

FEASTING ON DONKEY SKIN

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FOR ALMOST TWO millennia, donkey hide glue (*colla corii asini*) has been part of the Chinese apothecary. *Ejiao* 阿膠, or ‘E-glue’ as this medicine is referred to in Chinese, consists of gelatin that is extracted from donkey hides by boiling them in water. According to traditional Chinese medicine, *ejiao* strengthens blood, stops bleeding, and improves the quality of vital fluids. It can be used to restore the vigour of depleted patients, or taken as a life-enhancing tonic to strengthen vitality and promote health. Recent biomedical clinical trials confirm the hematopoietic (blood cell producing) effect of donkey hide gelatin.³

Historical records insist that only boiling the skins in water drawn from the ‘E Well’ 阿井 in Shandong province produces *ejiao*, and that only skins

from the black Wu donkey 烏驢 would produce top-quality medicinal glue. The precinct of the E Well was protected by imperial armies and E-glue was sent annually to the imperial court. Thus *ejiao* remained an expensive regional delicacy that only the wealthy could afford. Genuine *ejiao* was hard to get hold of, and fakes were abundant.² This problem was exacerbated in the 1990s, when entrepreneurs started to mix *ejiao* with dried fruits, nuts, and sesame seeds, marketing it as a beauty and wellness booster with anti-ageing and health-promoting properties. It is now a coveted luxury product for ostentatious consumption and gift giving, comparable to ginseng or expensive tea.

The success of this repackaging campaign in China’s age of prosperity



Ejiao wellness cake gift box
Source: ebuy7.com/item/ehhebdegchif

has led to exponential growth in the consumption of *ejiao*, with production soaring to meet demand.⁵ As a result, China's donkey population has plummeted, falling from 9.4 million to less than six million in 2017 (with unverified reports saying the number is closer to three million).⁶ With industrialisation, fewer donkeys are being raised as farm animals in the first place, and their sensitivity makes them ill-suited for mass breeding.⁷ So China's *ejiao* industry depends heavily on imported hides. Currently 1.8 million donkey hides are traded globally every year, with demand estimated at between four and ten million.⁸ With only around forty-four million donkeys worldwide,

Chinese demand could lead to total extinction within a short time.

The demand for donkey hides also creates severe problems for the world's poorest communities, which are still heavily dependent on donkeys as work animals. The spike in the market price of donkeys has led to an increase in theft and poaching in countries such as Tanzania and South Africa, with heartbreaking reports of farmers or even whole villages waking up to find the skinned remains of their donkeys in a nearby field, after a poacher's strike in the night.

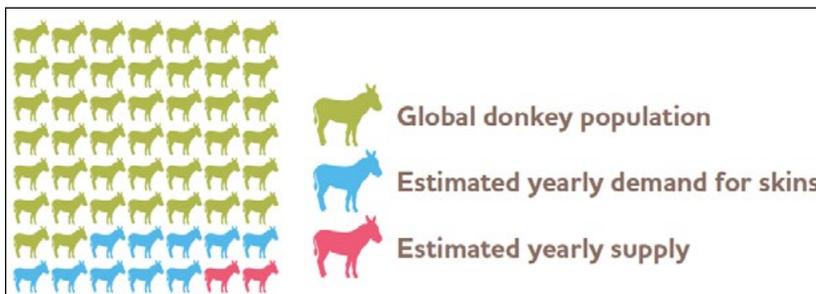
The increase in the donkeys' market price makes it impossible for many families to replace them. This

leads to financial ruin: their children can no longer go to school, and they can no longer easily fetch drinking water or transport firewood.⁹ In an attempt to protect local economies, a number of countries including Uganda, Tanzania, Botswana, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, and Nigeria have already banned donkey exports to China.¹⁰ Others, such as Kenya, attracted by the high returns of the donkey trade, have allowed Chinese investment in state-sanctioned donkey slaughterhouses. The profits of this questionable trade benefit few, and devastate many.¹¹ Donkeys that are traded for their hides are also often poorly looked after — or even starved to death — during gruelling long-distance live transports, or while waiting for slaughter: the market value of a

hide is not affected by the poor health of the donkey that used to live inside it.

Even Chinese medicine is a victim, rather than a culprit of this excessive *ejiao* consumption. As the price of *ejiao* goes up, fewer and fewer patients can afford or obtain genuine *ejiao* when they need it. Instead, they are being fobbed off with wellness candies that have no medical efficacy.

In their quest to overcome the shortage of donkey skins, China's *ejiao* investors have set their eyes on Australia. In 2004, Australia had an estimated population of five million feral donkeys concentrated in the arid regions of the country's centre.¹² They are the descendants of the finest donkey breeds of the world, imported by early settlers from Spain, Chile, Mexico, and India. The earliest donkeys



Worldwide supply and demand for donkeys

Source: Under the Skin, thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk



Donkeys are often poorly looked after or die during live transport

Source: George Knowles Hong Kong georgeknowles@yahoo.com

arrived in Australia in 1794, but it was not until the 1890s that they began to play a key role in opening up the outback. Essentially a desert animal, donkeys are more resistant to drought, heat, and toxic plants than horses. ‘Teamster donkeys’, harnessed four to five abreast in teams of up to forty animals, transported wood, food, mining supplies, and wool across the country. Their hardiness, docility, and ability to haul heavy loads made them indispensable for developing the colonies.

In the 1930s, mechanised transport made the teamster obsolete.

Teamsters, not wanting to kill their former work animals, simply released them into the wild. The donkeys thrived and multiplied to such an extent that they were soon considered to pose a problem for the arid soil, and were declared a pest in the Northern Territory as early as 1949.

The view that donkeys are a pest is shared by the agribusiness sector. In March 2017, the then minister for agriculture Barnaby Joyce announced his intention to make the export of donkey skin part of a bilateral trade deal: ‘We are going to make sure that if you want to eat edible donkey skins then you are going to be eating our edible donkey skins’.¹³ Several months later, Northern Territory Minister for Primary Industries and Resources Ken Vowles visited China’s largest *ejiao* processing factory, Dong E Ejiao, in Shandong.

Other Australians feel strong attachment to the ‘beautiful Australian bush donkey’ that has become an integral part of the Australian landscape. Fortunately, live exports are off the table for the time being. But a multi-species abattoir is being built in Charleville, Queensland and mustering of feral donkeys has started in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Terri-

tories in Southern Australia. Despite the pleas of animal rights activists to the Australian Government not to feed into a globally destructive trade, Australia has effectively already become an exporter of donkey skins.

Granted, the media images of donkey abattoirs are gruesome, but the same goes for slaughterhouses for cattle or pigs. Since the number of Australian donkeys is already controlled by aerial culling, one might argue that this way at least their skin goes to use. Yet the scale of the trade, which threatens global extinction of a whole species, is devastating rural communities

worldwide, and lacks any form of legislation and control.

This raises legitimate questions about ethics and sustainability for any country involved in the skin trade, including Australia. Historically, *ejiao* was a regional delicacy, a ‘medicine for emperors’; today it is a wellness candy, mass-produced for conspicuous consumption by the affluent, an ever-expanding part of China’s vast population. Yet natural resources are finite and delicacies by definition cannot be mass produced. No matter how wealthy a society becomes, not everyone can be the emperor.



Teamster donkeys at work, ca. 1928

Source: State Library of Western Australia 4383B/323

This text is taken from *China Story Yearbook 2017: Prosperity*,
edited by Jane Golley and Linda Jaivin, published 2018 by ANU Press,
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/CSY.04.2018.05B