

Taiwan Tales: Pampered Pooches

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Wah-Yin Rixon reveals a world in which dogs have become the most important 'person' in people's lives.

There is a well-known Chinese dish - pork braised with dried, fermented cabbage (it tastes better than it sounds) - claimed as their invention by both the Cantonese and the Hakka.

My mother's version is the best. Its creation is involved. First, the slab of raw pork steak - skin and fat intact - must be marinated for some hours in soya sauce and five spices plus oil and sugar. After draining, the pork is deep-fried. It is then hung out to dry. Meanwhile, the vegetable is soaked, drained and finely chopped. The pork steak is sliced and arranged carefully over the vegetable. A sauce made up of secret ingredients is poured over this; and the whole dish is steamed.

When you place a slice of the pork with a little vegetable into your mouth, both melt away in the most gorgeous, intense manner. As far as I am aware, it has never been on the Imperial menu but it should have been.

Imagine my delight when I discovered that a restaurant, a mere five minutes' saunter from my apartment, offered my mother's dish.

My pleasure in its consumption has now, abruptly and unhappily, been halted. By a dog. The last time I was at the restaurant, a man at the next table was feeding his dog who was sitting on his lap. It had its own bowl. Its bowl was on the table. The bowl was next to the man's bowl from which he was eating. It was a striking dog, some kind of oyster-furred terrier with large eyes and a pert nose. Naturally, I felt moved to say a word or two.

Me: What a nice dog. Is it hungry?

He: Yes. She's lovely, isn't she? (he kisses the dog on its snout, gives it an affectionate pat and feeds the animal a morsel of meat).

Me: (trying not to sound haughty) In the UK, we don't allow dogs into restaurants. We like dogs, too, but we think it's not hygienic to combine the two.

He: Hygienic? (he pauses dramatically as if to savour the word). Oh, don't you? Ah, we do things differently in Taiwan. We take our dogs everywhere, don't we? (he chuckles and throws a conspiratorial look at the waitress, who is trying to keep a neutral expression).

Me: (hysteria rising as I scent defeat) I like dogs myself but, really, do you think it's acceptable? Our lives are...well...different...from our dogs'.

He: We love our dogs here (he laughs dismissively and, as if to hammer home his point, offers a lump of rice to the terrier).

I paid my bill and left.

As modern Taiwan has emerged from the shackles of colonialism (under the Japanese from 1895 to 1945), the horrors of 228 (a Stalinesque purge in 1947), and a humiliating defeat in the Chinese Civil War (in 1949 against Mao Tse Tung in China), democracy, free-market capitalism, education and the en masse embrace of electronic technology have produced the vibrant Taiwanese society you see today. Any superficial observation gives you a positive image of a country at ease with its status as a super international economy. It is against this comfortable context that dog-worship has flourished, imperceptibly initially, but no longer.

This is the era of the pampered pooch.

On any street in any part of town on any sunny, breezy day, you will see, repeatedly, without even trying, a dog and its

owner in tow. The dog is, invariably, one of the smaller types - a Chihuahua or a Spaniel or a Poodle. There is usually no leash attached to it. It often wears no collar. The dog does not walk. It is carried in the arms of its owner in the manner that one might cradle an infant, its legs tucked out of sight while its head hangs languidly over its owner's arm.

Sometimes, the dog is carried in a customised bag slung over the shoulder. More often than not, a dog whizzes by, seated at the foot of the ubiquitous scooter that plagues the streets in Taiwan, fur flying and ears flapping, as the dog sways effortlessly to accommodate the erratic moves of its scooter driver-owner. Occasionally, you will see a dog in a stroller being pushed through the crowded market alleys.

In Taiwan, the dog has become a highly visible human companion in ways that are unimaginable other than in the most eccentric households in that other dog-loving nation, the UK.

Dog pet shops are loud and brash and sell dogs together with all the paraphernalia considered necessary to responsible dog ownership. There are doggy push chairs (or strollers) which come in single or double (for twins, presumably); and trolley bags with fine mesh exteriors so that your dog can breathe and not miss any exciting sights while it is being wheeled round a shopping mall.

All sorts of ingenious bags have been designed to keep your animal safe as you go jogging, do the weekly shopping, take the children to school, or roam the streets with your mates: padded bags that sit across your chest; bags fashioned from leather or floral chintz; designer bags studded with bling; and manly backpacks in sturdy polyester.

You can choose from sequinned leashes, lamb-skin muzzles and rainbow-coloured harnesses; and cotton T-shirts with cool slogans or smart woollen jackets with shiny buttons. There are shoes, leggings, ribbons, ear muffs, eye patches, hats, necklaces and myriad items you never knew were necessary for a dog - until you saw them, and then it makes perfect sense to have them for that most important 'person' in your life.

The smaller pedigrees are the most popular: Terrier, Chihuahua, Poodle, Dachshund, Shih Tzu, Lhasa Apso and Spaniel. But size is no bar to love. Two doors away from my apartment lives a handsome Husky; I often see a Corgi with a snappy kerchief slung low round its neck flying past in a scooter; and Golden Retrievers and German Shepherds are as desirable here as they are in the west.

Su Jen is not an untypical dog owner. She shows me several pictures of her five dogs on her mobile phone. She does not offer any picture of her eight-year old son. Here they all are: an elegant Shih Tzu, a proud German Shepherd, a sleek Golden Retriever, an irrepressible Chihuahua and a spiky Scottish terrier.

Each has been carefully selected for its pedigree and comes with a Certificate of Authenticity with a price tag to match. Her husband has built each dog its own outhouse and the kennels crowd their small courtyard as much as the animals dominate their lives.

Su Jen says: 'My dogs are the love of my life. Dogs are better than babies. Babies are expensive. They grow up and become ungrateful teenagers who turn their backs on you. My dogs would never do that. I cannot live without my dogs (all five of them). I'd rather have my dogs than a lover (this said out of her husband's earshot).'

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'lazy corgi' by istoletv