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GOVERNING MORALITY, NEGOTIATING IDENTITY:

LOCAL RESPONSES TO CULTURAL BANS IN A MULTICULTURAL URBAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

This article examines local responses to the prohibition of dog meat consumption and trade framed through moral regulation in the multicultural urban context of Surakarta, Indonesia. Drawing on a critical cultural studies perspective and engaging with international relations scholarship, the study conceptualizes cultural bans as part of the circulation of global moral norms related to animal welfare and public health that are negotiated at the local level. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation of everyday practices, and analysis of policy documents and public discourse. The findings show that moral regulation does not eliminate the contested practice but instead transforms it and displaces it into informal and less visible spaces. Local actors respond through adaptive, symbolic, and non-confrontational forms of everyday resistance, in which public compliance coexists with the persistence of practice in private and semi-public domains. Global moral norms are neither fully internalized nor outright rejected; rather, they are selectively negotiated through local moral economies and embodied understandings of health, producing hybrid moral formations. By foregrounding everyday practices as key sites of moral negotiation, this article challenges linear assumptions of global norm diffusion and highlights the active moral agency of local actors in shaping how global ethical claims are enacted, contested, and transformed in multicultural urban settings.

Keywords: moral regulation; everyday resistance; food practices; global norms; multicultural urban society

Introduction

Over the past decade, debates surrounding the consumption and trade of dog meat have shifted from a marginal concern within culinary anthropology to a central issue in public policy, ethics, and the governance of cultural values. Transnational advocacy networks, animal welfare organizations, and global public health institutions have increasingly framed the dog meat trade as a global moral problem, invoking ethical consumption, animal welfare, and zoonotic disease risks as justifications for regulatory intervention (Scullion, 2022; Quan, 2024). This reframing has transformed dog meat consumption from a locally embedded cultural practice into an object

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of global moral concern, thereby legitimizing calls for prohibition across diverse national and local contexts.

Legal developments at the national level illustrate how global moral discourses are translated into domestic regulation. A prominent example is South Korea’s Special Act enacted in January 2024, which prohibits the breeding, slaughtering, distribution, and sale of dogs for human consumption. This legislation reflects shifting public attitudes and sustained international pressure and has been widely interpreted as signaling the end of a long-contested food industry (Choi, 2024; Kim & Oh, 2022). The South Korean case underscores that moral regulation does not emerge in a vacuum but is embedded in transnational norm circulation, generational change, and political negotiation. This process exemplifies norm diffusion and localization, in which global ethical standards are selectively adopted and institutionalized within national frameworks (Acharya, 2004). Public health considerations further reinforce the moral framing of dog meat bans. Academic research has linked unregulated dog meat trade and informal animal markets to heightened risks of zoonotic diseases, including rabies and other transmissible pathogens (Quan, 2024; World Health Organization, 2022). Health-based arguments provide technocratic and scientific justification for state intervention, while simultaneously strengthening the moral legitimacy of cultural bans. However, such universalizing narratives often overlook the deep entanglement between food practices, local moral economies, and cultural identities (Scullion, 2022).

Despite the growing global momentum toward prohibition, local responses to dog meat bans remain diverse and highly contextual. In Indonesia, dog meat consumption persists within certain communities, where the practice is embedded in histories of marginality, identity formation, and embodied beliefs about health. Studies on culinary taboos and food politics in Java demonstrate that contested food practices frequently function as sites of symbolic resistance rather than mere acts of consumption (Wijaya et al., 2023). Rather than disappearing under regulatory pressure, these practices often adapt, becoming less visible yet retaining strong cultural significance. At the municipal level, Indonesia reveals complex dynamics between global norms and local governance. In February 2024, the Surakarta City Government issued a circular urging residents to refrain from consuming dog meat and encouraging traders to shift toward certified livestock products, citing food safety, zoonotic risks, and public morality (Pemerintah Kota Surakarta, 2024). While this directive aligns with global health and ethical discourses, empirical evidence suggests that it has not eliminated dog meat consumption and trade. Instead, the practice has transformed—from open food stalls to informal exchanges mediated by social networks and digital communication. Similar dynamics have been observed elsewhere in Java, where traders and consumers employ concealment strategies, euphemisms, and trust-based networks to sustain prohibited practices (Sunarto & Lestari, 2023).

These adaptive responses resonate with James C. Scott’s concept of everyday resistance, which emphasizes subtle, non-confrontational practices through which subordinated groups negotiate domination without overt defiance (Scott, 1985). More recent scholarship

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extends Scott’s framework by conceptualizing resistance as dispersed, symbolic, and embedded in everyday life, particularly in contexts of moral regulation (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2018). Within this framework, compliance and resistance are not binary opposites but intertwined strategies for navigating regulatory power. Positioned at the intersection of cultural studies and international relations, this article conceptualizes the prohibition of dog meat consumption as an arena of contestation between global moral norms, national governance, and local moral cultures. Rather than treating global values as universally accepted or unilaterally imposed, the study examines how such values are selectively interpreted, contested, and reconstructed through culturally embedded moral frameworks.

Focusing on suppliers, traders, and consumers in Surakarta, this research highlights how local moralities rooted in tradition, embodied health beliefs, communal solidarity, and historical legitimacy sustain forms of everyday resistance to cultural bans. The findings challenge linear models of norm diffusion and contribute to broader debates on moral regulation, cultural politics, and norm localization in Asia and beyond. Local actors are thus conceptualized not as passive recipients of global norms but as active moral agents who negotiate the conditions under which global ethical claims are enacted, debated, and transformed.

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative interpretive–critical approach using a case study design. The objective is to understand how local actors interpret, respond to, and negotiate cultural bans framed through moral regulation. Within the tradition of cultural studies, social practices are understood as sites of meaning production that are inseparable from power relations, identity, and discourse (Hall, 1997; Barker, 2012). Surakarta was selected as a critical case within a multicultural urban context where global moral norms concerning animal welfare, ethical consumption, and public health intersect with long-standing local cultural practices. In cultural studies, case studies are not intended to generate statistical generalizations but analytical generalizations that enrich conceptual understanding of how moral regulation operates and is negotiated in specific contexts (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted in Surakarta, Indonesia, a city with a long history of ethnic, religious, and culinary pluralism. Participants consisted of three main actor groups within the practice chain:

1. Dog meat suppliers,
2. Traders or food stall owners, and
3. Consumers.

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Informants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling, based on direct involvement in the practice, experience with regulatory pressure, and the capacity to reflect on the cultural meanings of their activities. In line with cultural studies traditions, these actors are positioned not as policy objects but as cultural subjects actively producing meaning and survival strategies (Couldry, 2000).

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through three complementary methods:

1. In-depth interviews, aimed at eliciting lived experiences, moral rationalizations, and identity narratives. This approach aligns with cultural interviewing methods that foreground subjective experience and everyday language as entry points for understanding broader meaning structures (Seale et al., 2018).
2. Observation of practice spaces both open and concealed including social interactions, coded language, and concealment strategies. In cultural studies, observation is understood as reading social practices as “living texts” imbued with symbolism and power relations (Pink et al., 2016).
3. Document and discourse analysis of local policy documents, media coverage, and animal welfare campaign materials to trace how dog meat bans are framed as public moral issues. This analysis follows the tradition of cultural discourse analysis, which treats discourse as social practice rather than mere linguistic representation (Fairclough, 2013).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a thematic–critical and contextual interpretive approach. Analytical themes were developed inductively from field data and then read dialogically through the theoretical lenses of everyday resistance, cultural conflict, and moral regulation. Rather than seeking a single “truth,” analysis focused on tensions, ambiguities, and contradictions within social practices (Storey, 2018). Acts of resistance were interpreted as *hidden transcripts* operating through symbols, language, and routine practices rather than overt opposition to the state (Scott, 1990).

Findings and Analysis

a. Moral Regulation and the Transformation of Everyday Practices

The findings indicate that municipal policies and public appeals discouraging dog meat consumption and trade have not eradicated the practice but have instead transformed its forms and spatial organization. Traders and suppliers no longer operate openly as before, shifting transactions into more concealed arrangements based on personal relationships, trust networks, and informal communication. Food stalls previously known for dog meat dishes have changed

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names, removed visual markers, and adjusted menus. At the distribution level, supply routes have become flexible and mobile to avoid surveillance. Consumers, in turn, rely on closed social networks and word-of-mouth recommendations. These dynamics suggest that moral regulation operates less through direct repression than through the disciplining of public space. Rather than full criminalization, the city state restricts visibility. From a cultural studies perspective, this reflects *governing through morality*: practices are not eliminated but pushed into grey zones between legal and illegal, visible and invisible. Moral regulation thus produces symbolic compliance at the surface while triggering cultural adaptation at the level of practice.

b. Everyday Resistance as a Strategy of Survival

Resistance to the ban does not manifest as open rejection or collective protest but through small, routine, non-confrontational practices. Suppliers adjust timing and routes, traders interpret policy shifts as “business challenges” rather than absolute prohibitions, and consumers justify continued consumption through habit, taste, or perceived health benefits. Resistance is also articulated through language and symbolism: euphemisms, coded menus, and humor mark the practice without explicitly naming it. Online transactions occur within closed, trust-based groups.

These practices align with the concept of everyday resistance. Rather than aiming to overturn policy, resistance seeks to sustain livelihoods and ways of life under moral pressure. Ambiguous compliance becomes a key strategy: actors appear to conform publicly while maintaining practices in private and semi-public spaces. Such resistance highlights the limits of moral regulation absent local cultural legitimacy.

c. Moral Economy and the Legitimation of Local Practices

Local actors construct the legitimacy of dog meat consumption and trade through a moral economy framework. The practice is understood as a source of livelihood, inherited custom, and social solidarity within actor networks. The ban is perceived primarily as a threat to micro-economic survival rather than as a protective intervention. Additionally, beliefs concerning bodily health and vitality persist, particularly among long-term consumers, reinforcing narratives of stamina and resilience. Here, moral economy functions as a cultural counterweight to global moral claims. When animal welfare and public health norms are presented as universal, local actors respond with alternative moral standards rooted in lived experience. The conflict thus unfolds not only at the policy level but at the level of competing moral evaluation frameworks.

d. Norm Negotiation and the Production of Hybrid Moralities

The findings also show that local actors do not entirely reject global norms. Many informants acknowledge the importance of hygiene, food safety, and public health. However, such recognition does not translate into the abandonment of practice but into efforts to make it “safer” and “more orderly” according to local understandings. This reflects a process of norm

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negotiation rather than outright rejection. Global norms undergo localization through selective adoption and reinterpretation, producing hybrid moralities in which certain global values are incorporated while local cultural legitimacy is retained. This challenges linear assumptions in norm diffusion theory and underscores the agency of local actors in shaping moral meaning.

e. Moral Regulation and the Limits of Urban Tolerance

Urban tolerance in Surakarta emerges as contextual and selective rather than fully inclusive. Practices deemed morally deviant are not necessarily eliminated but are allowed to persist as long as they do not disrupt public order or the city's image. This reflects a politics of selective visibility, whereby the city state manages cultural conflict by regulating space and symbolism rather than through direct confrontation.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the prohibition of dog meat consumption and trade in Surakarta operates primarily as moral regulation rather than as a purely technical policy grounded in public health concerns. The city government does not fully criminalize the practice but instead restricts its visibility through circular letters, administrative monitoring, and moral framing in public discourse. This pattern reinforces arguments within cultural studies that moral regulation functions through normalization and the production of “moral” citizen-subjects rather than through overt repression (Hunt, 1999; Foucault). As Hunt suggests, moral regulation targets everyday practices what people eat, how bodies are managed, and which values are deemed appropriate for public display. Food practices become a strategic site of governance precisely because they intersect with identity, embodiment, and the symbolic image of the city. Accordingly, the ban on dog meat consumption cannot be reduced to a neutral response to zoonotic risk. Instead, it must be understood as a form of cultural politics that reproduces moral hierarchies between practices framed as modern, ethical, and appropriate and those labeled as problematic or incompatible with dominant urban values. In Surakarta, the moralization of food operates as a boundary-making process that distinguishes acceptable from unacceptable cultural expressions in public space.

These findings challenge the linear assumptions embedded in classical theories of global norm diffusion, which posit that international norms such as animal welfare and food safety are progressively internalized at the local level (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). While global norms clearly enter local policy discourse, they are not passively absorbed by social actors. Instead, the process observed in Surakarta aligns more closely with the concept of norm localization (Acharya, 2004), whereby global norms are translated, selectively adopted, and reinterpreted through local moral frameworks. Public health and ethical claims are acknowledged discursively, yet they do not automatically displace long-standing practices. Rather, they are negotiated through adaptive strategies that allow practices to persist, albeit in more concealed forms.

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This study thus contributes to a growing body of scholarship that critiques state-centric approaches in international relations by demonstrating that the primary sites of norm negotiation are often located in everyday life. Non-state actors traders, suppliers, and consumers exercise significant normative agency by interpreting, reshaping, and selectively complying with global moral claims. The forms of resistance documented here are non-confrontational and dispersed, consistent with Scott's (1985; 1990) concept of everyday resistance. Instead of openly opposing policy, local actors develop strategies of ambiguous compliance: conforming to public norms while sustaining practices within private and informal spaces. Building on recent expansions of resistance theory (Lilja & Vinthagen, 2018), the findings indicate that resistance in this context is not necessarily driven by explicit political consciousness but by the need to preserve livelihoods, identities, and locally grounded senses of justice. Everyday resistance thus emerges not merely as law avoidance but as an expression of local moral agency. Actors do not perceive themselves as violating norms; rather, they operate within alternative moral frameworks that define what is legitimate, fair, and meaningful.

The discussion further highlights the role of moral economy and moral body in sustaining resistance to moral regulation. Consistent with scholarship on the moral economy of food (Morgan, 2015), the dog meat trade is viewed by participants as morally justified because it supports economic survival, social solidarity, and micro-level economic continuity. Simultaneously, beliefs regarding bodily vitality and health form a localized moral epistemology of the body that does not necessarily align with global biomedical narratives. The tension between local moral bodies and global public health discourses reveals that this conflict is not solely about policy compliance but about competing regimes of knowledge and moral authority. This finding resonates with Scullion's (2022) observation that taboo food consumption in Asia is often sustained through symbolic legitimation and localized health rationalities despite mounting global moral pressure.

Finally, the case of Surakarta contributes to broader debates on urban tolerance in multicultural societies. Tolerance here does not entail full acceptance but operates through what can be described as a politics of invisibility. Practices deemed morally deviant are allowed to persist as long as they do not disrupt public order, urban branding, or dominant moral sensibilities. Moral regulation thus functions as a mechanism for managing cultural difference by regulating visibility rather than eliminating difference altogether. While this approach avoids open conflict, it simultaneously produces symbolic marginalization and reinforces unequal moral hierarchies within urban space.

Theoretical Implications

First, for cultural studies, the findings reaffirm the importance of analyzing moral regulation as a form of cultural governance that operates through symbols, spatial arrangements, and everyday practices. Moral policies should not be treated merely as

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regulatory instruments but as cultural projects that shape subjectivity, visibility, and legitimacy in urban life. Second, for international relations, this research expands understandings of global norm diffusion by demonstrating that norms are actively negotiated at the level of everyday practice, not solely at the level of the state or formal policy adoption. By foregrounding local actors as sites of normative contestation, the study challenges state-centric and linear models of norm internalization and underscores the value of ethnographically informed approaches to global norm politics. Third, the study contributes to the literature on resistance by showing that resistance to moral regulation is often hybrid in nature, combining adaptation, symbolic compliance, and latent refusal. Resistance is not necessarily oppositional or overtly political; rather, it is embedded in routine practices that sustain alternative moral orders under regulatory pressure.

Policy Implications

The policy implications of this study underscore the limitations of regulatory approaches that rely primarily on moral and technocratic framing. Cultural bans that are implemented without sensitivity to local socio-cultural contexts risk producing symbolic compliance while displacing practices into informal and less governable spaces. Effective policy design should therefore incorporate sustained dialogue with affected communities, recognition of plural moral frameworks, and transitional strategies that extend beyond prohibition. Policy approaches that integrate public health education, socio-economic protection for small-scale traders, and participatory mechanisms are more likely to generate meaningful compliance and social legitimacy.

In multicultural urban settings, governing contested cultural practices requires not only regulatory authority but also cultural negotiation. Policies that acknowledge local moral economies and embodied beliefs, while gradually introducing health and welfare standards, may offer more sustainable and equitable pathways for managing cultural conflict. Such an approach moves beyond punitive governance toward a model of moral regulation that is dialogical, inclusive, and context-sensitive.

Conclusion

This study shows that local responses to the prohibition of dog meat consumption and trade in Surakarta cannot be reduced to straightforward compliance or rejection. Framed through public health and animal welfare discourses, the ban operates as a form of moral regulation that does not eliminate the contested practice but instead transforms it and displaces it into informal and less visible spaces. Local actors respond to this regulatory pressure through adaptive, symbolic, and non-confrontational forms of everyday resistance. Public conformity coexists with the persistence of practice in private and semi-public domains, mediated by trust-based networks and coded communication. In this process, global moral norms are neither fully internalized nor entirely rejected; rather, they are selectively negotiated through local moral economies and embodied understandings of health, producing hybrid moral formations.

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By foregrounding everyday practices as sites of moral negotiation, this article challenges linear assumptions of global norm diffusion and highlights the active moral agency of local actors. The findings underscore the importance of understanding moral regulation not solely through policy texts and institutional commitments, but through the lived practices in which global ethical claims are interpreted, contested, and transformed within multicultural urban contexts.

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