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## The Slaughter behind 200-million-yuan Revenue from Fur

In Hebei province's Shangcun Market - which accounts for over 60% of China's pelt trade - the phenomenon of live skinning of animals has become a cause for concern



On this particular day around half the raccoon dogs and foxes were skinned alive like this.



A caged raccoon dog. The cage is too small with almost no room for movement – the animal can merely sway its head from side to side.



A villager pauses in front of the cages of raccoon dogs and foxes to select an animal for slaughter. He holds a blood-spattered wooden club.



A slaughterman violently slams a raccoon dog to the ground, while traders gather around negotiating prices.



A raccoon dog which has been beaten with a club tries to stand up, the slaughterman steps firmly on it, and the animal cries out pitifully until it can no longer move.

The cage opens with a creaking sound; a large hand reaches in and grabs the tail. The animal lifts its head, bares its teeth and emits a low growl. The hand lets go. The animal squats back down on the cage floor, hanging its head, its eyes glistening.

It is a raccoon dog, seven months old.

It is just before 7 o'clock on the morning of 21 March, and the animal has been brought in its cage by the owner to Shangcun town, in Suning county, Hebei, to a pelt market dubbed the 'Fur Capital'. Already there is a sea of people.

## Caged for Life

On a vacant plot on the west side of Shangcun's fur trading market lie several hundred similar iron cages, around 70cm long by 35cm high. Here raccoon dogs spend their entire lives. They have long been far removed from the traditional image we have had of these creatures – the saying 'raccoon dogs from the same hill' [trans. note: equivalent in English to the expression 'birds of a feather'] originates from their habit of burrowing, usually a male-female pair to each burrow.

Raccoon dogs are habitually nocturnal, sleeping in their burrows in daylight, coming out to feed at dusk or just before sunrise, and hibernating in the coldest winter months. But as a result of overhunting by humans, in the wild they have already become extremely uncommon. Instead, huge numbers of raccoon dogs are artificially reared.

In Dudaying village, Xinji county, Hebei, there is a large-scale raccoon dog farm, with rows of several hundred iron cages. Here you can hear the frequent whimpering of the animals, like the sound of babies crying.

We are at the farm at around 2 or 3 o'clock in the afternoon, and most of the caged raccoon dogs are wide awake and alert. The farmer explains that these farmed animals can be active all day and have no clear hibernation period.

When someone passes by its cage, a raccoon dog can become quite nervous, but its cage is too small with almost no room for movement. The animal can merely sway its head from side to side.

Raccoon dog farming has already become an industry in many of Hebei's counties and cities. Like Xinji, Suning county – where Shangcun Market is located – is one of them. Official statistics indicate that Suning has 152 sizable fur farms, 65 villages specialising in fur production, with around 10,000 farmers owning a total stock of 470,000 raccoon dogs, foxes, mink and other rare and valuable animals.

Qin Lao (not his real name), 62, lives in one of Shangcun town's neighbouring villages. Here most of the 2,000-strong population is engaged in fur farming, and there are a dozen or so large-scale breeders. Qin Lao explains that in the 90s a few villagers began breeding raccoon dogs and it soon grew into an industry.

'City people like to eat raccoon dog meat. The fur can be processed into clothing and exported – *we* can't afford to wear it.' Qin Lao uses a local saying to express his idea: 'A weaver has no shirt on his back, a builder lives in a run-down shack.' Although Qin Lao himself does not breed raccoon dogs, he knows the business like the back of his hand. February to March is the mating period, in April and May the females give birth and suckle the cubs. When the young are six or seven months old they are ready to be sold. By then their fur is thick and luxuriant and they can fetch a good price.

## Making the Deal

This seven-month-old raccoon dog waiting to be traded at Shangcun Market has dense, long, brown fur. A strong wind picks up the dust and whistles around, rippling through its coat.

A pair of feet stops in front of the cage. Two sturdy, big feet clad in shiny leather. "Big Feet" is a very tall man in a mink overcoat.

'How much?'

'380 *yuan* [approx. 36 or US\$50].'

'Too much, 350 apiece.'

'I was just offered 370 and didn't sell.'

'Come off it – you can take 370.'

"Big Feet" sighs gently and reaches into his pocket for the money.

The cage door is opened and "Big Feet" wraps a leather belt around the raccoon dog's neck. It emits a continuous growling sound and cowers away. The belt tightens and the hair on virtually its entire body bristles.

"Big Feet" gives a sharp tug and drags the animal out.

The raccoon dog's owner, a 30-year-old man, looks pleased at his sale. The fur trading season runs from each November to the following March, and as it is March now, the high season is coming to an end and this price is not too low. He tells us that by the afternoon when the market is closing, some farmers ask as little as 5 *yuan* [0.5 or US\$0.05], because if the animals were not sold they would have to go back with the farmer and the cost of rearing them for a further six months would be too high.

"Big Feet" looks a little anxious, however. It is already noon, the market will close soon and he has not yet bought enough furs of the ideal quality he is looking for.

Shangcun Market begins trading around 8am. In practice, however, even before 6 o'clock scores of fur buyers and farmers converge on the site in order to secure a favourable pitch. We were told that it is the local custom to hold the market six times every ten days (on the first, second, fourth, sixth, seventh and ninth days of each lunar month), and that fur has always been the main item traded.

And 21 March is a market day. In Suning county, people can be seen everywhere hurrying along the roads carrying iron cages. Bicycles have one or two cages balanced on their backs, and tractors, trucks and cars are crammed with raccoon dogs

and foxes on their way to Shangcun Market. The buyers are not only local – many come from the [neighbouring] provinces of Shandong, Henan and elsewhere.

'Even though you can make money further afield, it's better to be nearer home.' Five years ago, Qin Lao set up a local fur buying store. Now his two sons have followed him into the business and are both fur dealers.

Qin Lao admits that he 'takes a back seat' nowadays: 'I do a bit of work around the market, and it's good that I know how the fur business works – I can give my sons a few ideas.'

An official from Suning county Party Committee's propaganda department confirms that the locals have a strong sense of family and do not like to leave their home villages to work in labouring jobs. As a result, very little labour is exported and of the county population of 330,000, around 50,000 are employed in fur-related jobs.

The propaganda department's statistics show that Shangcun town has China's largest unprocessed fur market, with a turnover of 3.5 billion *yuan* [330 million or US\$424 million] annually or over 60% of the country's pelt trade. A local banner reads: 'China fur depends on Suning, Suning fur depends on Shangcun'.

## Cruel Slaughter

Once pulled out from its cage, the raccoon dog curls up into a ball in mid-air.

A few middle-aged women carrying wooden clubs gather round. One woman in a headscarf is first to grab hold of the raccoon dog's tail and the others drift away peevishly.

The woman in the headscarf swings the animal upwards. It forms an arc in the air and is then slammed heavily to the ground, throwing up a cloud of dust.

The raccoon dog tries to stand up, its paws scrabbling in the grit. The wooden club in the woman's hand swings down onto its forehead.

The woman picks up the animal and walks towards the other side of road, throwing it onto a pile of other raccoon dogs. A stream of blood trickles from its muzzle, but its eyes are open and it continues to repeatedly blink, move its paws, raise its head and collapse to the ground. Beside it lies another raccoon dog. Its four limbs have been hacked off but still it continues to yelp.

Ten or more minutes later Qin Lao approaches the raccoon dog with a knife. His job is to skin the animals.

The raccoon dog is suspended upside down from a hook on the overhead bar of a motor-tricycle and the area around the hind legs and anus is scored with the knife. There is a ripping sound as the skin is torn completely from the hind legs and the animal struggles to turn away, crying out. The skin is ripped up to the abdomen.

Qin Lao's body is bent with effort like a bow at full stretch, but the fur remains stubbornly attached to the flesh. A middle-aged woman jogs over to help, and their backs arched with the strain. The whole fur is finally ripped from the raccoon dog's body.

The animal is thrown onto the back of the truck, steam rising from its blood-red body. It tries to stand up again, lifting its head and glancing down at its own body. Without blinking it tries once more to turn its head and then falls still.

'Skinning the animal dead or alive is all the same, but it is more convenient and neater this way. Everyone has always done it like this', explains Qin Lao.

He says that there are around forty or fifty locals like him who specialise in skinning, most of whom live in the villages around Shangcun. On each market day, they usually form teams of four or five people and turn up at the appropriate time. An even more specialised duty is performed by the wives, who roam the market with their wooden clubs touting for business, clubbing the raccoon dogs and handing them over to their husbands to skin.

For each pelt Qin Lao has two options: he can simply skin the animal in which case he will make 3 *yuan* [0.3 or US40¢] from the buyer, or he can pay the buyer 4 *yuan* for the skinned carcass for meat.

'You can sell raccoon dog meat to the big restaurants, 15 *yuan* apiece,' says Qin Lao. When the market closes at 2pm, a gang comes round especially to buy up the meat.

It's already 1pm and on the back of his motor-tricycle Qin Lao has only ninety carcasses, to be shared among five people. 'Not a good day today,' he shakes his head.

Nearby a group of women line a red-painted wall, oiling the pelts. For each pelt they earn 1 *yuan*. Qin Lao's wife is among them. 'Today she's earned more than I have, over 100 *yuan*.'

Qin Lao and his wife also cultivate a 9-*mu* [0.6 hectare] plot of land. 'You can't make money growing crops. About 100 *yuan* a year per *mu* would be pretty good, but we can't hope to do that well.'

The propaganda department's statistics show that the fur industry has already become a mainstay of Suning's flourishing economy. The county's revenue generated from fur grew from 80 million *yuan* in 2002 to over 200 million *yuan* [ 18.8 million or US\$24 million] in 2004.

## Video on the Internet

Two months ago, a video entitled "*Brutal fashion, the cruelty behind every fur coat*" [produced by Swiss Animal Protection SAP] was aired publicly on the internet. The film lasts 16 minutes and documents the live skinning of raccoon dogs, foxes and other animals at a large fur market in Hebei province. Throughout the entire skinning process, the animals are alive and even struggle fiercely. The video makes the plea: 'Humans already have beautiful, warm clothing. Give fur back to the animals; reject fashion and luxury based on cruel slaughter.'

This video rapidly appeared on several discussion websites, and the live skinning of animals was fiercely condemned by those participating online.

Through the telephone phone number cited on the video, this reporter contacted the Taiwan-based animal protection organisation involved. They confirmed that the footage was from Shangcun.

On 21 March 2005, this reporter learned from Suning county Party Committee's propaganda department that, on hearing these reports, the local government immediately organised an investigation of the market. An official at the county's livestock and aquatic products bureau said that live skinning took place seven or eight years ago, and could not happen now.

At present China has no national animal welfare legislation. Only the *China Wildlife Protection Law* and the *Regulations on the Licensing of the Rearing and Breeding of Protected Wildlife of National Importance* contain some sections covering the management of wildlife breeding. According to the [local] *Regulations on Fox Slaughter, Skinning and Initial Processing* passed on 1 September 2003 by Cangzhou city [also in Hebei province], methods for killing foxes include injection of drugs, intercardiac injection of air and electrocution. A Suning county livestock bureau official says that these standards could be similarly applied to raccoon dogs and other animals.

The Suning authorities conclude that the video documentary is one-sided.

A member of the local fur market's management committee admits that the rearing, management, transport and slaughter services and systems are not yet fully in place. 'In short there is a process, and Hebei's level of development is far behind that of developed countries.'

- Special feature photographs by Beijing News reporter Chen Jie.
- Text by Beijing News reporter Wu Xuejun in Hebei province.

**If you run an internet search on *Baidu* [a Chinese search engine] for 'fur markets' there are around 191,000 relevant pages. In an undercover investigation this journalist discovered that at one of China's biggest fur markets – at Shangcun town, Suning county, Hebei – most animals are still skinned alive.**

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