

World's Biggest Animal Cloning Center Set for '16 in a Skeptical China

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If all proceeds as planned, the world's biggest animal cloning center will open next year in the northeastern Chinese port city of Tianjin, taking factory farming to a new level.

The center, being built by Boyalife Group, a Chinese biotechnology company, and Sooam Biotech, a South Korean company that specializes in animal cloning, will eventually churn out up to a million beef cattle embryos a year, as well as sniffer dogs, racehorses and other animals, its backers say. When completed, at a projected cost of \$500 million, it will include a research laboratory, a gene bank and a museum.

Public education appeared to be a concern of Xu Xiaochun, Boyalife's chief executive, during a conference call with journalists on Thursday, in which he sought to quell anxieties over the technology.

"Clone technology is already around us," Mr. Xu said. "It's just that not everyone knows about it." He added that many strawberries and bananas sold in Chinese supermarkets were the products of this technology.

The process, he said, is just like "pouring a glass of orange juice into another empty glass," meaning the cloned entity will be identical to the original.

"And I call tell you all that cloned beef is the tastiest beef I have ever had," he said.

But Mr. Xu must contend with skeptical consumers in China, where food safety is a near obsession after scandals like melamine-tainted baby formula and recycled industrial "gutter oil." Online reaction to the project has been overwhelmingly negative.

"Crazily evil!!!" commented the user No-Music-No-Life on Weibo.

A person with the handle Xingchen Miaoyu wrote, "Please serve cloned beef to leaders first!"

A commenter with the user name Zhenwei Shusheng added, "China has become a major biotech research lab and Chinese are the experimental subjects."

Others questioned the decision to build such a plant in Tianjin, the site of a deadly chemical explosion in August that killed 173, fearing lax law enforcement could compound an already complicated issue.

"The real-life version of 'Resident Evil'?" asked the Weibo user Li Li, referring to the science-fiction film series that features a bioengineering company that produces bioweapons.

The undertaking has also been clouded by a scandal that embroiled the head of the South Korean partner, Hwang Woo-suk. In 2005, Dr. Hwang was found to have fabricated research that he had claimed used cloning to produce human embryos and extract stem cells from them.

But he has since focused his attention on animal cloning. His company worked with Boyalife to develop a rare Tibetan mastiff last year with a hefty price.

Beijing has watched with both envy and caution since the first cloned mammal, Dolly, a sheep, was born in Scotland in 1996. Since then, Chinese scientists have cloned cows and pigs, but they have largely limited such activities to experimental purposes.

Cloning is used in some farm animal breeding programs in the United States, but in September, the European Parliament voted in favor of a ban on cloned animals and their products, arguing that current techniques inflict greater suffering on animals than conventional breeding.

Zhu Yi, an associate professor at China Agricultural University, said that cloning technology could help China reduce its reliance on cattle imports to meet its people's rising demand for beef. "But long term, this is not a solution," she warned, emphasizing the need to assess the risks of using such technology and to overhaul China's livestock industry.

The high costs of grain for feed and other items have squeezed profits for many Chinese cattle breeders and have depressed production, forcing a number of meat processors to turn to imports.

That situation presented an opportunity for Mr. Xu, who said he hoped cloning would help improve livestock production in China.

"One reason we have so much low-quality beef is because we haven't applied clone technology," Mr. Xu said. "This is the only way to allow Chinese and many other people in the world to enjoy high-quality beef in an efficient manner."

Before bringing cloned beef to the market, Mr. Xu said, his company must receive the approval of the Ministry of Agriculture and other government agencies. He did not elaborate. The ministry did not immediately reply to a faxed request for comment.

Ma Wenfeng, an analyst at Beijing Orient Agribusiness Consultant, raised doubts over this approach for mass-producing beef. "I think clone technology can be used for endangered species, but it's not very necessary for animal husbandry," he said. "I don't think this will be very economical, and I doubt this model will take off any time soon."

On Thursday, Mr. Xu said the venture had aims beyond just profits. "Our priority is to do a good job," he said, "so we'll achieve greater social influence."

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