

Bitter Bile: Torture of Moon Bears in Asian Bear Farms
By Anita Lo

In Chengdu, China, on the outskirts of a bustling city, a small grove of trees conceals a cluster of gravestones. Cool to the touch, each gravestone is inscribed with a name. Oliver. Mafi. Rupert. The hot summer breeze softly rustles the leaves, and in this tranquil cemetery, 107 moon bears lay entombed after a lifetime of suffering.

Bears are the most indomitable of creatures. Fiercely protective of their young, stubbornly determined to take honey from stinging bees, and formidable to any who invade their space, they emanate an aura of supreme control. They are symbols untamed strength. But the pasts of these 107 moon bears remind us that even bears are helpless against human cruelty.

Bear bile and gall bladder are much prized elements in traditional Chinese medicine. It is said to reduce internal heat, relieve spasms, and improve vision. Mixed with milk, it is a remedy for conjunctivitis (Lu 394). For 3,000 years, the bile was obtained by catching and killing wild bears; only in the 1980s, after moon bears became rare in the wild, did the Chinese and Korean governments ban bear hunting.

Thus began the practice of bear farming.

In Cambodia, China, Laos, Vietnam, and many other Asian countries, over 14,000 bears are kept in bear farms. They spend an average of 25 years trapped in 15-square-foot “crush cages”—so called because once inside, the bears cannot stand up or move (Bekoff). This makes it extremely easy for the farmers to anesthetize the bear, insert a catheter into its gall bladder, and milk its gall bladder for bear bile, an excruciatingly painful process that can take hours (Yang). The bears are fed rice gruel; they cannot even hibernate because the cage floors are iron bars, so there is no stable ground to hibernate on. When bear farming was first discovered in the 1990s, journalists

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reported watching bears moan, gnaw on their paws in agony, and bang their heads against the metal cage bars (Wong). Each bear produces about 5 kilograms of the bitter, greenish-yellow bile each year, which is then sold to clients for 4000 yuan per kilogram (Bekoff). Dehydrated in the unforgiving Asian sun and deprived of bile, moon bears waste away inside the crush cages. Once they are of no use, they are slaughtered and auctioned off part by part: paws for bear paw soup in Vietnam, gall bladders for heart tonics in China, and meat for consumption by the highest bidder (MacGregor).

The exposure of this barbaric practice has been shocking and heart-wrenching. In April 2010, local authorities in Shandong, China rescued a 10 diseased, mentally ill bears on a small bear farm. The bears had been treated horribly. Holes carved in their abdomens for bile catheters were uncovered and untreated. According to Xiong Beirong of the Sichuan Forestry Department, “The farmers had continued to drain bile from bears afflicted with cancers and injected excessive antibiotics into their bodies to keep them alive” (Yang). In Tan Uyen, Vietnam, 19 moon bears were rescued from a urine-soaked trailer in January 2010 (MSNBC). Jasper, a moon bear rescued by Animals Asia, is now a poster child of sorts for China’s Chengdu Bear Rescue Center. He was kept in a Chinese bear farm for 15 years and has now become a “clarion call to each and every one of us to pull together to end bile farming once and for all” (McDermott).

But how do we end it? It is clear that rescue missions, while inspiring, are not halting bear farming quickly enough. Even after numerous rescue operations, there are still 10,000 moon bears in bear farms in China alone, saying nothing of the thousands of captured bears in Vietnam, Laos, and even India. Animals Asia currently rescues bears from bear farms and relocates them to various rehabilitation centers around Asia.

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However, Vietnam Director for Animals Asia Tuan Bendixsen admits that “Animals Asia does not have the capacity to rescue all 4,000 bears in captivity in Vietnam” (Elliot). And after being in captivity for so long, it is impractical to release the bears into the wild, especially because of the abscesses and open wounds that repeated bile extraction leaves. The WSPA suggests that we “donate or fundraise to keep up the pressure on bear farms” and “do not use products which contain bile.” The Ursa Freedom Project aims to raise money to rescue bears from bear farms (Wong). Though these are all admirable strategies, they do not directly combat the sources of the cruelty.

The bear bile industry is perpetuated because of the poverty and lack of education that are endemic to the rural parts of Asia. A bear cub sold to farmers for \$600 can sustain a Laotian family for a year, while the average monthly wage in Laos is \$30—it is no wonder that struggling Laotians take advantage of this lucrative opportunity (MacGregor). Farmers are not extraordinarily cruel human beings, but rather people trying to make a living. Other opportunities to earn wages must be offered to the bear farmers before bear farming will cease; incarceration of the bear farmers, though it may seem justified, will result in a loss of income for the family, sinking countries further into poverty. Instead, farmers might be offered jobs in Animals Asia, paid to rescue the bears they once farmed. Other options might include agricultural farming that would be legal and productive for the farmers.

Additionally, the Asian public is largely unaware of bear farming. Toby Zhang, Animal Asia Foundation’s Director External Affairs, says, “Most people think bear bile can cure disease, but have no idea how it is extracted from living bears” (Yang). Without knowledge of the torture that goes on behind the scenes, customers will unwittingly feed

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the vicious cycle by paying huge sums of money to buy bear bile and bear bile products. Therefore, it is more important to educate the public about the bears' suffering and offer alternatives to bear bile than to try to rescue every bear in every bear farm.

The active chemical in bear bile is ursodeoxycholic acid, and while bears are the only mammals who produce this acid, it can also be synthetically manufactured and mimicked by other alternatives (WSPA). Synthetic ursodeoxycholic acid is not a practical alternative: usually, the Chinese will choose traditional Chinese medicine over “artificial” Western medicine (Wharton). Moreover, synthetic ursodeoxycholic acid cannot be used in traditional Chinese medicine because it is not from a natural resource. A better way to wean the people of bear bile would be offering herbal alternatives—the Chinese lobelia plant has similar detoxifying properties, and chrysanthemum flowers can also sharpen eyesight (WSPA). Since both herbs are already used in traditional Chinese medicine, they would be easily accepted by the consumers. Previously, four large Chinese pharmaceutical chains stopped selling bear bile products, but did not actively promote alternatives (MacGregor). Rather than switching to different products, consumers switched to different chains that provide bear bile. Alternatives need to be publicized—posted in the windows of Chinese pharmacies and listed out in pamphlets.

Another important nuance is the uniqueness of Asian culture. Because cultures differ so much from country to country, bear farming must be treated with due sensitivity. Westerners trying to perform animal rescues in Asian countries rarely make progress, as they are seen as interfering, high-minded meddlers (Daiqi). Jill Robinson, the founder of Animals Asia, recalls being called “racist” while lobbying against bear farming in Korea (Bekoff). The Chinese government actually promoted bear farming as an alternative to

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bear hunting (MSNBC). Any help from outside Asia must be careful not to seem overpowering, or it will be rejected. And while the Western public is outraged by bear farming, “China's public has traditionally been unmoved by animal welfare issues” (Foster). The campaign to stop bear farming might draw funding and support from the Western public, but to end bear farming in Asia, support needs to come from Asia. Recent reports are encouraging: Gui Zhen Tai, the third largest bear farming company in China, was met with fury from Chinese bloggers and activists when it attempted to expand into China’s Fujian province (Foster). The publicity campaigns need to be within China, Vietnam, and other Asian countries in order to end this atrocity. Directly treating the causes of bear farming is the best way to end the exploitation of the moon bear.

Bears are inexplicably awe-inspiring creatures, hardy and tough, yet tender and vulnerable to exploitation. Restoring their dignity and health by halting the despicable practice of bear farming would not be a favor on our part, but rather a righting of the natural status quo. By ending bear farming, bears will regain the respect that they deserve and renew the freedom that human insensitivity stole away. And finally, the moon bears in the Chengdu Moon Bear Rescue Center Cemetery, knowing that their kin are no longer tormented, will rest in peace.

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Bitter Bile: Torture of Moon Bears in Asian Bear Farms
By Anita Lo

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