Bats bite back

BY I R FA N H U S A I N | 2/1/2020

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| ON the Chinese horoscope, this is the Year of the Rat. Traditionally, the New Year begins with celebrations and feasts, but the lethal coronavirus has dampened all such festivities.  Many scientists trying to pinpoint the origin of this virus have concluded that it was caused by bats f rom a certain cave in Hubei province. From them it appears to have jumped to civet cats kept in small cages in the seafood market at Wuhan by way of urine or faeces. Some biologists conjecture that the outbreak was caused by snakes.  Whatever the cause, it is certain that China`s food preferences have triggered this plague.  Don`t get me wrong: as a foodie, I like to experiment and have been known to slurp down all manner of exotic dainties. Once in Hanoi, I was happily scoffing stir-fried locusts until my wife stopped me in mid-bite by saying: `That one looks like a cockroach.` To this day, I don`t know if she was joking.  But bats? Civet cats? No way. However, not everyone is restrained in their tastes.  Most faiths practised in China do not offer dietary guidelines, so people will eat whatever catches their fancy. In fact, the rich will buy the most expensive beast or bug on the menu. Thus, entire nations are being stripped of their wildlife to satisfy the Chinese desire to impress and try novel dishes.  Donkeys in Africa are being shipped to China where their skins are turned into gelatine for traditional medicine. There have also been proposals to export donkey hides from Pakistan to China. The meat, of course, is eaten.  Pangolins, too, have been pushed to the edge by China`s dietary habits. These helpless, scaly beasts are being scooped up f rom East Af rica to Pakistan and traf ficked to China where they are sold for $470 per kilo (as against $11 per kilo in the 1990s).  The scales cost another $3,000 per kilo in Vietnam and China, and are used in spurious cures, including as a cure for impotence.  In fact, more endangered animals and birds have been slaughtered in search of an elusive virility than in any other cause.  Our own houbara bustards have fallen victim to Arab royalty`s compulsion to overcome impotence. But the killing of rare species like the Indian tiger, the rhinoceros for its horn, and elephants for their tusks has pushed them to the edge of extinction.  Fortunately, the giant panda and many types of whales are staging a slow comeback. Partly, this is due to their appeal to animal lovers: it has never hurt tohave good PR. But if you are a bat in a cave in Hubei province, you don`t stand a chance. Other bears don`t fare as well: some are locked up in cages to make them secrete bile which again is used in Chinese medicine.  Fortunately, China has shut down the animal food markets, but how long this ban will last and whether it will be rigorously implemented is an open question. If the SARS epidemic of 2003 is any guide, we can conclude that the authorities in China have learned little from the past.  However, China has a lot to lose from the current outbreak: tourists and investors will be reluctant to visit a country that poses such a serious health hazard. Millions of overseas Chinese are being seen as potential carriers of coronavirus.  At a time when President Xi is trying to position China at the top table, the last thing he needs is for his country to be dragged into pariah territory.  So is the coronavirus a case of wild ani-mals striking back? Well, I`m certainly on the side of the pangolins and the donkeys. Nobody can convince me that an animal on the endangered list is good for me, no matter how delicious it tastes.  And yet we all have our own foodie preferencesthat must seem odd to foreigners. Forcefeeding geese to make them produce more liver for foie gras must be painful for the birds, but we do it anyway to obtain the unctuous paste so beloved by diners in luxury restaurants.  The Japanese continue to hunt whales despite worldwide criticism. Meat from these giants of the deep is f rozen and stored.  Consumption is down to a small fraction of what it used to be during the Second World War, but the Japanese insist that whale meat is part of their culture.  People in France, Italy and Germany still eat horse meat. When I was a boy in Paris, it was fairly common to see butchers with a horse`s head on the shop f ront. A horse steak I once had in Italy was lean and tasty. And what would foreigners make of the nihari/ brain/marrow combination that makes us salivate? So it`s all about perceptions and preferences at the end. But I still draw the line at bats.  irfan.husain@gmail.com |