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Last stand of the Tibetan mastiff

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By Zhang Zhilong



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Mastiffs are displayed at a dog show in Urumqi on April 1, which saw about 600 mastiffs and 400 rare purebred shown. Photo: CFP

Tibetan mastiffs are no ordinary dogs. With their natural fierce appearance and loyalty, they came down from mountain pastures in the 1980s and their stock has been rising ever since. However, experts warned that the species is facing danger of degradation even though their number increased greatly.

There are cases where mastiffs are now being seen biting or mauling their hosts, which goes against the nature of purebred mastiffs who are well-known for their loyalty, said Guo Feng, director of the national Tibetan Mastiff website and vice chairman of the China Purebred Tibetan Mastiff Association.

He said some breeders have experienced the negative effects of over 90 percent of mastiffs not being purebred. "People's excessive intervention and cross-breeding has caused inbred mastiffs, and the consequences are already showing," said Guo.

The opinion is echoed by Peng Qiwei, vice chairman of the China Tibetan Mastiff Club.

"Under natural conditions, mastiffs with weak or sick hind legs are not competitive or strong enough to mate successfully, and thus cannot produce offspring," said Peng.

He has a mastiff farm on the outskirts of Beijing, which currently houses over 30 purebred mastiffs.

People put sick mastiffs out to stud, producing poor or weak offspring, just for the sake of money, Peng pointed out.

Statistics show that only around 700 Tibetan mastiffs are definitely identified as purebred across China, according to Shandong Business Daily. Peng estimates that the country currently has about 100,000 mastiffs.

Mongrel race

Due to huge profits, the business surrounding these dogs has become increasingly shady, with a number of mongrels now being passed off as purebreds.

For unprofessional breeders, especially newcomers, it is more difficult to distinguish whether a mastiff is a purebred or a mongrel, since they look very similar to each other.

Some businessmen cross mastiffs with other breeds, such as the Tibetan Kyi-Apso and Afghan Hound. This has misled those who have never got seen a real purebred mastiff. "Thus, the number of purebred mastiffs is decreasing quickly," said Peng pitifully to the Global Times.

Even in their place of origin, on the Qinghai-Tibet plateau, many mastiffs are not purebred, as they mate with other large dogs. Part of Peng's work is to track the ancestry of purebreds, making sure the line is unbroken.

When judged by their ancestry, appearance and physical condition, only 2 to 3 percent of mastiffs are qualified to breed babies, said Peng.

As a real lover of dogs, Peng shares his standard on how to judge a purebred mastiff. "Generally, I observe their head, tail, stature and legs," he said. A purebred mastiff has a big head and tail, which are in perfect proportion to each other. Peng also states that purebreds have a fierce expression and stronger hind legs.

More problems are hidden behind the seemingly prosperous business, Guo said to the Global Times.

Female purebred mastiffs only give birth to puppies once a year, while other female dogs can do so two to three times a year.

In order to "help" mastiff puppies grow quickly, some people force-feed them with hormones and supplements. Many puppies are not allowed to roam or exercise, and simply sleep and eat, or have their hair dyed to look more beautiful.

There have been cases of saline water or glucose being injected into mastiffs' legs by breeders to make them look strong and powerful. Many of these poor creatures end up dying shortly after being sold to customers, according to Guo.

"The fact that demand for the dogs far outstrips supply has led to such shady practices," said Guo.

Prices for the breed had been rising, culminating in a mastiff named "Monster" being sold for 5 million yuan (\$780,000) to a bidder in Tianjin in November 2007.

Treated as commodities

Out of every litter of six or nine puppies of purebred mastiffs, only one puppy usually grows up to become a sought-after physical specimen, depending on nutrition and condition, also increasing the price of the breed.

Xia Xueliang, who has a mastiff farm in Ji'nan, Shandong Province, told the Shandong Business Daily that "it is an indisputable fact that an excellent male and female mastiff may not produce equally excellent puppies."

Peng first discovered Tibetan mastiffs through a magazine article in 1992. "I could not forget the dog because I was really impressed with it," said Peng, who thought it looked like a lion. A year later, he began to breed the dog in Shandong Province.

Peng said he began to search for information about mastiffs at the time, and studied how to raise them with a breeder. As the profit margins for selling the dogs grew, he quit his furniture moving company and focused full time on breeding.

Peng moved to Beijing in 2006 to continue his business at a time when the industry was booming. "The largest number I had at one time was about 80 mastiffs, and the best sold for 800,000 yuan," he recalled.

The mastiff in question, a 2-year-old female called Qiao Hong, was sold to an iron mine owner in 2008. The owner used her for breeding and made a fortune, a sequence Peng says is typical of the business.



Two mastiffs are shown off by their owners at an auction in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, on April 18. According to the organizer, about 20 mastiffs were auctioned, one with an original auction price of 5 million yuan. Photo: CFP

Though an expensive mastiff is difficult to resell, rich people still show a strong interest, and mainly intend to use them to breed puppies.

Take a male mastiff named "Emperor" for example. He reaps 300,000 yuan every time he is put out to stud, and his owner recouped his investment in the dog after 30 mating sessions. Statistics show that a mature male mastiff can mate with 40 females within a year.

Today, so many people have joined this industry that profit margins for established breeders are down, but it "remains profitable compared with raising pigs or cattle," said Peng.

The numbers of mastiff enthusiasts and breeders began to increase sharply in 2002, and more investors joined the market three years later, said Wang Zhankui to the Global Times in a telephone interview, explaining that it is mainly because mastiffs were expensive. "People either owned mastiffs as a social status symbol or saw them as an investment," said Wang.

Wang is recognized in China as the man who helped the Tibetan mastiff breed rise to the fore and for his efforts in keeping the species purebred.

Business dates back to 1980s

Before the late 1980s, adult mastiffs were seldom sold outside the Tibet Autonomous Region, Qinghai and Gansu provinces where they originated, according to Tibet Geographic, a journal reporting on the natural scenery and culture of Tibet.

A fine specimen of the Tibetan mastiff breed was sold for 300 yuan in 1985 in pasture lands, outside of which this price could have doubled at least, said Wang.

It was in 1996, 10 years after Wang brought mastiffs outside their home areas that newspapers began publicizing the breed. The record price for such a dog was under 10,000 yuan in 1998, increasing to 30,000 yuan in 2003, according to Tibet Geographic.

Wang first discovered about Tibetan mastiffs from a Taiwanese businessman and went to Qinghai Province to look for mastiffs in 1986, visiting Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and Maqu county.

"The Taiwanese businessman asked whether I had mastiffs, but I had no idea what they were," recalled Wang. He added that at that time, a local man who was once set for forced labor work in Qinghai Province brought back

a Tibetan mastiff. As a lover of dogs, Wang learned where the mastiffs could be found and went to Qinghai to look for them.

"Pasture lands are where most families raise mastiffs," said Wang, adding that he bought 25 mastiffs after becoming friendly with locals and persuading them to sell him some dogs.

Back then, no herdsman were willing to sell their own mastiffs, and even purchasing a puppy was very difficult without a protracted bargaining process with the owner, Wang explained.

Dogging problems

"People can keep them as pets or as guard dogs, but they should avoid selling them to unqualified owners," said Wang Zhankui. He fears that excessive breeding will weaken the dogs through in-breeding and make them lose their natural attributes.

While for Yang Zhijun, repeated reports about the sky-high prices that the mastiffs command have become overly sensationalized. "Too many people are just following suit. They raise whatever brings them big money, and see mastiffs as pets or commodities, without a true respect for the animal," Yang told Tibet Geographic.

"The mastiff's original duty was to guard flocks from beasts and protect their owners, but now the chances to show their bravery and loyalty is decreasing. The former 'heroes' are put into doghouses and have become pets," complained Yang, appealing for owners to give the dogs every chance to follow their natural behavior.

Guo hopes to partially remedy this problem by constructing a large farm reserved for purebred Tibetan mastiffs that will be open for the public to discover more about these dogs.

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