

World's largest animal cloning factory can save species, says Chinese founder
 Tianjin facility aims to produce thousands of cow embryos as well as racehorses
 and sniffer dogs but could also bring species back from brink, says scientist

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The scientist behind plans to build the world's largest animal cloning factory in China has hailed the venture as an "extremely important" contribution that could help save critically endangered species from extinction.

Xu Xiaochun, the chief executive of BoyaLife, the company behind the 200m yuan (£20.6m) project, said it would begin operations in the first half of 2016 in Tianjin, a city about 160km from Beijing.

"We are going [down] a path that no one has ever travelled," he told the Guardian following the unveiling of the factory's blueprint this week. "We are building something that has not existed in the past."

The main focus of the 14,000-square-metre facility will be cloning cattle to feed China's rocketing demand for beef. BoyaLife initially hopes to produce 100,000 "top quality" cow embryos a year and to eventually be responsible for 5% of the premium cattle slaughtered in China.

Scientists will also focus on cloning champion racehorses and sniffer dogs capable of locating victims of natural disasters or stashes of illegal drugs.

But Xu said the clone factory would also serve humanity and nature by helping rescue endangered species from the brink of extinction.

"This is going to change our world and our lives," he said. "It is going to make our life better. So we are very, very excited about it."

The factory is the latest step in Chinese attempts to become a world leader in cloning technology.

Scientists in mainland China have been cloning cattle, pigs and sheep for about 15 years, Hong Kong's South China Morning Post reported.

In 2014, the BBC said a Chinese company called BGI was cloning animals on an industrial scale in the southern city of Shenzhen. There, scientists working out of a former shoe factory were reportedly churning out 500 cloned pigs every year.

"We can do cloning on a very large scale," Yutao Du, a scientist at the project, was quoted as saying. "Thirty to 50 people together doing cloning so that we can make a cloning factory here."

The Tianjin factory is a partnership with Soam Biotech, a South Korean firm run by Seoul-based scientist Hwang Woo-suk. Hwang, a once-revered veterinarian known as the "king of cloning", was disgraced in 2006 after claims he had fabricated his research.

Soam has been cloning puppies for around a decade and has been operating in China since 2014, cloning Tibetan mastiff puppies in the city of Weihai in partnership with BoyaLife.

"In China we do things on a massive scale," Xu told Bloomberg in 2014 in an interview about that project. "But we want to do all this not just for profit, but also for history."

The Chinese scientist suggested his firm might one day be able to produce the world's first cloned giant panda at its Weihai facility.

In China, which has witnessed a series of devastating food safety scandals, state media sought to convince readers there was no risk in consuming the cloned cattle Xu's company plans to produce.

"Beef from cloned cattle is safe to eat," Zhang Yong, a professor at the veterinary medicine college of Shaanxi province's Northwest A & F University, told the China Daily.

In a conference call with reporters, BoyaLife's chief executive said: "I can tell you, cloned beef is the tastiest beef I've had!"

Xu said the construction of the world's largest animal cloning factory was now almost complete. "We want it to be modern, we want it to be cutting edge. We want it to represent the future," he said.