

# How the Honey Bee Got Her Hum

(I've retold this Mongolian folktale in verse)

by CONRAD A. BERUBE, JR.  
Victoria, British Columbia

Dear Reader,

From 1982 to 1988 I was employed as a consultant to train new Peace Corps volunteers and host-national extensionists in all aspects of tropical apiculture for a number of developing countries (Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Paraguay, Central African Republic and Tunisia). Thereafter, I pursued a Master's degree in entomology (specializing in apiculture and integrated pest manage-

ment) at the University of California, Davis, which I completed in March of last year and I have since been employed as a crop consultant for an integrated pest management enterprise.

In my travels and research I have come across a wealth of tales and legends involving the honey bee which I have gathered and embellished into a book about the biology of this most-esteemed of insects. I thought the enclosed original, unpublished excerpt might be of interest to you.

A long time ago, way up in the sky,  
Lived Khan Garudi, Lord of All Things that Fly,  
He said "Such as I, a Prince of the Air,  
Should have for his table the finest of fare.  
The bee and the crow I'll send on this quest,  
To find of all creatures whose flesh tastes the best.  
The crow is quite clever and wily at that,  
but his word is as true as Mount Khuitun\* is flat.  
The bee is an expert on sweet things, 'tis sure,  
And her tongue will know nothing of lying impure."

So the crow and the bee set off on their search,  
But it wasn't too long till the crow took to perch.  
Said he "My dear bee, I'm sure that you'll see,  
That you'd make better time if it wasn't for me.

*I'm feeble and old, not meant for this quest.  
You go on ahead and I'll stay here and rest."*  
So off flew the bee to finish the job,  
While the crow stayed behind, man's fields to rob.

The bee, on her journey, did sample all beasts,  
To find the flesh sweetest to furnish Khan's feasts.  
So she nibbled on lion, she nibbled on lamb.  
She nosed gnu on the hoof and duck in the air.  
(The gnu tasted old, but the fowl was fair.)  
She tasted the lip of a great, hairy yak,  
Who gave her a lick and tasted her back.  
From aardvark through zebra she nibbled a bit,  
But the sweetest was **man** she had to admit.

Crow soon found this out,  
Though in ways round about --  
(In a chat with a bat,  
Who heard from a bird,  
Who knew from a shrew,  
Who'd gabbed with a crab,  
Who'd talked with a hawk,  
Who'd yakked with the yak,  
The same one, you see,  
Who'd got bit by the bee).  
And the crow grew to wonder,

*"Whose fields will I plunder,  
If this beast they call 'man'  
Is to grace the Khan's pan?"*

Not very long after, the bee came along,  
Smiling with pride and singing this song,  
"Now back to the Khan we can fly, ancient Crow,  
for here is the answer he wanted to know:  
Amongst all the creatures, the great and the small,  
**Man** has the flesh that's the sweetest of all."  
"Eh," said the crow, "I'm afraid since you left,  
That I've gotten still older and I'm going quite deaf.  
come closer, dear daughter, and shout in my ear,  
In that way I'm sure I'll be able to hear."  
Now the bee she drew closer to the crafty old bird  
With mouth open wide, that she might be heard,  
And quick as a think the crow darted out,



**She tasted the lip of a great, hairy yak, who gave her a lick and tasted her back.**

\* Khuitun Peak, also known as Tavan Bogd, is the tallest peak in Mongolia.

And plucked the bee's tongue right out of her mouth.

So when they returned before Khan Garudi,  
The most she could say was "Mmmmmmm", the poor mute bee.  
"Never fear," said the crow, "I'll try to interpret,  
Yes, indeed, I feel certain what she's saying is: 'Serpent!'"  
Thus the Khan was quite pleased to start eating snakes,  
And that's how we escaped becoming Khan's steaks.

So, hearing a hum, a bee should you spy,  
(Whizzing around you in circles she'll fly).  
Don't whack her or swat her -- she'll soon pass you by.  
She just thinks that you're sweet -- but don't ask me why!

## SOURCES

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## NOTES

In the original it is two birds (the swallow and the titmouse) and the bee that go off to find the sweetest flesh and it is the storm god, *Bur-khan*, who convinces the birds to lie to their master in order to save man. But they don't believe the bee is capable of lying so they pluck out her tongue. There is a very similar tale in Palestinian folklore involving the swallow and the mosquito<sup>1</sup>.

### about buzzing...

Although the buzzing of bees and the chirping of crickets was used by Pliny as evidence that insects can give voice<sup>2</sup>, the buzzing produced by all bees (and piping sounds produced by the queens) are caused by vibrations of the wings (or of the flight muscles alone, the wings remaining over the back<sup>3</sup>). (Crickets produce sound by rubbing tooth-like projections on their wings or legs against one another in a fiddling action<sup>4</sup>.)

### about beekeeping in China...

China has a very venerable history of beekeeping and is currently the world's largest producer of honey. Records indicate

that the Chinese practiced beekeeping over three thousand years ago<sup>5</sup>. Honey heads the list of medicines described in the *Book of Chinese Medicine* written 2,200 years ago<sup>6</sup>. Even today, much honey consumed in China goes towards the production of naturopathic remedies, the sweet liquid being mixed with medicinal herbs and elaborated into pill form. The ancient Chinese classified honey by the terrain from which it was gathered: As ground honey, bamboo honey, wood honey and even stone honey. These designations most likely reflect the different preferences for nesting sites of the three honey-bee species native to China<sup>7</sup>: *A. dorsata* (whose large single-comb nests are usually located in tall trees or on cliff faces), *A. florea* (whose single-comb nests are usually located in dense vegetation such as bamboo stands) and *A. cerana* (very similar to the western honey bee, building its multi-comb nests in cavities in trees or rocks -- and is thus the only native species which can be kept in hives). "Ground honey" may have been collected from bumblebee nests since they commonly nest in abandoned rodent burrows.

The western honey bee was not introduced into China until the beginning of the 20th century<sup>8</sup>, but China has recently wrestled the ascendancy as the foremost producer of honey from the Soviet Union (the national yield having doubled over the course of the last decade)<sup>9</sup>. China boasts over six million colonies<sup>10</sup> producing over 200,000 metric tons of honey annually. Over a million of the colonies kept (and in some areas up to 90% of hive stock) are those of *A. cerana* producing an average yield of between 20 and 50 kg per colony per year<sup>11</sup>. Hives traditionally used for the culture of *A. cerana* have been of the fixed-comb variety and have included horizontal models, either woven or constructed of wood<sup>12</sup>, a barrel-like affair<sup>13</sup>, and handsome box hives usually hung beneath the eaves of houses for security and ease of harvesting<sup>14</sup>. High-tech hives for *A. cerana* are generally scaled-down versions of Langstroth equipment -- the ten-frame hive-bodies measuring 375 x 232 mm<sup>15</sup>, and the frames themselves encompassing an area of comb 340 x 189 mm<sup>16</sup>. Development of apiculture plays an important role in the increase of communal income and in improving the standard of living for the rural Chinese<sup>17</sup>.

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