

Donkey Selfies: Chinese Roads in Kyrgyzstan

Emilia Sułek

“I came home from the field to have dinner and watch television. I left the donkey on the road. In the morning, I went out and the donkey wasn’t there. It lay a few meters away, at the roadside. Its whole body, only the skin was missing.” So Tokubek, a Kyrgyz farmer recalls the events of 2019. That year there were fourteen such cases in his village and hundreds across the country.

Between the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 and the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, Kyrgyzstan lost nearly fifty thousand donkeys (Stat.kg 2022). This accounts for more than half of the country’s donkey population. Importantly, Kyrgyzstan is not the only country where donkey numbers have plummeted as Chinese infrastructure investments have increased, suggesting a connection between Chinese-led road building and the decline of donkeys. In this article, I shed light on this complex relationship, addressing a so-far unstudied aspect of China’s growing global engagements.

Donkey (hide) Trade

In 2008, Kyrgyzstan and China signed a bilateral agreement on the export of donkeys. The BRI, a centerpiece of Xi Jinping's foreign policy, was launched five years later. However, neither the donkey trade nor Chinese investors were new in Kyrgyzstan. Donkeys had been sold to China prior to 2008 – even if data on this remains scarce – to meet the growing demand for donkey-derived products in the Chinese pharmaceutical industry. The latter is estimated to process nearly five million donkey hides per year, making a product called *ejiao* (Ch. 阿胶), marketed as a “beauty and wellness booster with anti-aging and health promoting properties” (Köhle 2018: 177; TDS 2019).

Chinese infrastructure investments in Kyrgyzstan also have a longer history, dating back to the 1990s. The BRI ideology sanctioned their presence in Kyrgyzstan and, more broadly, across Central Asia, which was now presented as a ‘corridor’ between China and Europe, the Near East and other markets. It raised the status of these infrastructure investments and made them internationally visible. In Kyrgyzstan, the real goals of BRI remain somewhat obscure to many Kyrgyz citizens, who can nevertheless easily identify which roads were ‘built by the Chinese’ (Кг. *Кытайлар салган жолдор*).

“They go as workers with us” (Они ходят у нас как рабочие, in Russian), explained a woman from the Ysyk-Köl region. This donkey replaced a stolen animal.

Photo: Emilia Sutek, 2021.



Since the launch of the BRI, the donkey population in Kyrgyzstan has declined by up to ten thousand animals per year (Kabar 2018). The numbers correspond with a general feeling that donkeys are vanishing from the rural landscape. These hard-working animals are a key source of draft power for farmers across Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, they are the least culturally valued. Neither an object of national pride (such as horses), nor of great economic value (like sheep or cows), donkeys are disappearing silently.¹

¹ Donkeys reproduce slowly and are ill-suited for mass breeding. This explains concerns of global extinction (TDS 2019).

The decline in donkey numbers did eventually capture some attention. Kyrgyz First Deputy Prime Minister Kubatbek Boronov welcomed it as an index of Kyrgyzstan's improved economy, which remains the second-least successful in post-Soviet Central Asia, draws nearly one third of its GDP from personal remittances and features significant public debt to China (World Bank 2022). Boronov, in a 2020 speech to the parliament, said that the obsolescence of the donkey as a work animal shows that the population is becoming affluent. It is a natural consequence of improved road infrastructure. People drive cars now, he remarked (Maralfm 2020).

Is there, indeed, a causal relationship between these two overlapping phenomena: the declining numbers of donkeys and better road infrastructure? In the opinion of Tokubek, the farmer from Ysyk-Köl in eastern Kyrgyzstan, there is – though it is not the one posited by the Deputy Prime Minister. “As soon as the Chinese finished building the road, the problem ended,” he recounted when I interviewed him in the summer of 2022. The road he referred to is the Bishkek–Balykchy section of the highway running to the Chinese border. Tokubek's village is seventy kilometers from Balykchy. Another highway, around the Ysyk-Köl lake, is currently under construction, closer to Tokubek's village. This project, however, is being realized by Kyrgyz companies and so it does not impact the donkey population, Tokubek said. It is only the ‘Chinese roads’ (Kg. *Кытай жолдор*) that do.

The temporal correlation between Chinese road-building and declining donkey numbers makes Kyrgyz citizens seek explanations. A common one says that it is the starvation-level wages that push Chinese road workers into donkey-eating. “Their pay is so low that they would eat anything,” Tokubek suggested. His belief that the road workers are political or criminal convicts echoes the well-documented practices of forced labour and ‘re-education’ camps for Uyghur citizens in China. Nearly two hundred thousand ethnic Kyrgyz live across the Chinese border, so news from China is followed in Kyrgyzstan with concern and is the cause of occasional protests (RFA 2018).² Another explanation refers to price differences between mutton, beef and horse meat, all considered *halal*, and donkeys, which are *haram*.³ For people not bounded by the dietary rules of Islam, as some Kyrgyz say, eating donkeys might be a rational economic choice – albeit a reprehensible one.

² Some infrastructure projects from the Soviet period were also rumoured to rely on convict labor, e.g. the Töö Ashuu Tunnel on the Osh–Bishkek highway.

³ In 2022, a donkey cost five thousand Kyrgyz som, a cow fifty thousand and a horse at least one hundred thousand. While prices can vary, the relative costs remain roughly stable.

Twenty Minutes

As with most other livestock in Kyrgyzstan, donkeys roam freely and can be easy prey for reportedly hungry road workers. In fact, in the BRI-decade donkey thefts became so common that police urged citizens to take selfies with their donkeys: these could be used as a confirmation of ownership, in case the stolen animal was found. Many donkeys, however, are not exactly stolen, but slaughtered and skinned on the spot – their carcass abandoned within walking distance of the village. The proportion of donkeys slaughtered and skinned to those stolen is difficult to estimate, but hundreds of carcasses discarded by the roadside across the country reveal that this is not an incidental phenomenon.

China has been buying animal skins from Kyrgyzstan for years, so its interest in donkey hides does not surprise local farmers. It is the loss of property and labour force that concerns them, and – on top of this – the question of what happens to donkey meat when it is not the road workers who eat it. The trade agreement between Kyrgyzstan and China implies that donkeys should be exported alive. Yet the skinning of donkeys within Kyrgyzstan has led to concerns over the fate of the rest of the carcass. Recent years have seen a series of scandals where donkey meat was discovered in licensed slaughterhouses (24.kg 2015). Rumours about restaurants serving donkey meat as beef and horse meat circulate (TopNews.kg 2015). This applies particularly to restaurants located along the new highways: these cater to hundreds of anonymous customers who have no time to investigate the ingredients of their meat-stuffed *samsa* or *lagman* noodles.

Donkeys sold to China are taken directly to Chinese building sites and mines – so report traders in Tokmok, a town on the Bishkek–Balykchy highway.

Photo: Emilia Sutek, 2022.



It takes twenty minutes to slaughter and skin a donkey, Tokubek claimed, at least for someone with the necessary skills. Would Chinese road workers possess these? Tokubek is under no illusions. "It's our boys who did it," he stated. In cases both of donkey theft and slaughter, it is often rural inhabitants themselves who feed the Chinese demand; sometimes they even get arrested for doing so. Tokubek drafted a portrait of a typical person involved: young, male, unmarried, in need of money to start a family or business. The sale of donkeys or their hides offers them a cash income – one that is ephemeral and rather unsustainable – which can be spent or used for investments.⁴

⁴In 2022, a donkey cost five thousand Kyrgyz som, a cow fifty thousand and a horse at least one hundred thousand. While prices can vary, the relative costs remain roughly stable.

The exact flows of the donkey trade between Kyrgyzstan and China remain largely unexamined. Despite the official legal status of donkey export, illegal activities flourish. This applies both to the ways in which animals are procured and how they leave the country. In May 2022, a major Kyrgyz state official, Tolon Yrsaliyev, was arrested for accepting seventy thousand USD to facilitate obtaining a permit for donkey export, showing that the trade is still very lucrative business (24.kg 2022).

“Everywhere animals disappear” states John Berger in his essay on modernity’s marginalization of the animal enabled by technological inventions and infrastructures (1980: 26). The latter serve as a material metonym of modernity, a measure of progress towards a more advanced future (Appel 2018: 46). Deputy Prime Minister Boronov’s words reveal his belief in this narrative of modernity as manifesting itself in the expansion of roads and the disappearance of the donkey. However, donkeys have neither become obsolete in Kyrgyz farming nor have they been exchanged for cars. They disappear because of their value for the pharmaceutical industry in China.

The humble donkey, work animal of smallholders and village farmers, does not fit with some politicians’ vision of a modern, affluent society. Whether the donkey trade actually indicates a growing affluence is what the Deputy Prime Minister did not say: in 2020 he resigned from office. In rural Kyrgyzstan, it is the shortage of cash, combined with entrepreneurial skills and a new connectivity brought by ‘Chinese roads’ that spur this phenomenon. Allowing a new level of integration into the predatory capitalist economy of China, this connectivity has transformed the donkey into a cash-bringing commodity and a source of raw material, and has linked certain enterprising rural inhabitants to obscure trade networks which syphon Kyrgyz natural resources off to China.

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Emilia Sutek is a social anthropologist with expertise covering political and economic anthropology in broadly understood Central Asia. As a member of the research project “ROADWORK: An Anthropology of Infrastructure at China’s Inner Asian Borders” (<https://www.roadworkasia.com>) funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation, she has been working on the unexpected side-effects of current infrastructural investments in Kyrgyzstan. In her earlier work, Emilia was interested in reconsidering the impact of medicinal fashions in China on the pastoral communities inhabiting the Tibetan plateau. Her book, *Trading Caterpillar Fungus in Tibet: When Economic Boom Hits Rural Area*, was published by Amsterdam University Press in 2019.

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