



She's the "Calf Mother of China"

When customers claimed calves fed milk replacer died from diarrhea, Xiurong Meng rolled up her sleeves and went to the farm to deliver and feed the next 100 calves.

by Corey Geiger

CHINA was a far different place when the Honneur Company entered the dairy scene in 1994. At that time, the world's most populated nation had yet to join the World Trade Organization. For the most part, China operated in economic isolation from the rest of the developed world.



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Even so, the Honneur Company forged ahead with Xiurong Meng serving as one of its first employees. Milk replacer became Honneur's signature product with Meng serving as the team leader. Just years earlier, she majored in veterinary medicine at the Hebei Agricultural University located a few hours southwest of Beijing. In subsequent years, she added to her business acumen by earning a degree in enterprise management at Tsinghua University.

An early struggle

"Despite making a good product, our customers were struggling," said Meng through an interpreter. "We were losing customers as fast as we gained new customers," she said of the Honneur Company, which was the first entity to bring milk replacer to the marketplace in China.

When customers said, "Some calves fed milk replacer still get diarrhea and some calves even die," Meng knew it was time to take action. "At that point, no one in China had intensely focused on calf rearing."

In making the motion as if she was rolling up her sleeves, she said, "I rolled up my sleeves and said, 'Let's get to work.'"

At that first dairy, Meng worked the calving pens to deliver every calf herself — 100 in

total. She tested the colostrum for immunoglobulins (IgGs), began pasteurizing the colostrum, and applied every calf-rearing practice on the very best farms in North America and Europe. As she applied calf-raising protocols she had learned from the world's best calf raisers, she took pictures of her work on the farm to create what would become standard operating procedures (SOPs) for that dairy.

To prove her point, however, she still needed to successfully raise a top-notch group of calves. And that she did . . . all 100 of Meng's calves not only lived but thrived. Those calves gained 23 pounds in the first 30 days of life.

She now had believers.

At that point in the journey, she shared her calf-raising SOPs with the dairy owners and the employees.

"I identified lots of problems during calf raising," recalled Meng of that experience.

"The calving pen environment was less than ideal. The same went for colostrum management," she said of her deep dive into the first two months of the calf's life.

"I completed a comprehensive review of all things related to calf raising. Prior to that, no one had focused on calf raising in China."

Step-by-step progress

After that first voyage of working on the customer's dairy, word began to spread. Meng began sharing her picture procedures for calf raising with others.

She became so successful that she became president of the entire Honneur Company in 2006. "For me, it took a lot of courage to take that next step," recalled Meng of that major business undertaking for a Chinese woman.

It's at that point that she developed three divisions of the company. Those divisions include the feed division focused on milk replacer, an agricultural solutions enterprise specializing in importing dairy equipment, and a farm division that now raises 24,000 bull calves each year.

A LIFELONG LEARNER, XIURONG MENG (shown far left) vastly improved calf-raising practices in China by documenting best practices. As a result, she eventually became president of the company that produced milk replacer and brought more agricultural solutions to China's dairy farmers.

Meng was so confident in the combination of milk replacer product and calf-raising SOPs that she made a deal with dairy farm clients: "Follow these protocols and I'll buy your bull calves," she said. "I even agreed to pay a premium."

To receive the premium, the bull calves are blood tested to ensure adequate IgG levels are met. "The farms also must use a pasteurizer for colostrum or waste milk," she said.

Shortly after birth, Meng's farm team picks up the calves and raises them for three to five months. Some are harvested as fattened calves, while others are sold as feeder steers.

"Last year we raised 24,000 bull calves," she said in describing the growth of that enterprise. At that point, she shared a steak from one of her calves with those nearby the interview. The cut of meat, and its taste, would have favorably passed inspection by the most discriminating American food connoisseur.

Today, Meng's agricultural solutions division represents 10 brands. Some of the early brands would be recognized by American dairy farmers such as ColoQuick and Forster Technik; both specialize in calf-raising solutions. Others include Highline, APManufacturing, Trioliet, Loewen, Holm Laue, and Automatic. The latest to the Honneur family is Lely. That most recent venture will require a demonstration farm.

"If you want to promote a new concept in China, you must do a lot of work," said Meng. "We will need to set up two to three demonstration farms in China to show dairy farmers how to use the products well," she said, recalling her earlier days of advancing milk replacer and improving calf raising. She is the professional member of China Calf and Heifer Association, founded by Professor Zhijun Cao in 2016. She also served as committee member of Feeding Specification for Dairy Replacement, released by China Standardization Administration.

A "family business"

These days, Meng employs 40 people. That represents significant growth over the company's first 25 years.

"Our company is like a family. We have harmony," she said during the interview at the Dairy Expo of China that drew 65,000 attendees in mid-July. "This is such an important event that everyone from the Honneur Company is here," she went on to say.

"We are not necessarily a big company. Our staff needs to handle many jobs," said Meng, who has a number of women in leadership positions within her company. "Everyone must understand the technical and the financial aspects. My employees are loyal and hard working," she said with a smile.

"Our company culture is like a big family even though there is a lot of pressure to succeed," she said, doubling down on her earlier statement.

In witnessing Meng interact with her employees, each staffer is living out the culture that their company CEO started many years ago when she successfully raised those first 100 calves for a client — practice what you preach.

She also spent more time training the young generation, especially collaborating with Elite Cattlemen Program (ECP). Each year, her company will accept at least five students to start summer internships and have had over 50 student interns in total since 2014. Jenny Ma, managing editor of *Hoard's Dairyman China*, was one of those summer interns in 2014. 🐄