

out & about

TWO MONTHS IN THE CULTURE



On the Runway: A mastiff is presented at the Seventh Tibetan Mastiff Expo in Shenyang, China, this past March—the same month a different mastiff sold for a reported \$1.5 million.

CHINA FILES

HOT DOG

In a country with a million millionaires, the fluffy red Tibetan mastiff has become the best friend of choice. **Ron Gluckman** goes on the hunt for the world's most expensive dog.

You can buy any kind of dog you want at the sprawling Xin Gou (Gold Dog) Market on the southern outskirts of Beijing: a poodle, a husky, or, if you have the money—lots of money—a **Tibetan mastiff**, currently the most desired dog in China and the ultimate status symbol of the nouveau elite. In March one mastiff reportedly sold for \$1.5 million, making it the most expensive dog in the world.

Outside one shop that's covered with signs and pictures of mastiff puppies sits a fine specimen: a friendly, largish pup, her fur thick and plush. The proprietor, an enthusiastic middle-aged woman named Chen, says that like all her puppies this one was sired by Big Red, an enormous stud on sale for \$25,000. Despite the country's double-digit economic growth rates, that's a lot of cash in China, more than two years' salary for the average worker. Even so, Chen has sold mastiffs for up to \$100,000.

When asked about million-dollar mastiffs, however, Chen points down a dirt lane. I stroll past crates of toy dogs, grooming stalls, and shops selling doggie clothes and doggie vitamins. The signs don't seem too promising. Scrawled on one wall in black Chinese characters is an advertisement for

dog meat, with a phone number. At the end of the lane, however, are billboards advertising magnificently coiffed mastiffs. The most expensive Tibetan mastiffs are flame-red, although the breed can range in color from black to white. But more than the color of their lion-like fur, what distinguishes the top dogs from the lesser ones is their facial features. An elite mastiff should have a regal expression, not too big a forehead, and eyes that look thoughtful but not sad. When I point at the signs, one of the men playing cards nearby makes a call, and within minutes I'm being introduced to Zhao Huipu.

With his dapper black suit and shaved head, Zhao looks a bit like a cheerful Chinese Kojak. We climb into a van and drive for 20 minutes, through neighborhoods with names like Pear Orchard and Nine Trees Village. As elsewhere around Beijing, these are the former sites of orchards, which have been razed in favor of the towering concrete apartment blocks that dominate the landscape. Finally we park outside an old brick building that once housed a school. Inside, workers begin hurriedly preparing the elaborate tea ceremony that precedes any Chinese bargaining session.

And then, suddenly, there he is: Taiyang ("Sunny"). A monstrous beast with

bright red fur, he stands three feet tall and weighs 220 pounds. And he could be mine, says Zhao—for just a bit more than \$600,000. Cash.

Dogs have been in vogue in China for barely a decade; until recently they were banned in most cities. But the mastiffs' sudden popularity has surprised even Zhao, who has been in the dog business for 30 years and runs a dozen mastiff farms for a single owner.

Mastiffs first became popular around five years ago among the newly wealthy Chinese, who found them the perfect accessories for their SUVs, company for the ride to their countryside mansions. The sudden frenzy to acquire the biggest, most beautiful mastiffs—the bigger the dog, the more valued it is—sent prices soaring and buyers on the hunt to Tibetan areas, where the dogs have traditionally served as guards. Today the breed is a national obsession. “People in China have a lot of money now,” says Zhao, who claims that prices of \$2 to \$3 million are commonplace. “Sometimes they buy five or six dogs, for millions at a time.” Contributing to the dogs' desirability is their relative scarcity. The China National Kennel Club estimates that there are 4,000 mastiff kennels around the country, but Wang Yonggang, president of the Tibetan Mastiff Association, says only a few dozen trade in the purest-bred dogs, of which there are perhaps 300. If so, that would make them scarcer than that other rare Chinese native, the panda.

I hear similar stories of seven-figure dogs from Lu Liang, a breeder who in March was quoted in newspapers around the globe for supposedly selling a red mastiff named Big Splash for \$1.5 million. “The journalists exaggerated everything,” he barks over the phone from Laoshan, a coastal city famous for its mineral water. “They made everything up.” The actual price was lower, says Lu, although he refuses to

discuss exact numbers. But, he adds, “I’ve sold lots of mastiffs for this much or more.”

So why the mastiff, and why now? The simple answer is that the wealthy Chinese need things to spend their money on. There are currently around a million Chinese millionaires, but the number grows by nearly 10 percent a year, according to the *Hurun Report*, a publication that tracks the obsessions of China’s rich. From fine

DOG DAYS



Every evening in Beijing, at nine o'clock, owners of big dogs, which are banned in the city, make the “doggy dash,” a furtive lap or two around the park, one eye open for the police. Dog owners must register their dogs (which costs around \$150), and no dogs taller than 14 inches are allowed in the central city. Population pressures are intense in a country of 1.3 billion people, and dogs (there are 65 million to 150 million in China) are not exempt from scrutiny. In 2006, Beijing enacted a policy limiting small dogs to one per household. (A similar restriction began in Shanghai last month.) Still, the Chinese are crazy about pets, which were banned under Mao. Shops in upscale malls feature hundreds of accessories, from jeweled collars to fur coats; the current rage is grooming salons where you can pay upward of \$250 to have your pet dyed to resemble a panda or a tiger. Mao may be rolling over, but the dog’s days are here. R.G.

wines to sports cars to chalets, Chinese spending has skyrocketed in recent years, says Paul French, of AccessAsia, which monitors consumer trends in China. “There is really no limit. The Chinese buy *everything*.” Earlier this year, he notes, a racing pigeon sold for a record \$200,000, about 100 times the usual price. But the mastiff is considered desirable for its symbolic import, too. Unlike Mercedes, Vuitton, and Cartier, the mastiff is a “made-in-China luxury brand”—an item of national pride, according to Rupert Hoogewerf, who publishes the *Hurun Report*. Chinese breeders claim that the dog has dazzled the Chinese and foreigners alike for centuries. “Marco Polo wrote about seeing a mastiff, how it had the body of a donkey but the roar of a lion,” says Wang, repeating a widely quoted (albeit dubious) claim.

The mastiff is also considered a canny investment; champions claim breeding fees up to \$100,000. “Among collectors, money is no object,” he adds. “With the top mastiffs, buyers want the best, and they will pay any price for them.”

I think about this as I watch Taiyang roll around in the dirt. Despite their current most valuable status and often splendid size, these dogs are, ultimately, dogs like any other, and what they love more than being shown off is a belly rub. I lean down to stroke Taiyang. His fur, under my hand, is wonderfully soft and thick; it feels like nothing so much as a million-dollar mink coat. •

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STATUS SYMBOLS

You’ve got the dog, but what else do you need? These are the items on every Chinese billionaire’s wish list.



1. JET
Gulfstream 550;
\$59.8 million

As the number of traveling tycoons increases, China is investing \$200 billion in 40 new airports for private jets. The plutocrat’s favorite is the 96-foot Gulfstream 550, which can reach remote locations without stopping for gas. To while away the long hours, there is both on-board Internet and, of course, wine storage.



2. WINE
Château Lafite Rothschild 1982;
\$5,900

High rollers are known to favor Lafite (some speculate that this is partially because the name is easy for the Chinese to pronounce), and one of the most coveted vintages is the 1982, a renowned year for Bordeaux. Even empty bottles can go for as much as \$1,500.



3. PASTIME
Golf; \$156,000 and up

There’s no better place to do business than on the links, which means any serious mogul will have a membership at at least one of these top-tier clubs, designed by the likes of Jack Nicklaus and Nelson & Haworth: Mission Hills (the world’s largest golf club, per Guinness), in Shenzhen (\$275,000 initiation fee); Sheshan, in Shanghai (\$257,000); and Fuchun, in Hangzhou (\$156,000).



4. CAR
Rolls-Royce Phantom;
\$990,000

The top choice for older Chinese businessmen, the spacious sedan (known for its rear-hinged back doors, 55 meters of hand-stitched leather, and ability to minimize street noise) has a waiting list of several months across eight dealerships in China.



5. TEA
Pu er; vintages from \$1,000

Like great wine, pu er tea, typically a blend of large leaves from the Yunnan region, becomes increasingly valuable as it gets older. Coveted for its health benefits (aiding digestion, lowering cholesterol), vintage pu er—meaning 50 years or older—can fetch astronomical prices on the auction block. Six years ago 500 grams of 64-year-old tea sold for \$150,000. STEPHANIE WU

Photographs: Getty Images (dog); Trains and Planes/Alamy (jet); Owen Franken/Corbis (wine); Stephen Boyd/istock.com (pastime); Neale Haynes/Rex USA (car); Christopher Pillitz/Alamy (tea)