In 1964, a provocative essay was published by British social anthropologist Edmund Leach in the proceedings of the 17th International Congress of Psychology. The organizer of the congress, Eric Lenneberg, commented that he used the occasion to invite outstanding scientists to discuss the phenomenon of language from the perspective of their respective fields. He urged them to “vent their enthusiasm” and “speculate freely” – an invitation Leach fulfilled and surpassed! His presentation was titled “Anthropological Aspects of Language: Animal Categories and Verbal Abuse,” where he discussed why specific animal terms carried sufficient linguistic potency (like obscenities and blasphemies) to be used as terms of abuse. He also discussed why certain animals were considered inedible or only edible in certain rituals. His essay was later subjected to severe criticism by fellow anthropologist John Halverson. Although Leach may have speculated too freely, his analysis of human-animal interactions, linguistic culture, and edibility is still thought-provoking and fascinating.
In 1989, the original Leach and Halverson articles were reprinted in *Anthrozoos* and introduced by veterinarian and anthropologist Elizabeth Lawrence. She noted that Leach acknowledged the influence of Claude Levi-Strauss’ dictum that animals are good to eat and are also “good to think.” Lawrence stated that Leach’s speculative analysis still offers rich food for thought for those who study human-animal interactions and the often paradoxical relationships between humans and animals, including which animals are regarded as edible or not edible across different cultures.

Animal edibility has recently been central to cultural change in South Korea. In January this year, 208 of 297 members of the South Korean parliament voted to ban the production and sale of dog meat in the country. While the law does not criminalize dog meat consumption, it will probably end the practice in the country. The law includes a 3-year grace period during which farmers are expected to transition from breeding dogs for consumption.

The new law prohibiting the production and sale of dog meat is the outcome of a forty-year-long campaign by international and domestic animal protection organizations. The Seoul Olympic Games of 1988 and the 2002 World Cup competition brought global attention to South Korea but also led to increasing calls by international and domestic animal welfare organizations to end the dog meat trade. In 1984, the South Korean government, reportedly fearing negative media attention before they hosted the 1988 Seoul Olympic games, outlawed dog meat in Seoul and formally classified dog meat as “disgusting” food. While this action tended to obscure the presence of dog meat dishes in Seoul restaurants, it had relatively little immediate impact on the actual breeding and consumption of dogs in the country. Almost twenty years later, South Korea and Japan co-hosted the 2002 World Cup, and international attention was again drawn to dog meat consumption in South Korea.

Limited and unreliable data is available on the dog meat industry scale. According to estimates by domestic NGO Korea Animal Rights Advocates, around 2.3 to 2.9 million dogs were killed and consumed annually in the country in the early part of this century. However, dog meat consumption has been
declining over time, and by 2021, it was estimated that only about one million dogs were being killed for consumption yearly. A government investigation conducted in 2022 reported that only around 500,000 dogs were killed for consumption that same year.

Public opinion has also been changing. A poll conducted in 2020 by Nielsen found that 84% of South Koreans had never consumed dog meat and that 59% of the respondents supported a ban. A 2023 poll by Gallup Korea reported that only 8% of respondents had eaten dog meat in 2023 compared to 27% in 2015.

Probably not coincidentally, the pet industry in South Korea has grown dramatically in the 21st century. According to a report by Daxue Consulting, annual retail sales for the pet industry grew from $1.76 billion in 2017 to $2.8 billion in 2021 and were projected to reach almost $5 billion by 2027. Meanwhile, the government has announced plans to encourage an expansion of South Korea's pet-related markets to $11.5 billion by 2027. Media reports suggest pet-keeping growth results from the country's rise of single-person households. However, a recent data analysis on pet ownership in Seoul did not find pet ownership (18.4%) in single-person households to be higher than pet ownership (ca. 20.5%) in larger family households. In Western countries, pet ownership is much higher in family households than in single-person households. Nevertheless, the media continues to report that having a pet is a substitute for having children.

However, the rise in pet ownership probably has impacted how dog meat consumption is viewed in the culture. According to anthropologist Julien Dugnoille, the dog meat issue exposes nationalistic issues in South Korea. Dugnoille argues that government actions to avoid foreign attention to the commodification of dogs in Korean culture appear superficially to be about defending national culture. However, those actions are often undermined by segments of the population because dog meat is viewed as a potent food with valuable medicinal properties, leading to increased stamina (and potency) during the hot “dog” days of summer.
Laws have been passed in several Asian countries (e.g., Taiwan in 2017, Hong Kong in 1950, and the Philippines in 1998 and 2007) banning or discouraging dog slaughter for consumption. In many Western nations, the consumption of dog meat is still legal, possibly because few citizens would ever consider dog meat to be “edible.” In the United States, only a few states banned the slaughter and sale of dog meat before 2021, when a Federal law prohibiting eating dogs and cats was passed. In the UK, there is no specific law banning the sale of dog meat. Nevertheless, the regulatory infrastructure governing the production and sale of food prevents dog meat from being commercially available.

For a sophisticated anthropological analysis of dog commodification and pet dog keeping in South Korea, readers are referred to a recent book by Julien Dugnoille, published by Purdue University Press.