DIGITALIZING THE KOREAN COSMOS: Ontological transfiguration and more-than-human ethnicity in contemporary Korea.

In his recent ‘Anthropology beyond humanity’ paper, Tim Ingold pointed out that the identification of a multi-species turn in anthropology was both an anachronism and a contradiction in terms (2013). This is because, long before Helmreich and Kirksey in their Cultural Anthropology edited journal issue claimed the advent of ‘multi-species ethnography’ (2010: 545), many anthropologists had taken a focus on ecology beyond human-made taxonomies of life, including that of ‘species’ distinction. Indeed, Ingold’s own research on transactionalism in Saami reindeer herders published in 1974 is an early example of this. In that paper, Ingold also shows that Lestel et al. (2006)’s work at the Ethno-ethological institute in Paris had actually taken a step forward in the anthropological conceptualization of human-nonhuman interactions that endeavours to escape human-made taxonomies, which Helmreich and Kirksey have overlooked. Lestel et al. exposed the inconsistency of anthropological theory looking at human-animal interactions in terms of ‘human societies’ (2006: 157). They ascertained all societies are composed of individuals who belong to a variety of taxonomies that go beyond their conceptualisations in human terms. Many anthropologists and human geographers, since then, have focussed on human-animal relations using this framework to highlight that societies occur and engage in more-than-human environments more than they exist ontologically. While Ingold made sense of these interactions as an ‘ecology of life’ (2000: 16), Kohn argued for an ‘anthropology of life’ (2013: 229) in which ‘selves’ evolve in an ‘open whole’ (Kohn 2013: 17-39); and, in human geography Whatmore (2006), Hinchliffe (2007) and Lorimer (2010) among others, have identified more-than-human ontologies as a space of investigation in which the anthropocene could be studied through ethnographic practice. In the light of these interdisciplinary developments and based on my thirteen-month fieldwork conducted in South Korea in the early 2010s, I also chose to break away from Helmreich and Kirksey’s concept of
‘multi-species ethnography’ as one that counter-productively re-places taxonomic distinctions at the centre of the study of human-animal relations. In particular, the findings I present in this paper highlight the unwieldy and inapt nature of the concept, as it unveils how South Korean modern urbanites mobilize digital devices backed up by a civil discourse about Korean tradition to show that Korean individuals do not make sense of more-than-human intersubjectivity in terms of species distinction (‘multi-species’) but, rather, in terms of a continuity between all living entities on the territory.

I will start this article by reproducing my participants’ internet aesthetics to show how animal activists visually frame animal abuse and more-than-human empathy in order to increase the visibility of violent practices against cats and dogs. I will then show how my participants use digital photography as a way to attest to Korea’s social change without having to move away from what they describe as ‘traditional Korean values’. As such, I will then show how participants use photography to ‘singularize’, (Kopytoff in Appadurai 1986: 83) or ‘transfigure’, the status of livestock animals into that of cosmological responsibility, thereby arguing that digital photography enables my participants to perform and articulate human-animal interactions beyond human terms and human-made categories of life. Finally, I will show how my participants identify more-than-human identity construction as part of a nationalist discourse that draws on cosmological and geomantic understandings of a more-than-human ethnicity. This paper will fill a gap in the literature on the contemporary developments of more-than-human ecologies and in particular in a society that has suffered from much misrepresentation of its health behaviour (Walraven 2002, Podberscek 2009, Oh and Jackson 2011). This way, as Arizpe (this volume) suggests about recent developments in the use of photography by anthropologists, the photographs reproduced in this manuscript may provide an interpretative reservoir for future research, and for more-than-human ethnographic engagement in particular.
HUMAN AND NONHUMAN TRANSFIGURATION

As I have taken more than 4,000 photographs in the field, gaining access into various organizations also required me to deal with their apprehension regards my use of visual devices. It was more difficult to use my camera in more sensitive locations such as the meat market or various dog farms, as my participants often associated taking photographs with a form of Western judgment on ‘Korean tradition’. By encouraging my participants to relate to my presence in the field as a way to testify of their contemporary struggle to make sense of conflicting discourses about Korean tradition and cosmology, I was able to build trust progressively. Rapidly, my photographic presence was thus perceived as a way to de-sensationalize cat and dog meat consumption. However, the way my participants related to the production of images portraying more-than-human engagement was particularly complex because of the political message they conveyed about Korean culture. Thus, the importance of letting my participants represent this complex setting and widely misrepresented practice on their own quickly emerged as an ethnographic necessity, let alone when these images were produced in the perspective of being uploaded online.

As demonstrated by the £1,473,000 raised in less than six months thanks to the posting and sharing of human-animal selfies throughout the world (Fig. 01) after a 15-year-old killed 53 animals by setting a Manchester dog shelter on fire in 2014, not only is human-animal representation a significantly potent agent for global mobilization and solidarity, but also a transnational mode of identity construction.
The extraordinary success of this fundraiser which received donations from all over the world suggests that ‘selfies with animals’, photographic self-portraits of human individuals with nonhuman individuals captured with digital devices, have become a widespread medium for the representation and/or enactment of more-than-human empathy in many post-industrial or post-domestic contexts today. South Korea (hereafter Korea) where digital photographs portraying more-than-human identity are particularly widespread, is no exception. Korea is an ultra-wired society where 70% of its 50 million human individuals have smartphones, the highest rate in the world according to market research firm eMarket (accessed 01/12 2013). This compares to, for instance, 58% of Americans and 55% of Canadians. Koreans upload millions of images every day onto their discussion forums, or ‘cafés’, whose access is restricted to those registered with either Daum or Naver, Korean web-search engines preferred to Google and Yahoo! when surfing the net. Because certain species are simultaneously regarded as companions and food sources in Korea, the digital circulation of more-than-human portraits also acts as a utensil to articulate and display this social ambivalence to the world. More to the point, many Koreans, predominantly younger generations, use digital photography to counteract stereotypical representations of Korean dog and cat-human relationships as being, for instance, solely based on meat consumption (Dugnoille 2014).
Anonymous access to online cafés such as those cited above (Naver or Daum) is not permitted. Registration requires a verified name, a phone number registered in Korea and a Korean national identity or alien registration number. There is a high level of online censorship in Korea. Many sites’ contents, and comments from internet users, such as those sympathizing with North Korea, discussing LGBT issues, criticizing the government or showing cat and dog slaughter, are often censored, simply showing a warning message from the government (Fig. 02). After this text the message states why the site concerned has been blocked. Reasons include ‘gambling’ (dokbak) or ‘obscenity’ (deumlan).

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Fig. 02 © 2013 Korean Communications Standards Commission

[In red] This site is blocked because it contains illegal information. We inform you that you are trying to enter a site whose content is prohibited by the Law and which has been blocked for containing illegal information. After deliberation by the Korea Communications Standards Commission, this site was duly blocked in accordance with the law. If you have any questions about this, please contact the following.

This kind of censorship explains why animal advocates rely on national networks for the online spreading of sensitive images of violent methods of slaughter. Undercover animal activists and amateur photographers regularly report instances of animal cruelty by uploading digital images online. For
instance, images showing the hanging procedure that dogs often endure before being killed have increasingly been uploaded on major animal welfare organizations’ website and profusely re-blogged (Fig. 03). These photographs sometimes help prosecute Korea’s numerous mortar markets for illegal hanging practices.
Thus, many of my participants used digital photography to fight against Korea’s online censorship about animal cruelty and show abusive more-than-human enactment in Korea today such as
violent slaughter, as a way to break away from practices they do not agree with and demonstrate contemporary developments in more-than-human companionship solidarity. One of the most widely known campaigns that endeavoured to do this at a national level is the *Sajima ibyanghaseyo* (‘Don’t buy, adopt’) campaign. *Sajima ibyanghaseyo* is the motto of many Korean animal activist organizations that specifically focus on reducing the excessive purchasing of nonhuman animals in pet shops who often come from unsupervised centres that treat animals as breeding machines before they are dumped in the streets or sold to meat markets when no longer profitable. This was a particular problem for Taiwan in the 1980s, leading to an estimated population of 650,000 stray dogs there at the end of the 1990s, 90% of which have since been culled (Jennings 2007). Therefore, in an attempt to reduce cat and dog meat consumption while, at the same time, reducing pedigree breeding, Korean animal advocates attempted to ‘singularize’ former livestock and strays as potential companions. In the past fifteen years, many have done this through the circulation of digital photographs representing nonhuman animals as individuals with whom human animals may share a whole lifetime.

In this article, I use what Kopytoff calls ‘singularization’ to refer to the capacity for some part of the environment to resist being commoditized by others (Kopytoff in Appadurai 1986: 73). In that sense, a cow that is imported from Europe to India, for instance, is singularized by the contemporary social context it is being imported to. It could thus be argued that livestock, which acquires a status of potential companionship, as it is the case for many cats and dogs in Korean society today, are singularized in that way. However, as Kopytoff argues with regards to ‘the commodity phase’ (ibid), while animals are then temporarily turned into commodities, they would then be singularized again by becoming companions or family members after being exchanged against financial value. In that case, their financial value decreases as their symbolic/cultural value increases. The three animal shelters I worked for during my fieldwork (HELP, AYIBAN and SSS) finalized many adoptions without requiring an adoption fee, but often worked on a case-by-case basis. As a result, they alternate between singularizing and commoditizing rescued animals. HELP’s transformation processes were particularly
complex because they euthanized animals, leaving them with the status of having lost their financial value without being given a financial or a moral value later on. This acceptance of ‘singularization’, however, fails to include situations where livestock animals become adoptable animals in exchange of an adoption fee or, as it is argued in this article, a situation where a nonhuman animal is recognized by the human animal he/she lives with as enacting a more-than-human environment with him/her. As such, I chose to call the latter process ‘transfiguration’ and will refer to it as such for the remainder of this article.

The development of a public discourse about the lifetime commitment for adopted animals in need thereby transfiguring more-than-human ontologies and advocating for the recognition of Korean society as being a more-than-human society, is a collaborative project between all animal welfare organizations in Korea, who circulate each other's digital photographs freely. It is visible in the production of hoodies and t-shirts by AYIBAN, Korea’s first cat-only shelter, both to finance the winter refurbishing of the shelter and to raise awareness about animal adoption. **Fig. 04** gives an example of the type of photographs staged by AYIBAN activists and uploaded onto AYIBAN’s website and Facebook page, then circulated on many animal welfare organizations.

![Fig. 04 © 2012 Soojin’s Facebook](image-url)
The circulation of digital photographs showcasing both Korean- and English-speaking ‘Don’t buy, adopt’ hoodies and t-shirts for both human and animal individuals ended up being a large fundraising success, as all hoodies sold out for 2012. Moreover, it seemed particularly important for shelter organizations to make sure that all male volunteers participated in the ‘Don’t buy, adopt’ campaign. For instance, when I arrived at AYIBAN to cover one of my shifts in early December 2012, Eunju, an AYIBAN activist, bluntly asked me to put on a yellow hoodie with AYIBAN’s name on the front, and ‘Don’t buy, adopt’ written on the back. I did what I was told and, before I knew it, Eunju had taken a photograph of me and uploaded it on AYIBAN’s online discussion forum. Many commented on it, and it seemed to suit all the activists who decided, without consulting me, that the photo was to be uploaded on AYIBAN’s online homepage the next day (Fig. 05). I thus participated, unaware, in the representation of more-than-human enactment in Korea today.
The rationale behind using men to advertise ‘Don’t buy, adopt’ merchandise was that many symbols of Korean violent temperament are associated with discursive tradition of Korean manhood (Dugnoille 2016 forthcoming). Indeed, this discourse was recurrent among my participants. For instance, Jaewon, a thirty-five-year-old administrator from another major animal welfare organization, confessed to me he used to be a dog meat consumer before working for Korea’s largest animal rescue organization. He expressed the connections between men’s social role, violence and bosintang (dog meat restaurant) outings as follows:

Before I started working for HELP (one of Korea’s largest animal welfare organizations), I thought I could continue eating dog meat, but I quickly changed my mind seeing the horrifying things they do to dogs. When you eat dogs, you don’t think about dogs. You eat it because you’re told to. About five years ago, I went to a bosintang because my previous boss took me on a business outing. I had no choice. But, to be
honest, I did not mind going at all. I enjoyed it. It was good food and good fun. It is a male-bonding experience. You eat dog meat, then you sing at a nearby nolaebang (karaoke bar), sometimes you do more (laughs)... It is a male-bonding experience destined to strengthen the professional ties in the company. If you don’t follow, they may think you are not loyal enough to the company. (Pause) Well, they fired me anyway, but you think you will automatically be fired if you refuse to go.

Jaewon’s experience of dog meat consumption shows that many men reproduce a social schema that is imposed upon them as young male professionals. Men consume dogs that are beaten to death with metal pipes so as to increase the level of adrenaline in the animal’s blood which supposedly increases the sexual stamina of the person that consumes it (Dugnoille 2014, 2015). This social reproduction is practised with little thought. Yet, things seem different in recent social and moral configurations in Korea, as younger generations are making older generations reflect on these practices as a tradition later in their lives. Younghae, a Korean male AYIBAN activist in his thirties, expressed Korea’s social pressure in similarly negative terms:

For Koreans, I should have had children by now. At thirty, you need to start thinking about having a family but I don’t want children, I don’t like children and I don’t want to be a father. …. My wife does not like cats, so I come here and help out. I’ve always cared for street cats when I was a child and as an adult too. But it always was and still is a little taboo so I come here, I clean, I play with the cats. I socialize with other activists, without my wife. It is quite refreshing (laughs).

Indeed, many male participants seemed to find in animal welfare a way to shelter themselves from social pressure, and escape the diktats of Korea’s older men in terms of marital and filial expectations. One must understand the relationship between these forms of emancipation from traditional forms of social hierarchy and social expectations, in terms of Korea’s history of uprisings against social oppression (in particular during the last hundred years), but also in relation to Korea’s recent inflow of non-Korean values (Dugnoille 2014). With this as a backdrop, the rising number of digital photographs posted online showing human male-nonhuman animal interactions in Korea suggests that animal welfare organizations are targeting an effective change in both social and gender roles in Korean society. In this sense, the progressive representation of the ‘sensible Korean man’ (Dugnoille 2014) as an individual that enacts his personhood through more-than-human enactment is a
good indicator of Korea’s contemporary developments towards reducing social pressure related to gender roles. It is easy to see that many Korean men are taught to relate to nonhuman animals in a socially codified manner. As such, one’s engagement with nonhuman animals and cats and dogs in particular, mirrors the way they negotiate Korean society’s great gender-based expectations. As the next section shall illustrate, this is true for many aspects of social identity in contemporary Korea.

THE KOREAN COSMOS: MORE-THAN-HUMAN ETHNICITY

The following post and comment from one of my participants suggests that some Koreans today, are also using digital photography as a medium to deconstruct common assumptions about Korean tradition. In particular, my participant’s comment shows that more-than-human engagement in personhood construction and representation is used to produce a discourse about a changing national identity:
Today I faked illness to avoid going to an intense seminar on the Korean War and only Lisa [her cat] knows it and keeps the secret to stay at home, lie down and put on make-up with mommy… [Not in the above text] This is my life. I want the world to know my cat when they get to know me. This is who I am. I am a Korean, I have a cat and we love each other.

This resonates with the mobilization of notions of ‘unique Koreanness’ by many of my participants during the course of my fieldwork. These notions, I was told, refer to a ‘unique’ Korean cosmology. Some of my participants used, for instance, the notions of jeong and woori (Dugnoille forthcoming) to show that the Korean understanding of the cosmos (koseumoseu) or cosmic universe (uju) means that all individuals on the Korean territory, regardless of ontologies, participate to a contiguous existence. Thereby, participants enabled the transfiguration not only of human-made taxonomies but also of subjectivities, which explains why many of my participants referred to themselves, as well as to other Korean human and nonhuman individuals, as a general woori, i.e. ‘we’
or ‘us’ which encompasses all entities living on the Korean territory. This explains the extraordinary success of smartphone applications that enabled animals, mostly cats and dogs, to take their own photographs, as they chase onscreen lasers and dots. Many of my participants encouraged the nonhuman animals they lived with to take these photographs, then uploaded them online and used them as modes of self-representation. Fig. 07 shows Gina’s cat’s ‘selfie’ which she uploaded to her Facebook profile. Gina’s friends’ reaction was to upload their own animal photographs.

Moreover, the product of these technology-based more-than-human encounters is often used not only to supply human individuals’ online profiles on social media, but also to act as online persona, enabling a form anonymity (Fig. 08). In my experience, those who use nonhuman animal images to
remain anonymous are often from older generations. The cat portrayed in Fig. 08 below lives with a well-known sixty-year-old Korean ‘power blogger’, whose followers number over 100,000. By using her cat’s image as her self-representation, she can remain as anonymous online as she wishes: ‘I want to keep my private life intact. I am scared that people will find me and I won’t have a private life anymore’. Perhaps being from a generation that has known Korean society when it was under dictatorship accounts for her mistrust of online visibility and public scrutiny.

![Fig. 08 © 2013 Anonymous](image)

It was also interesting to note that animal activists mostly communicated online with their ‘animal names’, alongside a profile picture that showed them alongside a nonhuman animal. Before taking on the names of their animals, participants named nonhuman individuals according to one or more of the following naming strategies: descriptive (e.g. ‘Nolengi’ or Yellowie’ for a ginger cat), generic (e.g. ‘Lara’, usually non-Korean given names), incidental (e.g. ‘Bbanggyé’ or Inside’, because this cat was always hiding inside boxes or bags) or referential (e.g. ‘Jiseong’ referring to ‘Park, Jiseong,’ a famous Korean football player and his presumed outgoing personality, which apparently matched that of the cat in question). Furthermore, some participants practised naming two animals with the same name. For instance, in January 2013, I named the cat I was to later adopt ‘Danchu’ (button) and, a few days
after telling Soojin, one of AYIBAN’s leaders, about it, she used ‘Danchu’ to name a cat she had recently rescued. A way to make sense of imitation in animal naming would be to regard it as a way to honour the principles of filial piety. For example, siblings and cousins of the same generational cohort are given names that incorporate the same single syllable, that is, a Chinese character, across a generation. This practice was originally Chinese. The Japanese do not do this, because the social orders were so very different and consequently the notion of agnatic relations has been different. Thus, this mimesis in naming is also interesting to note in light of how a member of a woori refers to the whole. For instance, Darae, head of HELP’s adoption centre, often named incoming animals with names that had served to identify recently adopted animals. For instance, she named a dog ‘Poly’ two weeks after a family in Busan had adopted another dog from the centre, also named ‘Poly’. This, Darae underlines, is a way for HELP to maintain their woori continuity, a way to honour those who have gone (or died) by giving those who arrive to replace them the name of their predecessors (or ancestors). Moreover, the fact that Confucian respect for more-than-human entities such as nonhuman animals, trees, Heaven and the Earth is identified as a filial one also indicates that Confucianism contributes to perceiving animals as members of Korea’s extended family. Thus, in Confucian terms, animals are kin who deserve respect and care in the name of a cosmological filiality, whether consumed or not. This may explain why my participants claimed that human-animal relations were rooted in kinship. For instance, as mentioned above, they referred to each other by their ‘animal names’ drawn from the activists’ (past) companion animals, to which a filial ending was added, usually appa (dad) or eomma (mom). Thus, if one male activist had a dog named ‘Jisung’, that activist could claim to be called ‘Jisung appa’ (Jisung’s dad), which would usually only be used between members of the shelter’s woori. Participants frequently described shelter animals as aidul (children). Moreover, because cats can be neutered/spayed for free under governmental care, many cat welfare activists, such as Jae, Mikyung and Soojin from AYIBAN, regularly trapped cats in their respective neighbourhoods and took them to these clinics. Thus, the effectiveness of Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) greatly depended on cooperation between administrative
authorities and local populations referred to as ‘cat moms’, a terminology that suggests, once again, that Koreans believe that more-than-human enactment and solidarity are grounded in Confucian principles of cosmology and filial piety. As the following vignette illustrates, this can be extended to my participants’ perceptions of more-than-human ethnicity.

Organizations design adoption profiles for cats and dogs by using digital photography to engage with fashionable trends. Indeed, in order to create an image they anticipate will have an impact on potential adopters, activists resort to producing photographs that emphasize what Serpell has referred to as the ‘cute response’ (1986: 82), later theorized as neoteny, i.e. the social phenomenon that leads human individuals to be attracted to nonhuman individuals for their ‘cute’ features and presupposed behaviour. For instance, Fig. 09 shows kittens photographed individually. They sit quietly around flowers with their head tilted thanks to a toy moving above the camera. This kind of image, reported Darae, defines the image of kitten ‘cuteness’ (‘kwiyeo-un’, similar to Japanese kawaii) that ‘many people look for when acquiring a pet’.
When animals are older, gimmicky digital portraits that accentuate each animal’s presumed personality replace the commoditization of ‘animal cuteness’. This form of neotenic egomorphism could be regarded as what Hurn describes as a ‘distancing device, a means of establishing hierarchy between the (egomorphiser) and their subject (human or animal)’ (2011: 127). Operating a comparison between the way the noble savage was ‘civilized’ by being given clothes and the way animals are being dressed by human beings, Hurn sees in the act of clothing one that ‘can also be regarded as a means of controlling animal nature in a bid to “civilize” or, in the case of nonhuman animals, “domesticate”’ (ibid). In this case, domestication can indeed be seen as a device to demonstrate animals’ capacity to emancipate themselves from their ‘wild’ image in Korean society and behave in a civilized manner with human animals upon adoption. As such, animal digital photography is used as a vector to demonstrate nonhuman animals’ affiliation with what Hurn refers as the ‘domus’, the human domestic sphere (2011: 128). For instance, the photographs shown in Fig. 10 and Fig. 11 were created for a cat that had had

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1 As noted by philosopher Regan (1983) and anthropologist Milton (2005), while anthropomorphism is often used
no luck at adoption during his first few months at the shelter. As he would not let anyone approach him, let alone photograph him, it was difficult to create an engaging profile for him. After a few months, he started opening up and Darae jumped on the opportunity to update his profile through creating gimmicky images that would amplify qualities she believed he had. For instance, because he was a cross-eyed cat, they portrayed him as being confused, as shown in Fig. 10 where he looks perplexed, surrounded by ‘sinbi, sinbi’ (mystery, mystery) written in different colours. Fig. 11 shows Darae’s idea that emphasizing his embonpoint would increase his chances of adoption, as overweight cats were often quite popular at the centre.

![Fig. 10 and Fig. 11 © 2013 Fromcare.org](https://example.com/image1)

‘(Adopted) Dongeop-i’

Name: Dongeop-i
Breed: Kosyot (often used to designate stray cats)
Sex: Male
Age: Estimated 2 years
Weight: 7 kg
Neutered/received primary vaccine shots

The *kwiyeo-un* additions to animals' profiles also included egomorphised gender attitudes, as
demonstrated by a photo of another male cat (strangely similar to the previous one) apparently blushing from being cuddled by a female volunteer (Fig. 12).

Fig. 12 © 2013 Fromcare.org

'(Cat adoption centre) Silo, the chubby, cutie tuxedo'

In order to make strays more attractive to potential adopters animal welfare organizations also resorted to producing photographs designed to enhance ‘qualities’ they thought would attract people who were looking for ‘pure-bred pets’. This breed portraiture is somehow reminiscent of Poole’s analysis of 1920s Andean family portraits (1997). Poole argues that these played a significant role in shaping the Peruvian representation of race and modernity. Family portraiture was imposed on Andean families by Peruvian indigenistas following political ideologies and projects for the reinvention of cultural identities in the early twentieth century. These projects sought to emphasize the boundaries between the nation state’s dominant ethnicity and ‘indigenous’ groups, most likely to strengthen national identity through ‘visual evidence’ of modernity and primitiveness. Poole argues that these portraits were made with the prospect of fixing racial boundaries, providing visible evidence of people’s different features and physicality. Poole then argues that one could either look at this portraiture, following Foucault’s
interpretation of ‘indigenous’ family portraiture, as the moulding of the subjects ‘in accordance with a vision of modernity’ that had been scripted in Europe (1997: 213) or, *a posteriori*, as a project that *in fine* serves the purpose of showing race as a discontinuous concept in constant cultural mutation. The two perspectives seem to feed off each other in the case of my participants’ nonhuman animal portraits. Indeed, animal activists understand that Koreans nowadays are looking for images of more-than-human enactment as they are increasingly portrayed in Korean society, that is, with movie stars engaged in animal welfare campaigns (Dugnoille 2014) but also with a plethora of K-Pop artists, Korean pop musicians and singers known worldwide, who often claim to support animal activism and pose with ‘breed animals’. As emphasized by Darae in her statement above, activists are very conscious of the fact that when celebrities publicly oppose violent more-than-human enactment, it becomes a symbol of Korea’s modernity.

Thus, one of the major strategies developed by my participants to increase adoption rate, consisted of accentuating animal characteristics believed to showcase the ‘purity’ of adoptable animals. As Darae, head of HELP’s adoption centre, put it:

> When they buy pets, many Koreans want to look like movie stars: wearing sunglasses, carrying a small dog and looking important. So they want a dog like this one ([Fig. 13](#)). She’s a pure-bred dog, so she will be adopted quickly. If that’s what they want, then we have to play with that to attract adopters for mixed breeds and strays. So we dress them up, and make them fancier to look more like this one.
Indeed, some of my participants thought they could accentuate characteristics associated with ‘blood purity’ via the accentuation of breed affiliation. This represents both a moral and epistemological issue as these accentuations are based on a preconceived and prejudiced correspondence between what participants refer to as ‘blood purity’ and phenotypes. Furthermore, it is somewhat ironic that animal activists are using the same devices that served pet culture since the 1980s onwards to promote the purchasing of ‘breed animals’ in East Asia. One way to make sense of this is to look at the importance of ‘blood’ and ‘purity’ in state and civil discourse when engaging on the topic of Korean culture and ethnicity. Koreanists have explored primordialist conceptions of Korean ethnicity, particularly in North Korea’s political discourses on the ideology of a pure-blooded race (Myers 2010). However, with regard to this research, anthropological debates about instrumental ethnicity are particularly useful to analyse the use of ‘unique’ ethnic characteristics by Korean animal activists. Instrumental ethnicity usually refers to a group’s use of unusual ‘ethnic’ characteristics as markers for ‘some common

Fig. 13 © Julien Dugnoille
purpose’ (Banks 1996). This purpose could be, for instance, a way of ascertaining economic monopoly or political dominance over other groups (Cohen 1969) or a mere form of cultural capital used to rationalize the inclusion and exclusion of ‘others’ (Glazer and Moynihan 1975, Pieterse 1997). Indeed, in the context of my research, it was important for many of my participants to make use of Korean ethnicity and presumed pure-bloodedness to justify intra-Korean (read ‘Korean-only’) intersubjectivity and mutuality that transcended ontologies. For example, welfare volunteer, Eunju, often mentioned that she had two cats at home but, while she could not resolve to actually love them, she insisted that she had a primordial connection with them:

‘It is difficult to explain to foreigners. I don’t love them but … [pause] Do you know jeong? [I nod] Oh! Well that’s it! Me and my cats we have jeong. They need me because of woori.’

In this rather opaque statement for a non-Korean speaker, Eunju refers to jeong, described to me as a unique Korean interrelatedness quality (which is the subject of one of my forthcoming articles) shared by all Korean individuals. Woori refers to a cosmological understanding of an exclusively-Korean community, which extends to more-than-human entities. Both notions were also used by another one of my participants, Chung, Chuha, a well-known fifty-year-old Korean photographer whom I met early in the course of my fieldwork, as he engaged with East Asian populations’ anxiety regarding human mistakes responsible for environmental disasters, which he uses as a recurrent theme for his photography:

[talking about the 2007 oil spill at the Daesan port] I am connected to the Korean land and my environment in a particular manner. I am connected through jeong. It is not love, it is not ecological conscience, it is an essential connection for all of us [Koreans].

The following photograph which shows human and nonhuman individuals enjoying a day at the beach located near a nuclear power plant (Fig. 15) is part of a series entitled Bulan, bul-an exhibited in Arles and Seoul by Chung in 2012. Bulan, bul-an, known in English as A pleasant day, is a play on words. On the one hand, Bulan is the name of a Korean village near one of Korea’s four nuclear power
plants, which leaked in the early 2000s. That is where Chung shot many of the photographs in this series. On the other hand, ‘bul-an’ literally means ‘fire within’ in Korean and evokes a form of ‘blinded fear’. This fear, according to Chung, is the fear Koreans have for the weakening of their environment and for the consequence on the health of those who enact with it. It is a fear, Chung underlines, that everybody feels but that nobody talks about.

![Fig. 15 © 2012 Chung, Chuha](image)

The latter vignettes demonstrates that digital photography in Korea is not applied to human-animal relations to construct, represent and enact new social and political configurations but also to show that Koreans relate to their environment with a sense of filial responsibility. The sharing of these digital images online enables this enactment beyond human terms and human-made categories of life to be spread out transnationally. This enables Koreans to claim some agency in correcting what they judge to be ‘a misrepresentation of traditional human-animal interactions by other cultures’ (Chung, Chuha interview 12). Far from being oblivious to the violence and cruelty that takes place in Korea’s cat
and dog meat trade, my participants were indeed adamant to portray the coexistence between both positive and negative forms of human-animal engagements in Korea today. Yet to emphasize that both animal consumption and more-than-human companionship are not mutually exclusive, most of my participants mobilized notions they judged ‘unique’ to the Korean cosmos, i.e. a sense of seminal continuity (jeong) that connects all living entities on the territory. By emphasizing a discourse about the Korean cosmos being based on more-than-human continuity, my participants were able to make sense of Korea’s social change with regards to cat and dog meat consumption and recent developments in animal welfare while remaining in the realm of traditional Korean values.

**CONCLUSION**

As many of my participants’ photographs and discourses suggest, Korean human individuals are eager to represent the precariousness and/or wellbeing of the individual ‘environments’ (read ‘Umwelt’ see von Uexküll 2010) they perceive, construct and share with more-than-human entities through an array of complex relationships. Arguably, making sense of complex more-than-human enactment with discourses and conceptions about more-than-human interrelatedness, and using digital photography to represent this cosmological continuity is hardly unique to Korean society. Indeed, this also happens in more Western societies, as indicated by one of my colleagues, who reported the following to me in a private communication:

> I raise my own chickens, I care for them all year long and see them as my children … When the summer comes, I kill them myself and I eat them. My friends and family have a hard time understanding this, but I think it makes sense. There is nothing weird in having this connection to animals.
The progressive representation of the complex enactment that occurs between human and nonhuman animals throughout the world transfigures conventional ontologies and discursive taxonomies of species distinction. This suggests that the ‘multi-species ethnography’ concept is just as unwieldy and inapt in many other cultural contexts as it is in Korean society. It is the symptom of a growing perception among contemporary populations that the environment is nothing but a continuously active process between various forms of life. What is unique to Korean society, however, is that its human population not only uses a traditional discourse about more-than-human cosmology to condemn the cat and dog meat trade, but also to promote it (Dugnoille forthcoming). This strategy seems, in any case, quite successful for both agendas, as while Korea’s largest animal welfare organization has maintained an 80% adoption rate over the past four years, cat and dog meat consumption has also tripled in the past thirty years alone (Ann 2010).
REFERENCES


