Contesting the "Oxen Protection" Discourse in Nationalist China in the 1930s

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1930 年代國民政府時期「護牛」論述的爭議

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Abstract

Agriculture has been the cornerstone of China's economy since imperial times. Oxen, therefore, were primarily classified as working companions rather than food, granting them a unique role and status in China's ecological and moral systems. This article examines how conceptual and technological changes influenced people's centuries-old symbiotic relationship with oxen and blurred the ethical boundaries between what is considered edible and inedible in modern China. By analyzing the manipulation of the "oxen protection" discourse during the Republican period in relation to the power dynamics between competing interest groups, this article traces the trajectory of

Republican government policies—from contrasting “oxen” with “non-oxen” and “protected cattle” with “non-protected cattle” to ultimately adopting the term “beef cattle” in 1933. At the discursive level, the Republican governments reiterated their responsibility to protect oxen so as to safeguard the country’s agricultural development and the livelihoods of peasants. However, the intention behind these policies was to justify and capitalize on the beef economy, revealing how the government had become increasingly alienated from the interests of the peasants.

Keywords

oxen, agriculture, beef economy, Nationalist government, human–animal relationship

摘要

自皇朝時期開始，農業一直是中國經濟的基礎。作為主要役畜，耕牛被視為勞動夥伴而非食物，因而在中國的生態與道德體系中享有獨特的地位。本文旨在探討，隨著現代中國概念與技術的變遷，人與牛之間延續千百年的共生關係如何受到衝擊，並進一步模糊了可食與不可食之間的倫理界線。透過分析民國時期圍繞「護牛」論述的操控，以及不同利益群體間的權力角力，本文梳理民國政府政策的演變軌跡——從區分「耕牛／非耕牛」、「受保護牛／非受保護牛」，到 1933 年正式採用「菜牛」一詞。在論述層面上，國民政府一再強調保護耕牛，以確保國家農業發展與農民生計。然而，這些政策的真正目的，在於使牛肉經濟正當化並從中牟利，顯示國民政府逐漸背離農民的利益。

关键词

耕牛, 農業, 牛肉經濟, 國民政府, 人與動物關係

Agriculture has been the cornerstone of China's economy since imperial times. Oxen, therefore, were primarily classified as working companions rather than as food, which granted them a unique role and status in China's ecological and moral systems, surpassing other domesticated animals. Beginning in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), the imperial government issued decrees prohibiting the slaughter of oxen 禁宰耕牛, viewing the ban as essential for sustaining agricultural production. Although the consumption of beef was not illegal, it was generally regarded as an undesirable practice, incompatible with the moral and cultural expectations of the respectable. During imperial times, tensions between the need to protect oxen and the public's appetite for beef were mitigated by cultural and moral norms, as well as the government's strict enforcement of bans during periods of famine or excessive slaughter.

Debates over the killing and protection of oxen intensified during the late Qing and Republican periods due to significant conceptual, technological, and economic changes. First, starting in the mid-nineteenth century, beef eating increasingly came to be seen as a symbol of modernity and an integral part of Western civilization in East Asian countries, particularly among the Japanese after the Meiji period and among Chinese urbanites in treaty ports. Second, mass beef exports from China became feasible with the introduction to Qingdao of Western methods for handling frozen meat by Germans, along with the development of modern transportation, including railroads and steamships. These advancements eventually contributed to the growing importance of the beef economy in China and the unprecedented scale of oxen

slaughter.

The confrontation between oxen protection and the beef economy became increasingly intertwined with regional and national politics during the Republican era. Navigating competing interests and considerations, various groups—including peasants, government officials, cattle dealers, and religious organizations—found themselves engaged in contesting the definition of "oxen" and, as a result, the policies associated with the time-honored official discourse of "oxen protection." This article aims to examine how the manipulation of the "oxen protection" discourse functioned and influenced the political economy during the Republican period, particularly in relation to the power dynamics among competing interest groups. It is divided into three sections, respectively addressing the following questions: (1) How did the "oxen protection" discourse function as both a form of political regulation and a cultural and moral norm in imperial China, and how was it challenged by conceptual and technological changes in the late Qing period? (2) Why did the Nationalist government's regulations to protect oxen and the subsequent policies implemented during the Yangtze River flood of 1931 fail to safeguard both oxen and the interests of peasants? (3) How did different interest groups contest the definition of the term "oxen," ultimately leading to the Nationalist government's adoption in 1933 of the controversial term "beef cattle" 菜牛—referring to cattle raised specifically for meat production—as distinct from "oxen" 耕牛?

The "Oxen Protection" Discourse in Imperial China and Challenges in the Late Qing

Unlike the "holy cows" of India, oxen in China were not regarded as the embodiments of a deity. Although divine status was attributed to the Ox King or Buffalo King 牛王—the patron god of bovines, to whom peasants prayed for the health and well-being

of their livestock in traditional China—ordinary oxen were not considered inherently sacred by the general populace.[1] Instead, oxen functioned as significant symbols in religious and political contexts since early imperial times. Oxen were often killed and used as offerings in high-level religious ceremonies presided over by the emperor. According to the *Book of Rites*, state rituals conducted by the emperor typically involved the sacrifice of a bull, a ram, and a boar, the three most important types of livestock, collectively referred to as "*tailao*" 太牢. Aristocratic lords, on the other hand, could only use a ram and a boar for their religious sacrifices, referred to as "*shaolu*" 少牢, and were prohibited from sacrificing a bull (Yang, 2004: 153). This distinction underscores a hierarchical system of sacrifices, as noted by Roel Sterckx (2002: 59): "Victimal hierarchies reflected the status of the persons who were allowed to sacrifice." The exclusive right of the emperor to slaughter a bull in state sacrifices highlighted not only his supreme status but also the immense value of oxen in an agricultural society.

Throughout the imperial period, the government maintained political and legal control over the slaughter of oxen, adjusting its regulations to contemporary needs. After the Yuan dynasty, the significant presence of Muslims in China—who observed a pork taboo and regarded beef as their primary source of meat—made it politically necessary for the Chinese regimes to exercise the restriction with flexibility (Qiu, 1992: 52–63). Ming Taizu (1328–1398), the first emperor of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), mandated that oxen could only be slaughtered with official permission. The Qing Legal Code, greatly influenced by similar clauses in the Ming Legal Code,

[1] It is important to note, as Meir Shahar (2025: 150–215) observes, that in Chinese Buddhist texts, oxen and buffalo were regarded as both human and divine due to their association with the bodhisattva Guanyin.

prohibited the killing of oxen, stipulating that those who slaughtered oxen for the first time would receive one hundred strokes of the cane. Repeat offenders would be sent to military service, and those who killed their own oxen would also be punished. However, during the Yongzheng emperor's reign (1722–1735), the Qing Legal Code added a condition that loosened the ban, stating that "slaughtering [oxen] that are injured, old, sick, or dead is exempt from punishment" 殘老病死者勿論 (Jiang, 2005: 143; Ma and Yang, 1992: 636). Without specific criteria regarding the meanings of "injured, old, and sick," this left a gray area in which cattle traders and butchers—most of whom were Muslims—were able to maneuver (Zhang, 2021: 4–38). However, during periods when excessive slaughter of oxen became apparent, government officials occasionally issued prohibition decrees as a regulatory measure.

Additionally, the slaughter of oxen for their meat was often viewed as ethically and culturally unacceptable in imperial China. Both Taoist and Buddhist texts propagated the idea that eating beef would bring bad karma. Since the Song dynasty, moral texts 善書 condemned the killing of oxen and the consumption of beef, further reinforcing the avoidance of beef among the religious populace (Goossaert, 2025: 134–49). This sentiment was echoed in genealogies and medical literature. Some genealogies included moral instructions for clansmen that prohibited the slaughter of cattle and the sale of beef, although consuming beef was not explicitly forbidden (Tan, 1993: 185). Li Shizhen 李時珍 (1518–1593), a renowned medical practitioner and writer of the Ming dynasty, acknowledged the medicinal value of beef in his influential *Compendium of Materia Medica* 本草綱目, but cautioned that "oxen are a resource for agricultural production and should not be killed excessively" (Li, 1992: 1514). The overall tone of opposition to beef eating was further reinforced by the Qing medical writer Fei Boxiong 費伯雄 (1800–1879) in his *Food Guide for*

Materia Medica 食鑑本草, in which he emphasized that "oxen help cultivate the land. They are of great service to people and should not be killed for food" (Fei, 1985: 10).

Even Westerners in the nineteenth century noted the Chinese people's moral opposition to killing oxen and consuming beef, viewing it as a subject for ridicule. An 1858 article published in *A Quarterly Token for Juvenile Subscribers*, a magazine of the London-based Church Missionary Society aimed at young fundraisers, depicts the gruesome death of a butcher who killed oxen: the butcher "fell down with the knife in his hand, and, somehow or other, ran it into his ear, so that the knife came out at the other side." The author, motivated by his evangelistic belief, lamented the "ignorance" of the Chinese people, noting that "while they can see no sin in idol-worship, and in lying, cheating, stealing, and murdering their infant daughters in vast numbers, it is regarded by them as a grievous sin to kill an ox or a cow!" ("A warning to all beef-eating John Bulls," 1858: 8). Ironically, this Western author saw the Chinese people's ethical consideration for oxen as evidence of their lack of moral judgment.

The unique status of oxen was reflected in the emotional relationship between peasants and their oxen, as vividly demonstrated in anthropologist Martin Yang's study of a village in Shandong. Although researched during the Republican period, Yang's account reveals the persistence of the traditional human–oxen bond among some villagers. According to Yang, oxen were regarded as family members, and a family would feel deep sadness if they had to sell their ox for any reason.

> A farmer would not sell his animal directly to a butcher, even if he were offered a high price. Instead, he would seek a good buyer for his ox with as much care as if he were looking for a good husband for his daughter. If

> he found that his ox had been purchased for slaughter, he would curse himself, the buyer and the buyer's ancestors. (Yang, 1945: 47)

Although it is not explicitly stated, we can infer from Yang's account that farmers were aware that their oxen, if too old to plough the land, would eventually end up in the butcher's hands and be turned into food. Nevertheless, peasants would neither kill the oxen themselves nor consume beef. Hence, the status of oxen was different from that of pigs, chickens, or other domestic animals, as indicated by the fact that the slaughter of oxen and the consumption of beef were subject to moral condemnation.

In summary, during imperial times, oxen embodied the ideals of agricultural vitality and human morality. Political regulations and cultural norms strongly discouraged, if not entirely deterred, beef consumption and acted as restraints on the excessive killing of oxen. The "beef taboo" and the discourse of "oxen protection" in imperial China were thus fluid rather than rigid, with their strictness varying over time and across different regions. However, their social, moral, and emotional significance should not be overlooked. As Vincent Goossaert (2025: 180, 189) points out, the "beef taboo" served as a social marker, distinguishing the Chinese from outsiders and respectable individuals from those less integrated into local society, including ethnic minorities such as Muslims and social marginals such as itinerant merchants and destitute vagrants. Mark S. Swislocki (2009: 115) further notes that for many Chinese people, eating beef involved "crossing an emotional and moral boundary."

The negative attitude toward oxen killing and beef eating in imperial China faced challenges at the turn of the twentieth century due to both conceptual and technological changes in Asia introduced by Western powers. At the conceptual level, eating beef took on new significance during the Meiji period in Japan (1868–1912); the Japanese attributed Westerners' domination to their diet of beef and cow's milk.

Emperor Meiji's advocacy for beef consumption marked a significant cultural shift in Japan's longstanding avoidance of, if not taboo against, eating meat. The emperor's preference for beef was primarily driven by his belief that it contributed to national strength and possibly by his intention to weaken Buddhist influence, which had long reinforced the meat taboo (Longworth, 1983: 1–2). Emperor Meiji's newfound culinary enthusiasm for beef found resonance among his subjects. One individual, referring to himself as "a young man fond of the West," expressed deep appreciation for the opportunity to eat beef. He described it as "a most delicious thing" and remarked that, through the consumption of beef, Japan had adopted the image of "a truly civilized country" (Cwiertka, 2006: 31–33). Eating beef thus emerged as a cultural marker of modernity and civilization in Meiji Japan, where many Chinese students pursued Western learning during the late Qing period.

A similar, though more subdued, enthusiasm for beef consumption also emerged in urban China, particularly after the 1911 Revolution and the end of the imperial era. Western ideas of agriculture and animal husbandry began to take root among Chinese intellectuals, influenced by their studies abroad and the increasing availability of translated works. For example, in a 1921 journal article published by the Agricultural Association of China 中華農學會, founded in 1917 by Zhejiang agriculturalists trained in Japan and the United States (Yang, 2018: 89–92), author Gu Huasun 顧華孫 argued that "eating beef is an indicator of the progress of material civilization." He criticized government decrees prohibiting the slaughter of cattle for agricultural purposes, asserting that such policies "reflect the undeveloped intelligence of the people in our country" and would impede efforts to improve cattle breeds in China by preventing the culling of inferior livestock (Gu, 1921: 5–8).

Zhong Baoxuan 鍾寶璇, a professor in the Department of Forestry and Agriculture at Lingnan University in Guangzhou—which was strongly influenced by the United States—stated in a 1923 article that beef "has a pleasant taste and is easily digestible. Eating beef can strengthen the body. The people in powerful countries such as Europe and the United States often eat beef. A growing number of people in our country have also begun to consume beef." He lamented that raising cattle for their meat was "not yet commonplace in China" (Zhong, 1923: 16). Even young people began to be instilled with the idea that oxen were edible. A chapter in a primer explained to children the various functions oxen could serve for human beings: "Oxen have great stamina. They can help cultivate the land and can pull the cart. Their meat is edible and their milk is drinkable" (Zhuang and Shen, 1927: 16).

Technological and political changes in late Qing China facilitated the global development of China's beef trade, further undermining the age-old tradition of not consuming beef. As Thomas DuBois succinctly states, the beef trade from the Qing to the Republican periods was driven by a combination of factors, including modern technology, foreign investment, imperialism, and war. The trade route during the late Qing period ran from China to Russia via the South Manchurian Railway and the Chinese Eastern Railway 中東鐵路 (hereafter the CER), while the trade route during the Republican period was from Qingdao, Shandong, to Japan by ship (DuBois, 2019: 22–43).

The CER, constructed between 1897 and 1902, connected Tianjin to Russia via key cities in Manchuria, including Changchun and Harbin, facilitating Russia's acquisition of cattle from China. To meet Russia's growing demand for beef, Russian traders had actively procured beef supplies from Outer and Inner Mongolia since the nineteenth century. This demand was further intensified by the outbreak of the Russo-

Japanese War in 1905, which prompted the development of slaughtering facilities along the CER, including two slaughterhouses in Harbin, which came under Russian influence following the railway's construction (DuBois, 2019: 32–33). In 1910, Chinese officials complained to the Russian government about the mass outflow of cattle to Russia via the railway, noting that over one hundred thousand live cattle had been transported by rail. They argued that agriculture in China was severely impacted, as peasants could no longer afford oxen due to rising prices. When the Russian government responded that the cattle purchased from China were "beef cattle" raised for export, Chinese officials countered that all cattle in China were oxen, contending that "beef cattle," a term referring to cattle raised for meat production, did not exist in China ("Correspondence between the governor of Shandong and the Russian consul," 1986 [1911]: 453–54).

This outright rejection of the term "beef cattle" reflected the imperial government's assertion of its enduring role as a guardian of agriculture and peasants' interests. The term "beef cattle" dates back to the eleventh century, with references becoming more frequent during the Qing dynasty. Its very existence indicates that some cattle were distinguished from "oxen" and treated as food rather than draft animals. Yet its de facto existence was never granted political recognition in the Qing period. For example, in 1805, the Jiaqing emperor rejected a trader's proposal to legalize the slaughter of "beef cattle," arguing that "oxen" and "beef cattle" were indistinguishable (Chen, 2013: 45–49). The Nationalist government's eventual adoption of the term "beef cattle" in 1933, which will be discussed later, marked an unprecedented shift in policies regarding the slaughter of cattle for meat.

In addition to the railway network, the construction of modern slaughterhouses was another key technological advancement that facilitated the expansion of the beef

trade. The first modern slaughterhouse in China was built in 1904 in Qingdao, Shandong, by Germans, after the German empire had seized Jiaozhou Bay in 1898. Conveniently located near the railway station and the harbor, it was primarily intended to supply Germans in Qingdao with hygienic beef. However, its slaughtering capacity and refrigeration facilities also enabled the export of beef to meet the demands of Russians and Westerners in Vladivostok, Dalian, Shanghai, and even Manila. Most cattle destined for Qingdao were initially gathered in Jinan, the provincial capital of Shandong, before being transported to Qingdao via the Jiaoji Railway 膠濟鐵路, which was also completed in 1904. The number of cattle slaughtered increased from 9,180 in 1901 to 29,288 in 1914 (Mitsuda, 2020: 13–14).

Japan controlled the slaughterhouse from 1914 to 1922, after seizing Qingdao from Germany soon after the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914. Under pressure from the United States, Japan was compelled to return Qingdao to China in 1922, but it continued to participate in the management of the slaughterhouse through a 1924 agreement with the Beiyang government. This agreement led to the establishment of a joint-stock company collectively owned by Japanese and Chinese merchants. The number of cattle slaughtered further rose to 60,953 in 1926. Beef exported to Japan was subject to inspection by Japanese inspectors, ensuring the sanitary and safety standards for the meat ("The business and industrial situation in Qingdao," 1935: 1–4; Saneyoshi, 1928: 61; Poon, 2021: 189-191).

The beef from cattle slaughtered at the Qingdao slaughterhouse, known as "Qingdao cattle" 青島牛 or "Shandong cattle" 山東牛 in Japan, gained a good reputation among the Japanese for its sanitary standards, quality, and relatively low

price.[2] However, it is important to note that most of the so-called "Shandong cattle" or "Qingdao cattle" actually came from villages in various provinces in Central China.[3] A 1919 Japanese report stated that "Shantung [Shandong] cattle may not be as good as Japanese cattle for beef, yet it is an established opinion that they are far better than Korean or Mongolian cattle" (Levine, 1919: 32). A Shanghai newspaper also reported in 1920 that "the Tsingtao [Qingdao] beef now on sale at every public market in Kobe appears to be attracting many buyers, and there is such a crush, mostly of women, that it is difficult to get served" (North China Herald, Jan. 3, 1920). It became increasingly common for some dishonest butchers in Japan to pass off Qingdao beef as Kobe beef to make extra profit (Japan Chronicle, Mar. 2, 1922, Oct. 12, 1922). The Japanese appreciation for Shandong cattle was further illustrated in a report compiled in 1927 and 1928 that praised Shandong beef for its marbled pattern and even fat distribution, calling it "highly desirable for sukiyaki" (Japanese-style beef hot pot). The report, however, noted a rise in the price of Shandong cattle and anticipated a potential shortage, recommending that Japan take proactive measures by increasing imports of cattle from Mongolia (South Manchuria Railway Company, 1930: 237–42).

The 1931 Regulations to Protect Oxen and the Yangtze River Flood

After the 1911 Revolution, China entered a period of disunity. To replace the Qing Legal Code, different local governments introduced regulations claiming to prevent the excessive slaughter of cattle. These regulations reflected both continuity with and

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[2] In October 1924, the price of Japanese beef ranged from 0.52 to 0.57 yen per 100 momme (0.833 pounds), while Qingdao beef was priced at 0.34 yen per 100 momme. In other words, Qingdao beef was more than one-third cheaper than Japanese beef (Japan Chronicle, Oct. 30, 1924).

[3] Seventy percent of Qingdao's cattle came from Henan province, 10 percent from Shandong, 10 percent from Shanxi, and the remaining 10 percent from other provinces (Saneyoshi, 1928: 60).

divergence from Qing legal traditions. For instance, the Jiangsu provincial government's 1916 regulations stipulated that only old and disabled oxen 殘疾牛, classified as "non-oxen" 非耕牛, could be slaughtered, while mature cattle, calves, and pregnant cows were to be protected. These rules retained the Qing Legal Code's allowance for the slaughter of oxen that were "injured, old, sick, or dead." However, they departed from the Qing Legal Code by adopting the term "non-oxen" and introducing greater specificity in distinguishing between "oxen" and "non-oxen." Oxen were defined as mature cattle with eight teeth, while "non-oxen" referred to cattle beginning to lose their teeth, rendering them too weak to serve as draft animals. This reliance on dental condition to differentiate between "oxen" and "non-oxen" made the boundary ambiguous and susceptible to manipulation. Furthermore, by categorizing cattle as either "oxen" or "non-oxen," the 1916 regulations implicitly acknowledged the existence of "edible cattle" while avoiding direct use of the term "beef cattle," which had become increasingly common among traders (Zhang, 1927: 73–75).

The Nationalist government, founded in 1928 with its central government established in Nanjing, first outlined its policy toward oxen in the Regulations to Protect Oxen 保護耕牛規則 in January 1931 (hereafter the 1931 Regulations). The 1931 Regulations were prompted by a petition from a delegation of peasants from Fuzhou, Fujian province, in late 1930, who called on the Ministry of Agriculture and Mining 農礦部 to impose a complete ban on cattle slaughter. In their petition, the peasants stated that the practice of slaughtering oxen in Fujian had become increasingly prevalent, partly due to the Fujian government's approval for the slaughter of three oxen per day in Fuzhou and two in Xiamen to meet the needs of foreigners. They complained that "dishonest merchants" slaughtered oxen far beyond

the government's limits to maximize profits, warning of the eventual extinction of oxen breeds and agricultural devastation in the country. The petitioners urged the government to replace the "restricted slaughter" 限宰 policy with a complete ban 禁宰 to protect agriculture and peasants' livelihoods ("Fuzhou farmers delegation," 1930–1931).

A detailed report titled "An Investigation on Cattle in Fuzhou" was appended to the petition to elucidate the rising consumption of beef in Fuzhou, the processes through which peasants were dispossessed of their oxen by cattle traders, and the subsequent repercussions on agricultural productivity. This report identified one of the primary factors contributing to the growing popularity of beef as the recent exorbitant prices of chicken, pork, and lamb, which rendered beef a comparatively affordable option. Consequently, restaurants in Fuzhou increasingly incorporated beef in the preparation of soups and sausages. The rising demand for beef was accompanied by a surge in oxen theft. Local criminal groups and powerful clans stole or looted oxen and sold them to cattle dealers. Moreover, unscrupulous traders exploited peasants by extending high-interest loans and confiscating oxen when the loans could not be repaid. In more extreme cases, certain individuals resorted to poisoning the oxen, compelling peasants to sell them at significantly reduced prices. This resulted in a shortage of oxen in Fuzhou, prompting cattle traders to travel to other provinces, such as Zhejiang, to acquire cattle ("Fuzhou farmers delegation," 1930–1931).

The report detailed the impact of the oxen shortage on agriculture. In the past, when few people consumed beef, oxen were inexpensive, and households with just a few acres of farmland could afford to own an ox. Nowadays, without their own oxen, farmers had to rely on "ox-renting households" 牛戶, who provided both an ox and an "ox-handler" 牛工 to plough the land. Unfortunately, the cost of renting these

services had become increasingly expensive. Worse still, as more and more people sought ox-renting services, the ox-handlers resorted to a labor- and time-saving method of "shallow ploughing" rather than "deep ploughing" 深犁 the farmland. Unlike deep ploughing, which could kill soil vermin and enrich the land, the widespread use of shallow ploughing, driven by the oxen shortage, ultimately resulted in reduced harvests. The report lamented that "the loss from this decline in agricultural productivity is incalculable" ("Fuzhou farmers delegation," 1930–1931).

The Nanjing government reacted to the peasants' petition with lukewarm suggestions. On one hand, it acknowledged the peasants' concerns that "killing oxen could hinder agricultural production" and expressed disapproval of a situation where "oxen related to agriculture are treated as commodities for profiteering by unscrupulous merchants, who view prohibitions as mere paperwork and disregard the livelihoods of the people." On the other hand, it recognized the need to consider "the dietary requirements of foreigners and Hui people," indicating that cattle slaughter could not be completely banned. It suggested that "local governments should adopt methods similar to those in Europe and America to promote the breeding of beef cattle to meet supply and demand." However, the government did not specify any measures for breeding the so-called beef cattle; it merely reiterated the principle of prohibiting the slaughter of oxen that were useful for agriculture and requested the Executive Yuan to order provincial and municipal governments to implement the slaughter restriction (Wu, 1935: 43–44).

On January 23, 1931, the Nanjing government's Ministry of Industry 實業部—formed by merging the Ministry of Agriculture and Mining with the Ministry of Industry and Commerce 工商部 in December 1930—promulgated the 1931 Regulations. The regulations began with the following statement: "There has been a

shortage of oxen in recent years. . . . Oxen will become extinct, and agriculture will be ruined if unscrupulous merchants are allowed to slaughter them indiscriminately for personal profit." Compared to the category of "oxen" defined in the Jiangsu government's 1916 regulations, discussed above, in the 1931 Regulations higher standards were set for the category of "protected cattle" 保護牛, whose slaughter and export were to be prohibited, and more detailed implementation guidelines were included. The criteria for "protected oxen" were as follows:

> Species: Water buffaloes, yellow cattle, and "plough cattle" 犁牛.
>
> Age: Male oxen aged from two to ten. Female oxen aged from two to eight.
>
> Height: Male oxen four feet tall and above. Female oxen three feet, eight inches tall and above.
>
> Physique: Proper shape and posture. Hooves are strong and in proper shape.
>
> Sexual reproduction capability: Proper reproduction capability with a tame disposition. (Wu, 1935: 43–44)

The 1931 Regulations specified the breeding obligations and treatment of cattle identified as "protected cattle." To signify their status, these oxen would be branded on their left horn, while hornless oxen would be branded on their front left leg. Owners of "protected cattle" could receive a protection fee from the local government, funded by local industrial expenses (though the regulations did not specify the amount of the fee). Owners of protected male oxen over four years old could not refuse requests from owners of female oxen for mating. If "protected cattle" no longer met the standards set by the 1931 Regulations, the local government could revoke protected status and cease payment of the protection fee. Individuals who violated the regulations would be subject to a fine of no more than 50 yuan (Wu, 1935: 43–44).

At first glance, the Nationalist government's oxen protection regulations appeared to reflect a continuation of the Qing Legal Code, positioning the regime as the guardian of agricultural production and farmers' livelihoods by protecting oxen. However, the Fuzhou peasant delegation immediately challenged the 1931 Regulations, describing them as "riddled with numerous problems" and claiming they would provide "ample opportunity for unscrupulous merchants to exploit." First, the delegation found the use of the term "plough cattle" puzzling, as both buffalo and yellow cattle were used for ploughing the land. In response, the Ministry of Industry explained that "plough cattle" actually referred to "variegated cattle" 雜色牛. This testified to the government's lack of knowledge about oxen. In fact, the category of "variegated cattle" in ancient texts was synonymous with "plough cattle" (or oxen) because single-color cattle were reserved for sacrifices and were not used as oxen (Hsu, 2003: 314). The inclusion of "plough cattle" in the 1931 Regulations, the peasant delegation pointed out, did not serve any useful purpose in the classification of oxen. More importantly, the peasant delegation expressed concerns that cattle without protected status could be slaughtered and exported and requested that the regulations be modified to address the loophole. In response, the government clarified that the 1931 Regulations were intended to "protect oxen" rather than to "ban slaughter," emphasizing that the two should not be confused ("Prohibition of slaughtering oxen," 1931–1933). Ultimately, the 1931 Regulations were more of a gesture than a sincere effort to address the peasant delegation's grievances.

The 1931 Regulations were short-lived, however. The catastrophic Yangtze River flood, which occurred six months after the promulgation of the 1931 Regulations, prompted the central government in Nanjing and the provincial government of Jiangsu to take the matter more seriously and put the regulations on hold. In July 1931, heavy

rains struck various provinces along the Yangtze River, leading to severe flooding and famine in many rural areas. Unable to feed their oxen, many peasants began selling them for slaughter, with some being exported. Believing that this would worsen the shortage of oxen, the Executive Yuan decided to enforce a complete ban on the slaughter and sale of oxen, setting out the following conditions: "(1) All oxen in disaster areas are prohibited from being slaughtered. (2) The procurement or smuggling of oxen out of disaster areas is not allowed without official permission. (3) Local governments will establish oxen shelters where they can set up pastures to collect oxen from farmers, register them for care, and return them to their owners once the waters recede and the fields are cultivable, charging a reasonable fee for their care. (4) Local governments will procure large quantities of feed to lend or distribute to farmers for self-feeding" (Zhongyang ribao, Aug. 27, 1931: 8).

In August 1931, the provincial government of Jiangsu, which was severely affected by the flood, also acknowledged that "victims of the disaster, driven by hunger, sell their cattle at low prices to prolong their lives. Meanwhile, unscrupulous merchants and cattle dealers take advantage of the situation to suppress prices, reselling cattle and openly slaughtering them, disregarding prohibitions." Consequently, Jiangsu province issued the Temporary Regulations on Prohibiting the Sale and Slaughter of Oxen 禁止販運宰殺耕牛暫行通則 (hereafter the Temporary Regulations), stating that from October 1, 1931, to the end of May 1932, any county found transporting oxen out of the province would have the cattle confiscated and face fines based on their total value. Additionally, all cattle markets and slaughterhouses were required to suspend operations during this period. If any cattle were slaughtered or beef sold without authorization, the products would be confiscated, and fines equivalent to the total value of the goods would be imposed. The 1931 Regulations

ceased to apply in disaster areas, where all oxen, regardless of whether they met the criteria for "protected cattle," were prohibited from being slaughtered ("Temporary Regulations on Prohibiting the Sale and Slaughter of Oxen," 1931: 4–5). This policy change is strong evidence that the primary intention of the 1931 Regulations was to provide a justification for slaughtering oxen rather than a genuine commitment to oxen protection.

To prevent oxen from being slaughtered, local officials established "oxen fostering shelters" 耕牛寄養所 to assist farmers by providing temporary care and forage for their oxen. Initially, farmers were responsible for the expenses, but this was later changed to a no-charge policy, allowing them to reclaim their oxen for plowing in the following farming season. It is important to note that temporary facilities for oxen during times of disaster were not a completely new initiative in Republican China. During the Qing dynasty, local officials established what was known as the "oxen pawning office" 當牛局 (or 典牛局). Scholar Mi Gonggan 宓公幹, in his 1930s study, classified this as a notable example of government-initiated "charitable pawnshops." Farmers who had exhausted their resources for keeping their oxen could pawn them to the oxen pawning office and receive a loan in return. They could reclaim their oxen upon repaying their loan plus interest (Mi, 1936: 397–98). As a disaster-relief measure, the oxen pawning office allowed farmers to retain their oxen during difficult times instead of selling or slaughtering them, ensuring that oxen would be available for the upcoming farming season, while the local gentry—most of whom were also landlords—could help their tenant farmers survive the disaster and sustain their rents in the long run.

Several Qing officials set up an oxen pawning office during their administrations in Jiangsu province, including Lin Zexu 林則徐 (1785–1850), the governor-general

of Jiangsu in 1823; Tao Shu 陶澍 (1779–1839), governor-general of Liangjiang 兩江 (Jiangsu, Jiangxi, and Anhui) in 1831; Wang Jianxin 王檢心 (1805–1869), the magistrate of Yizheng 儀徵 county in 1848; and He Jinshou 何金壽 (1834–1882), the prefect of Yangzhou in 1880 (Zhao, 2019: 92–93). The *Records of Disaster Relief in Zhenzhou* 真州救荒錄, compiled by Wang Jianxin, offer valuable first-hand information regarding the operation of the oxen pawning office that he established in Yizheng country during the 1848 flood. This allows for a comparative analysis of the oxen shelters founded in imperial and Republican China. Wang perceived his oxen pawning office as a success, but we should not overlook the prerequisites for this success, including the availability of sufficient funding and the relatively localized scale of the disaster.

Wang Jianxin's oxen pawning office managed a total of 409 oxen affected by the 1848 disaster, comprising 89 water buffalo, 293 yellow cattle, and 27 calves. The funding was provided by the local gentry, covering the costs of the oxen, forage, and salaries for the staff, including 125 herders tasked with caring for the oxen. Furthermore, the scale of the 1848 flood in Yizheng county was less severe, enabling the oxen shelter to focus its efforts on the affected farmers. The oxen pawning office stipulated that it would only accept oxen from the disaster area, stating that "oxen from mountainous regions or other counties will not be accepted; those who attempt to defraud will have their oxen confiscated. Both the oxen owners and their guarantors will be punished severely." In one instance, a resident from the eastern region of Yizheng pretended to be from the western region affected by the disaster in order to pawn his ox for a loan. Upon discovery, the oxen pawning office exercised leniency, choosing not to confiscate the ox but instructing the owner to reclaim it within a designated time period (Yang and Xiong, 2018: 80–84, 92).

In the Republican case, county governments in Jiangsu province implemented various policies to care for oxen following the 1931 Yangtze River floods. The oxen fostering shelter in Xinghua 興化 county, as mentioned in the *Records of Jiangsu Relief Work* 蘇賑紀要 compiled by the National Government Flood Relief Committee, functioned similarly to the oxen pawning offices established during the Qing dynasty. Xinghua county's oxen fostering shelter included a provision for "cattle collateral" 當牛, stating that large cattle would have a collateral value of twelve yuan each, while small cattle would be valued at six yuan each. Owners wishing to pawn their cattle at the shelter were required to reclaim them by April 1932 (National Government Flood Relief Committee, 1932: 4–5). This timeframe was reasonable, as oxen were needed for the new cultivation season beginning around April the following year. However, this measure proved ineffective due to insufficient funding and the large number of farmers affected by the floods.

Xinghua county, located in a low-lying area, was one of the hardest-hit regions. All houses were submerged, and refugees were dispersed across various relief centers. Approximately 70 to 80 percent of the cattle were either killed in the flood or slaughtered soon after, likely due to owners' financial difficulties or their inability to transport the oxen. Only two to three thousand oxen in the county survived the flood. The estimated costs for operating the oxen fostering shelter to care for these animals amounted to 30,000 yuan, yet the government allocated only a nominal amount of one thousand yuan. As a result, most farmers had no choice but to sell their oxen at low prices to cattle dealers and seek alternative livelihoods elsewhere (Zhongyang ribao, Sept. 12, 1931: 8; National Government Flood Relief Committee, 1932: 10–11).

In Jiangdu 江都 county, located on the north bank of the Yangtze River, an oxen loan program was announced to assist farmers without oxen in plowing their land for

the winter cultivation period. By November 1931, the Oxen Protection Committee 保護耕牛委員會, founded by the Agricultural Improvement Station 農業改良場, had cared for a total of 144 oxen. Due to a scarcity of data, it is unclear whether these oxen were collateral from farmers affected by the flood, and if so, how much the farmers could gain from pawning their cattle. According to the announced measures, farmers applying to borrow oxen from the committee were required to provide a guarantor, who could be either a merchant or a local administrative authority. The loan period was set for at least ten days, during which the farmers were responsible for feeding the oxen (Zhongyang ribao, Nov. 5, 1931: 7). However, it remains unknown whether this program was actually implemented and how many farmers benefited from it.

The effectiveness of these government measures to protect oxen and farmers' livelihoods is questionable, as evidenced by the correspondence sent by the Jiangning Flood Relief Association 江寧水災義賑協會 in Jiangning county, Jiangsu province (hereafter the Jiangning Association) to the Nanjing municipal government in December 1931. Jiangning, located south of Nanjing, witnessed its oxen being transported to slaughterhouses in Nanjing despite the government's prohibitions. The Jiangning Association stated in its correspondence that the slaughterhouses were still operating as usual, noting that "the number of cattle being slaughtered in Nanjing has increased several times compared to usual, leading to a significant drop in beef prices in the market, clearly indicating that disaster-stricken farmers are selling their cattle at low prices." The association requested that the Nanjing municipal government impose severe penalties on slaughterhouses for killing oxen, so that "farmers would have nowhere to sell their oxen," which would help ensure the long-term protection of oxen and farmers' livelihoods ("Strict prohibition on the slaughtering and selling of oxen in

the counties of Jiangbei," 1931: 3; Zhongyang ribao, Dec. 1, 1931: 8).

Instead of ordering slaughterhouses to comply with the government's prohibition on killing cattle, the Nanjing municipal government instructed the Social Affairs Bureau and the Public Health Bureau to register the oxen. This process involved listing the names of the owners and assigning identification numbers to the registered oxen, which would then be branded for easy identification. Slaughterhouses were prohibited from slaughtering any branded cattle (Zhongyang ribao, Dec. 10, 1931). In other words, the Nanjing municipal government chose not to impose an outright ban on cattle slaughter. Instead, it adopted a less radical approach by distinguishing "registered oxen" from other cattle for protection, likely to safeguard the interests of cattle dealers and slaughterhouses. This allowed the Nanjing government to present its registration of oxen as a commitment to the official policy of "oxen protection" while ensuring a stable beef supply for the city.

The government's oxen protection measures, such as fostering shelters, loan programs, and registration initiatives, were half-hearted and too piecemeal to have a tangible impact. According to a report compiled by the Agricultural Economics Department of Jinling University in Nanking (Nanjing), commissioned by the Nationalist government, about 200,000 draft animals, most of which were oxen, perished in the 1931 flood. The causes of death included drowning, illness, shortage of fodder, and being sold by distressed peasants for slaughter (Agricultural Economics Department, School of Agriculture of Jinling University, 1932: 11, 25). While the reliability of the data is difficult to assess, the scale of destruction is not hard to imagine. Unfortunately, we are unable to uncover the voices of the flood-afflicted farmers from the available sources. We can only imagine the possible thoughts of these voiceless individuals. Would those who sent their oxen to the slaughterhouse

have made a different choice had the government's oxen shelters functioned effectively? Or would they still have chosen to slaughter their oxen due to the severity of the flood and the bleak prospects for cultivation? Moreover, given that the assistance offered by the oxen shelters proved to be very limited, did the government's ban on slaughtering cattle help the farmers escape their predicament or merely increase their grievances? Before relevant sources surface, we can only postulate that if the oxen shelters had effectively allowed farmers to pawn their oxen for much-needed funds, some might have chosen not to slaughter them.

Contesting "Oxen" and "Beef Cattle"

Provinces where the beef trade flourished reacted to the Nationalist government's oxen protection policies with indifference. For instance, in response to the Nationalist government's December 1931 investigation of beef exports, Qingdao officials stated, "The cattle slaughtered in Qingdao are castrated bulls over seven years old. Once the young calves come of age, the peasants sell the old oxen that can no longer help cultivate the farm. Therefore, [killing old oxen] does not negatively affect agriculture. It is inappropriate to enforce these regulations. If rural economic activities are not allowed to develop smoothly, the implementation of the regulations will cause harm rather than benefit" ("Regarding the investigation of cattle and beef export," 1931). This response illustrates that, due to the significance of the beef trade to Shandong's economy, Qingdao had no intention of adhering to the Nationalist government's regulations. Furthermore, the Qingdao officials defined "old oxen" suitable for slaughter as bulls over seven years old, three years younger than specified in the 1931 Regulations, which mandated that male oxen between two and ten years of age were "protected cattle."

In Jiangsu province, the cattle industry was critical of the government's "oxen

protection" policies introduced after the Yangtze flood. Slaughterhouse companies and cattle traders, many of whom were Muslims, claimed that the ban on selling and slaughtering cattle negatively impacted their livelihoods. Their discontent further mounted when the Jiangsu provincial government, at the request of the War Zone Relief Committee 戰區救濟委員會, extended the Temporary Regulations for another year, until November 1933, due to the devastating impact of Japan's military invasion of Shanghai in early 1932 (Liu, 1935: 38).

The Danyang Cattle Industry Association 丹陽牛業公會 (hereafter the Danyang Association) assumed a leading role in petitioning the Jiangsu government to lift the ban on selling and slaughtering cattle. Danyang was the largest cattle distribution center in southern Jiangsu province, where both oxen and cattle for consumption were traded. The primary center of beef consumption was the treaty port of Shanghai, home to many Westerners whose meat consumption consisted mainly of beef and lamb (Guo, 1982: 125–30). The Danyang Association, through the Danyang Chamber of Commerce, presented to the government several key arguments for lifting the ban during 1931 and 1932, emphasizing the differences between oxen and beef cattle. Additionally, it refuted the claim that peasants had benefited from the ban, arguing that it was detrimental to the interests of both the beef industry and the farmers.

However, these arguments were ultimately rebutted by the Jiangsu government. First, the Danyang Association claimed that the cattle being traded were "beef cattle" rather than oxen. The government responded that the policy of "prohibiting slaughter and sale" meant that killing cattle for beef was prohibited during the period of disaster. Therefore, the term "beef cattle" was not justified. Second, the Danyang Association contended that the government's ban on selling cattle would harm farmers' interests, as they would be unable to purchase new oxen even when their

existing ones died. The government replied that farmers could still obtain oxen from nearby fostering centers established in flood-ridden regions on a rental basis. Third, the Danyang Association pointed out that the ban harmed the interests of cattle traders. According to local practices, cattle traders lent money that they had borrowed from moneylenders to "cattle buyers" 牛客, who used the loans to purchase cattle from villagers in rural areas. With the ban on selling and slaughtering cattle in place, these cattle buyers disappeared along with the money they had acquired from the cattle traders. This left the cattle traders in a desperate situation, with little hope of recovering their loans. In response, the government simply stated, "The ban is still in effect; there is no need for discussion on this matter" ("Danyang Chamber of Commerce," 1932: 8–9).

The Jiangsu government refuted the term "beef cattle" in its responses to the Danyang Association in 1931 and 1932, reiterating the importance of the government's prohibition policies. In October 1933, opposition to the ban on the sale and slaughter of cattle gained momentum with a petition from a coalition of seven Muslim organizations, supported by the Muslim community in Zhenjiang—one of the largest Muslim settlements in Jiangsu province since the Yuan dynasty. The petition highlighted how both Muslims and farmers were adversely affected by the ban. First, thousands of Muslims in Zhenjiang relied on the cattle industry for their livelihoods, and the government's prohibition on selling and slaughtering cattle left these "peaceful and good citizens 安善良民, who are unable to change their occupations, . . . suffering from hunger and cold, waiting for death." Second, the cattle industry did not harm agriculture, as there was a clear distinction between oxen and beef cattle (Xin Jiangsu bao, Oct. 24, 1933: 5).

The Muslim petitioners insisted on the validity and relevance of the term "beef

cattle," arguing that while "oxen are essential for agriculture and should not be slaughtered," beef cattle referred to those animals "that are too old or weak to be useful for agricultural purposes, and farmers should be allowed to sell these unproductive cattle in order to buy new oxen." The petition further contended that "the cattle that most traders deal in are precisely these useless beef cattle," and that the Jiangsu provincial government's failure to distinguish between oxen and beef cattle represented a mistaken policy. It also pointed out that the slaughter ban in Jiangsu province did not effectively address the issue, as slaughtering continued in places like Shanghai and Nanjing. Upon receiving the petition, the Jiangsu government immediately responded by convening the Muslim organizations and reiterating the reasons for the ban. In addition, police officers were sent to the slaughterhouses to ensure compliance with the slaughter ban (Xin Jiangsu bao, Oct. 29, 1933: 7).

Hence, it was surprising when the Jiangsu provincial government made a significant policy change in November 1933 by establishing "beef cattle inspection stations" in four major cattle trading and transportation centers in the province: Zhenjiang, Pukou 浦口, Danyang, and Songjiang 松江. These stations were to be managed by the Department of Construction, with inspection fees of 2.4 yuan per head charged as part of their operation (Xin Jiangsu bao, Nov. 19, 1933: 5, Dec. 22, 1933: 5). This establishment marked a decisive shift in the official narrative of "oxen protection." It not only deviated from the strict slaughter ban implemented after the outbreak of the Yangtze flood but also from the 1931 Regulations, which avoided adopting the term "beef cattle," despite indirectly acknowledging that cattle not meeting the "protected cattle" standards could be slaughtered. More importantly, the government-operated inspection stations would directly engage in the controversial

task of differentiating between oxen and beef cattle.

The policy change was closely linked to the reshuffle of the Jiangsu provincial government in October 1933, during which Chen Guofu 陳果夫 (1892–1951), a leader of the "CC clique" and a close associate of Chiang Kai-shek, served as chairman until 1937. Following the reorganization, Chen's loyal subordinates, Gu Renfa 辜仁發 (1890–1966), who was appointed head of the Department of Finance, and Zhao Lihua 趙棣華 (1895–1950), head of the Department of Civil Affairs, jointly submitted a resolution to the central government advocating for modifications to the Temporary Regulations. In their proposal, they argued that oxen and beef cattle were distinct categories of livestock and that there were sufficient oxen available to meet agricultural needs. They further emphasized that the slaughter ban had negatively impacted the agricultural economy, creating unnecessary constraints. They highlighted the importance of beef consumption for specific groups, particularly Westerners residing in major cities and members of the Muslim community. Based on these considerations, they called for the replacement of the complete slaughter ban with a "conditional slaughter ban." Due to Chen Guofu's influence within the Nationalist government and his close relationship with Chiang Kai-shek, the central government approved the proposal in principle, requesting only further clarification regarding its practical implementation (Liu, 1935: 47–51).

We can postulate the underlying political and economic considerations behind this official policy shift. First, it can be interpreted as an acknowledgment of the failure of the slaughter ban, which did not effectively prevent the slaughter of cattle. The privately run newspaper *New Jiangsu News* 新江蘇報 in Zhenjiang reported on a phenomenon in Jiangsu known as "selling beef while hanging a donkey's tail" 掛驢尾賣牛肉. This referred to cunning meat shops that killed cattle and sold beef while

disguising their actions by claiming to sell donkey meat. The article noted, "Since the authorities banned the slaughter of oxen, beef has never disappeared from the market. The only difference in the meat shops is that they hang a donkey's tail, implying compliance with the ban while still selling beef. Those who are doubtful can look at the donkey's tail as solid proof." The author ridiculed the situation by pointing out that although these shops had been selling "donkey meat" for several days, the number of donkey tails did not increase. "How clever people are now, willing to enjoy their beef under the cover of a donkey's tail," the author remarked. The author predicted that after the establishment of the beef cattle inspection stations, "the donkey's tails in the beef shops will no longer be seen," because beef consumption would no longer be illegal, making the pretense on the part of these meat shops unnecessary (Xin Jiangsu bao, Dec. 9, 1933: 8). The government's establishment of the beef cattle inspection stations was, therefore, a way to legalize cattle slaughter that it had previously failed to suppress.

More importantly, the inspection stations ideally functioned as an official regulatory framework to ensure that the protection of oxen and the slaughter of beef cattle were closely monitored by the government. This enabled the government to present itself as safeguarding the interests of both peasants and the beef industry, while obscuring its underlying economic motives. Instead of continuing an unpopular and losing battle, the government could capitalize on legalization by participating in the inspection process, thereby generating potential annual tax revenue of up to 256,838 yuan—representing 0.0099 percent of Jiangsu province's total revenue in 1933. While not a high percentage, the government was unlikely to overlook any potential source of revenue to balance its books.[4] Although Chen Guofu's agricultural

[4] Zhang Jixian estimated that every month, 8,055 head of cattle were slaughtered in Shanghai and

policies during his administration of Jiangsu fall outside the scope of this article, generating revenue from inspection centers and exercising the authority to define oxen in distinction to beef cattle could effectively establish the Jiangsu government's control over the cattle market, thereby consolidating its economic and political dominance.

Yet the initiative for beef cattle inspection stations drew widespread criticism for its failure to regulate cattle slaughter and for allegedly putting farmers in an even more desperate situation. Soon after the government announced its policy change, *New Jiangsu News* published an article titled "Discussion on Inspecting Beef Cattle," criticizing the policy of categorizing cattle as either oxen or beef cattle as "disturbing people" 擾民 rather than "benefiting people" 利民. The author pointed out that the distinction between oxen and beef cattle was unheard of in Jiangsu and questioned whether the province actually had farms for raising beef cattle, suggesting that if such farms existed, there would be no need to inspect cattle primarily raised for consumption. The author further argued that the establishment of cattle inspection stations would ultimately lead to the exploitation of farmers. As farmers would only choose to sell their cattle that could no longer be used for farming as a last resort, the cattle they sold—whether sick, weak, old, or incapable—were undoubtedly beef cattle that did not require inspection. Yet the inspection stations took advantage of the farmers' plight and extracted profits from them. The author also expressed concerns about the quality of the staff at the inspection centers, warning that some

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1,500 in Nanjing, totaling 114,660 annually (Zhang, 1934: 137). As all these cattle had to be examined at the inspection centers at a cost of 2.4 yuan each, this would generate a total annual revenue of 275,184 yuan. In comparison, the total revenue of the Jiangsu government in 1933 was approximately 27,920,000 yuan (Jiangsu Provincial Financial Report, 1934: n.p.).

“unscrupulous individuals” 不賢, motivated by personal gain, could deliberately misclassify oxen as beef cattle and vice versa without solid grounds (Xin Jiangsu bao, Dec. 1, 1933: 6).

The integrity of the beef cattle inspection stations was questioned not only by private newspapers but also by government officials in charge of agricultural affairs. In 1934, Zhang Jixian 張繼先, who worked in the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, published an article in an agricultural journal supporting a ban on slaughtering cattle, viewing it as the only solution to the shortage of oxen, which he considered a serious obstacle to China’s agricultural development. Zhang described the beef cattle inspection centers as functioning more like “tax offices” than as institutions meant to save oxen from being slaughtered, as they officially claimed. He cited the inspection station in Pukou as an example, noting that it charged an exorbitant inspection fee of four yuan per head of cattle—1.6 yuan higher than the stipulated fee. Driven by the tempting revenue, he lamented, “there are no cattle that cannot be slaughtered” (Zhang, 1934: 137).

Liu Xingji 劉行驥, an official in the Ministry of Industry, stated in his study that China lost at least 165,000 head of cattle annually, including 135,000 slaughtered in the four major cities of Shanghai, Nanjing, Qingdao, and Beiping (Beijing), as well as 3,000 exported alive. Unlike Zhang Jixian, Liu did not directly address issues related to the inspection centers. However, he considered the official approval of cattle slaughter and export a significant obstacle to China’s agricultural development, one that should be halted immediately. Liu acknowledged the dire financial situation of peasants, who might, in extreme cases, resort to selling family members if they were forbidden from selling their oxen. Rather than considering inspection centers a viable solution, Liu proposed that the government establish ranches 牧場. These ranches

would enable peasants to mortgage their oxen as collateral for loans, while also providing care for the animals. Oxen from these ranches could then be loaned or rented to peasants for plowing and for crossbreeding with quality cattle (Liu 1935: 13–15, 74–75). Yet Liu did not explain the operational costs or possible sources of funding for the ranches, without which his proposal could not be materialized.

The criticisms examined above suggest that while the government and the cattle industry benefited from legitimizing the slaughter of cattle by endorsing the term "beef cattle," the peasants and agriculture of the country as a whole were on the losing side. Driven by financial considerations, the government chose to establish beef cattle inspection centers to facilitate cattle slaughter, rather than operating oxen fostering centers (or "ranches," in Liu's words) to help peasants care for their oxen and promote long-term agricultural development.

Buddhist activists were another outspoken group critical of the government's policies that endorsed the slaughter of "beef cattle."[5] Their criticism was based not only on economic considerations but also on religious and ethical grounds, viewing the mass slaughter of oxen—working companions of humans for millennia in China—as a sign of moral degradation. Han Shizi 寒世子, founder of the Buddhist animal protection magazine *Journal of Protecting Life* 護生報, argued that the term "beef cattle" was utter nonsense, since all oxen were employed in farming and should therefore not be eaten. Ethically, slaughtering an ox too old to work was unacceptable. The killing of oxen would harm farmers, he wrote, but unfortunately, because of the current agricultural crisis, farmers had no choice but "to sell their oxen to make a living. When spring comes, and they have no oxen to help them, there will be nothing

[5] For details regarding the role of lay Buddhists in the protection of animals in Republican Shanghai, please refer to Shuk-wah Poon (2019 and forthcoming).

to harvest. This is suicide." He called on kind-hearted individuals to establish "oxen shelters" where animals saved from slaughterhouses could live and be rented out to peasants for farming (Husheng bao, July 1, 1935: 6, Nov. 10, 1935: 7).

The China Society for the Protection of Animals 中國保護動物會 (CSPA), established in 1934 with founding members primarily from the Buddhist community in Shanghai, shared Han Shizi's objection to the term "beef cattle." In 1936, the CSPA wrote to the Nationalist government that all "beef cattle" were in fact "farm oxen," requesting that the government abandon the term. The letter described the cruelty that oxen endured during their transformation into "beef cattle" (i.e., rendering them unfit for farming): "The butcher sticks iron needles into the oxen's legs to make them lame and then claims that the oxen are beef cattle." The CSPA pointed out that if farm oxen can become edible by being labeled "beef cattle," then so too could a human being be deemed edible by being called a "*cairen*" 菜人 (literally, "humans as food") ("The China Society for the Protection of Animals," 1934–1936).

The criticism of the Nationalist government's adoption of the term "beef cattle" was therefore multifaceted, highlighting the administrative failure of beef cattle inspection centers to effectively distinguish between oxen and beef cattle, the government's political and economic incompetence in safeguarding the country's agricultural development and the livelihoods of peasants, and the moral degradation evident in the treatment of cattle no longer deemed fit for farming.

Conclusion

The contested meanings of "oxen" in the 1930s were embedded with strong political, economic, and religio-ethical implications. This article has demonstrated how conceptual and technological changes influenced people's centuries-old symbiotic relationship with oxen and blurred the ethical boundaries between what is considered

edible and inedible in modern China. It also highlights the gap between political discourses and actual policies regarding peasants and agriculture. At the discursive level, the Republican governments reiterated their responsibility to protect oxen, thereby safeguarding the country's agricultural development and the livelihoods of peasants. However, the true intention behind these policies was to justify and capitalize on the beef economy. Unlike the late Qing period, when officials resisted the notion of "beef cattle" in response to Russia's mass importing of cattle from China, officials in the Republican period increasingly narrowed the definition of oxen and ultimately incorporated the term into their economic policies. By contrasting "oxen" with "non-oxen" and "protected cattle" with "non-protected cattle," and ultimately adopting the term "beef cattle," the Republican governments became increasingly alienated from the interests of the peasants.

This article brings up two related questions that merit further investigation. First, how did the Nationalist government's failure to implement an effective oxen protection policy affect peasants and the agricultural economy? The collapse of the rural economy in the 1930s was undoubtedly a complex issue that cannot be attributed solely to the Nationalist government's failure to protect oxen and safeguard peasant interests. Nonetheless, without examining this long-overlooked dimension, our understanding of rural Republican China remains incomplete.

Evidence indicates that peasants from Danyang—the major cattle market in Jiangsu, where one of the four beef cattle inspection stations was located—faced difficulties in acquiring oxen due to prohibitively high prices. In response, they ventured into a remote village near Nanjing in 1934, purchasing twenty-five oxen with the assistance of local agricultural cooperative staff. By 1936, they expanded their efforts to neighboring Anhui province, intending to procure 124 oxen but

ultimately managing to secure only 66 (Danyang Branch, 1934: 47–49; Dai, 1936: 30–35). While these sources do not conclusively establish an overall shortage of oxen, they do underscore the inability of peasants near major cattle markets to afford them, compelling them to seek alternatives in distant villages. Although these examples are suggestive rather than definitive, a comprehensive investigation is necessary to fully understand the effects of these dynamics on the peasantry and the rural economy during this period.

Secondly, how did the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which presented itself as the savior of Chinese peasants, critique and reform the Nationalist government's cattle-related policies? The CCP condemned both the Nationalist regime's failure to protect oxen and the urban population's excessive consumption of beef.[6] To what extent did the CCP's socialist framework address the tension between the agricultural and beef economies? Furthermore, how were the terms "beef cattle" and "oxen" redefined under the communist regime? These questions are crucial for understanding not only the evolution of the human–oxen relationship in modern China but also the rural policies of the opposing political regimes and their broader socio-economic implications across the 1949 divide.

[6] For example, in 1951, the PRC introduced the much stricter Provisional Regulations on Prohibiting the Slaughter of Draft Animals in East China, which prohibited slaughter of water buffalo under fifteen years of age and yellow cattle under thirteen ("Opinion of the Shanghai Federation of Industry and Commerce," 1950–1951).

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