

AND YOU THOUGHT IT WAS JUST CHICKEN

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When we speak of the chicken, let it be said, we speak of ourselves.

At Yale this past weekend, a dizzyingly ambitious event set out to prove this. A three-day conference, "The Chicken: Its Biological, Social, Cultural and Industrial History," drew scholars from around the world to tackle this very complex bird. "We see it as a window to focus on man's relationship with the environment by focusing on this one thing," says James Scott of Yale's Agrarian Studies Program, the conference's sponsor.

Sure, but why this one thing, the chicken?

Because, Scott says, of all animals, its history is most intertwined with ours. We've modified it so much that the contemporary version of the chicken is basically our own creation. And now just about every culture in the world depends on it, economically and socially.

"We have really created the chicken by breeding," he says. "And now, the chicken has transformed us."

Besides, says co-organizer Gavin Whitelaw, we like chickens:

"After the dog and cat, the chicken is probably next in line to people's sentimentality. Of course, someone could say the same thing about the duck or the pig. Maybe we'll have conferences on those."

To stand in any one spot at Yale's Sage Hall, the site of the conference, was to stand in the eye of a chicken trivia storm. Did you know of socialist chicken farms in eastern Connecticut? That scientists are on the verge of creating perfect imitation chicken flavor? How about umami, the fifth taste -- after bitter, sweet, salty and sour -- discovered in 1997? (It's how we respond to MSG).

Panel topics included "When Chickens Come to Town: The Impact on

Communities," "The Chicken in Folklore and Symbolism," and "The Historical Creation of the Chicken." Two film festivals were also featured.

Globalization was of particular interest here.

Ever wonder who'd win a fight between Col. Sanders and Gen. Tso? Not so fast, Tso fans. According to panelist Fuji Lozada of Davidson College, 600 KFCs have been built in China since 1989. While its main competitor, Glorious China Chicken, has gone out of business, a huge picture of the venerable colonel's face looms over Mao's mausoleum in Tiananmen Square.

Other discussions dealt with the global effects of Perdue, Tyson and the other major corporations collectively known in the conference argot as Big Chicken.

But it also dealt with chickens qua chickens, and what they mean to us.

Over the centuries, the hen has had a steady run as the symbol of maternal competence, particularly in folklore, noted Mercy College's Boria Sax. The rooster's a bit dodgier, as it can be both protector and predator. In more modern times, it's also the mascot of loutish ne'er-do-wells everywhere. Think old blues songs, or Foghorn Leghorn.

The tone of the weekend was of a loopy good humor seemingly inherent to those in the field of poultry study. Chicken puns abounded, almost every one followed by an insincere apology.

Strange, then, that there were no panel discussions on why the chicken is so funny. Some offered opinions anyway.

"Well, they look like a herd of U.S. senators," said Linnea Johnson, who was commissioned to write a few chicken poems and read them at the conference dinner. "They have a very serious expression on their face, yet they just peck at their grain all day."

But it wasn't all so jovial. Panelist Karen Davis, founder of the chicken advocacy group United Poultry Concerns, grated on some panelists' nerves. Relentless on the issue of slaughtering practices, Davis distributed literature that decried galloicide (nothing to do with the French, the word comes from the chicken's Latin name, *Gallus gallus*). She also charged that the conference at times "celebrated the exploitation of the chicken."

Avoiding the phrase "ruffled feathers," Whitelaw acknowledged that all this caused "something of a tension." But it also served as evidence of the many and

passionate feelings the chicken can evoke, he said.

A tricky matter, this bird. E.B. White, who owned a farm in his later years, said he didn't know which was more discouraging, chickens or literature. As a poet and "one who lives amongst the chickens," Johnson seemed uniquely qualified to speak to that.

It turns out neither discourages her. Indeed, she dreams of merging the two by leaving this world and reappearing as an extra character in the children's book "Flicka, Ricka, Dicka and the Big Red Hen."

"I love the way they walk together -- they seem to have an intention among them," she said. "It's amazing. Me, living with chickens. I think they think the same thing."