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Apis Alba Expansion into North Asia¹

In 2021, Olga and Alex Gavrilik, founders of Apis Alba, felt that it was important to further expand their international portfolio for the distribution of their Raw Honey products globally. The company was a family-owned business and wished to maintain their production and manufacturing in Belarus but was interested in entering new markets to further grow their business through eCommerce or local partnerships in new markets. As a country, Belarus was experiencing global political discourse, which had caused a decline in its economy and profitability. According to research studies, the global Honey Market was estimated to be \$8.5 billion USD in 2019. According to the Globe Newswire Industry Analysis report, the Global Honey Market size was expected to reach \$14.2 billion by 2026, rising at a market growth of 11.6% CAGR during the forecast period. Olga and Alex described the main principles of their business model with the following statement: “We take the very best from the bees, minimum treatment, maximum beneficial properties.” Apis Alba exported to a limited number of countries, but due to the declining economy in Belarus and political sanctions, they needed to explore new markets to continue to grow their business and increase their profitability. The team considered two possible locations for expansion: newly entering China and expanding deeper into Japan. These countries remained minimally involved in the growing political conflicts with Belarus and were known to have high import and export markets.

Apis Alba Company Background

Apis Alba was a family-owned honey business located in the vegetative state of Belarus. Across Belarus, beekeeping was a long-standing traditional craft and passion for many, but for no more than Olga and Alexander Gavrilik. Since 2011, Apis Alba had offered its domestic and international customers (US, Russia, Georgia, Japan, & Singapore) a quality (unpasteurized & unfiltered) line of honey product (raw, raw whipped, meadow raw, forest raw, and buckwheat raw) but the Gavrilik’s were eager to expand their reach. They were nationally and internationally recognized for their work in the honey industry – Olga a sensory analysis expert and Alexander a doctor. Both Gavrilik’s were passionate beekeepers, health advocates, and global minded business professional wanting to bring positive change to the health of global citizens primarily women aged 25-34. The duo understood the positive results

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honey could have on one's health (nutrient full, lowers blood pressure, kills bacteria, treats allergies, treats food poisoning, protects teeth, heals warts, improves athletic performance, and increases cancer cell death) and they were more than ready to help bring this positive change through their business. Apis Alba's competitive advantage was in the pure quality of their product as a result of their processing and quality control procedures. Basic facts about the company can be found in **Exhibit 1** below.

Potential Expansion Locations – Market Backgrounds (Exhibit 3)

As a result of urbanization, market size and growth and opportunities for exporting honey, China and Japan were optimal locations for Apis Alba to expand their business. The industry lifecycle and local economies provided a strong foundation for a comprehensive analysis about these potential locations.

China

Political

Prior to 2001 (year China entered WTO), political restrictions across the nation were incredibly stringent. Following that time, the government relaxed their policies allowing more foreigners to visit, study, and do business in the country. China was ruled by a president who also served as the general secretary of the national party. This President controlled the governing bodies that operated below him. The political environment in China was communist and collectivist. However, doing business in China was easy if you were well connected to the government and followed all the state, province, and local regulations, however, not so much if you were not. It took time to build these connections and the CCP's regulations were not always transparent. If Apis Alba decided to do business in China, it would be highly advised that they hire a local team who would be well connected to the government and understood the political climate to comply and operate effectively in China.

Economic

China has the second largest GDP in the world. This growth came when the government opened its borders and welcomed foreign investment. A lot of this foreign investment was centralized in Special Economic Zones (SEZ's). SEZ's were coastal regions within China for foreign companies operating in a certain industry. Special tax and regulatory policies were implemented in these areas to incentivize foreign investment in the region. The CCP was experimenting with new types of SEZ's called PFTZ's to accelerate growth during these challenging economies times (**Exhibit 2**). As the country recovered from the pandemic, analysts noticed that state owned enterprises were playing less of a role in the Chinese economy while private and public sectors were becoming more active. China had a high Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) and high levels of food/beverage consumption. China was a mid-size honey importer at \$89.23 M while it was a large honey exporter 444 tons in 2020. Understanding that China already had a large honey market was an important consideration for Apis Alba when making their decision on where to export to. If they chose China, they would have to create a niche for themselves to compete with the

countless honey producers in China. They would have to do extra marketing to help Chinese consumers understand the value of their pure unfiltered products.

Social

China had the world's largest population at 1.412 billion, 65% of this population were men between ages 20-64. China had a high level of human development index of 0.758 and was investing in vast urbanization projects. The domestic focus for the country was their *Made in China 2025* project. *Made in China 2025* was planned to help strengthen the Chinese brand. Foreign businesspeople needed to be aware of this project because it could affect their profitability in the Chinese market. Chinese Consumers were young, savvy, frugal about their spending, health conscious, and brand aware. They were becoming increasingly interested in high-end Chinese brands. This trend followed into honey consumption. Although the quality of honey in China was low, Chinese consumers preferred their domestic honey over foreign honey (**Exhibit 11**). Apis Alba needed to be weary of this growing trend since it would impact their success in the country.

Technological

China had a strong online population 854+ Million users, and they had high quality trade and transportation infrastructure in urban cities. However, much of China still lived in poverty and did not have access to the internet. Only about 61.7% of the nation's population (as of December 2020) had access to the internet. For foreign companies looking bring their products to market in China, this would limit the exposure to the country's vast population. Apis Alba would be able to reach their urban consumers easily through the country's top fintech & e-commerce apps - WeChat, Alibaba, Alipay, and Baidu. These platforms would streamline the marketing and sales process for sellers and buyers living in urban areas and make it nearly impossible for Apis Alba to reach the more rural areas. For a company like Apis Alba to be successful in China, the company would need to understand these platforms and who has access to them.

Environmental

China had 23 provinces with Shanghai, Beijing, and Shenzhen being the most developed. Each province had its own dialect, cuisine, and customs. There was an acquired taste for honey in these metropolitan areas. Additionally there was a growing desire for pure, healthy, and nature F&B in China. The vastness of this country provided an exceptional business opportunity to Apis Alba. The major cities, Beijing and Shanghai provided the greatest opportunities for Apis Alba's success being that this is where the highest income workers lived, technology was widespread, and shops were plentiful.

Legal

China had a high business competitive level (28/142) and scored well in the global ease of doing business rankings (94.1). It took approximately 8.6 days to set up a business in China, but customs clearance on F&B was tough. Products were often held up at the border or sent back to home countries. Registering IP Rights in China have historically been more complex but since the release of the *Foreign Investment Law (FIL)* on January 1, 2020, access had improved for foreign business owners. The goal of the law was to "help level the playing field for foreign-invested companies' equal access to government

supporting politics, fund raising and business opportunities in all walks of life. This law also “ban[ned] the practice of forced technology transfers to further protect IP rights. A complaint mechanism ha[d] also been established, exploring more channels for overseas investors to speak up.”

Japan

Political

The government of Japan had the political will to accommodate the needs of foreign companies by strengthening their consultation services for foreign businesses directly with State Ministers, offering simplified regulations and administrative procedures, and accepting highly skilled foreign professionals with its own “green-card system”. All these alternatives provided a favorable environment for Apis Alba in Japan as they had a democratic nation and collectivistic society.

Economic

Japan was the third largest economy in the world after the United States and China and had the third highest GDP per capita, representing a high purchasing power parity (PPP) in terms of consumption of goods and services. In addition, household consumption in Japan was higher than the average in Asia. The average time needed to import in Japan was 3.4 hours, well below the Asian average of 33 hours. Japan imported 173.9 million U.S dollars of honey in 2020 (**Exhibit 7**).

Social

The Japanese society had a high human development index of 0.915, ranking 19th in the world. More than half of the Japanese population were between the ages of 20 and 64 and more than half were men. The retail market for honey in Japan was constituted by specialized honey shops selling imported honey and local honey from domestic beekeepers. Moreover, food stores were crowded usually and have a broad variety of products. Hofstede analysis reveals that Japan and Belarus were close in the uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation dimensions (**Exhibit 4**). The retail sales of honey in Japan had been increasing year over year with sales of 695 million U.S dollars in 2020 and the market growth rate average was projected at 14% per year (**Exhibit 8**).

Technological

A high number of people in Japan had access to or used the internet (91.5%) and there were 143.6 mobile cellular subscriptions per 100 people. Japan had the 8th highest internet penetration in the world in 2019. This would be beneficial to Apis Alba if they chose to have an e-commerce presence and establish a digital reach in Japan. The quality of trade and transportation infrastructure was higher than the average of the region, representing an opportunity for exporting goods into the country.

Environmental

The top developed metropolitan areas where the target market for Apis Alba could potentially reside included Tokyo (Japan’s capital), Yokohama and Osaka. These were well-developed cities where customers had an acquired taste for honey with high consumption and retail sales (**Exhibit 9**).

Legal

It took 11.2 days to start a business in Japan while the regional average was 10 days. The efficiency of customs clearance was also very high (4 out of 5) compared to Asia (3.2 out of 5). Exporting goods into Japan was not too complicated due to the organization of entities and the structure of the import/export system. Japan was very high business competitive country, ranking 6th out of 141 countries and achieving a score of 86 in the Ease of Doing Business list.

Industry/Competitive Analysis (Exhibit 5)

China

Market Size & Environment

Globally, China was the largest producer/exporter (**Exhibit 6**) of honey and the 6th largest importer (**Exhibit 7**) of honey. Over time, Chinese honey producers had been able to maintain low product prices for their consumers helping them find economic success in their global market. While China held the position of the largest producer, this did not come without skepticism. In the early 2000's much pressure was put on Chinese honey companies and the Chinese government to address their honey adulteration, however, no real changes were made. Tariffs were originally placed on Chinese honey which were then loosened in 2004. China's impure honey was back on the global markets. Chinese honey producers were still producing fake honey in the Eastern Province of Zhejiang and exporting around the world. Most Chinese honey was made with low quality rice and corn syrup at large scale manufacturing plants unlike Apis Alba's unpurified and unfiltered products. The demand for honey and high-quality honey was rising especially as trends in healthy eating and healthy lifestyles increases in China. There were currently no specialized honey shops in China. Products could be found in grocery stores in urban areas.

Market Growth Rate

Honey was increasing in popularity in China. It had become a staple food in China and was often found more easily than sugar in local grocery stores. (GMA Marketing to China).

Main Competitors

Yishouyuan (Beijing) Bee Products Co., Ltd was the most popular honey company in China (**Exhibit 10**). Yishouyuan sourced its raw honey from 17 locations around the country and from one farm in Romania. The company had 2,000+ stores in more than 300+ Chinese cities. Most stores were in Beijing, Tianjin, and Guangzhou. Yishouyuan produced 100+ types of products that could be found in the form of honey, pollen, propolis, royal jelly, and cosmetics.

Baihua Bee Industry Technology Development Co., Ltd was a high-tech bee production company (**Exhibit 11**). Baihua had been operating 90 years. Over the years, Baihua had expanded its product offerings which included 140 distinct products in six categories – honey, bee pollen, royal jelly, propolis, daily chemicals and bee products. Products were made in China's rural towns and were brought to larger cities to be sold.

Wang's Bee Industry Group focused on producing bee products for uses in health care, food, beauty, and bee therapy. Wang was a subsidiary of Jingxi Wang's Bee Garden Co which invests in various industries but always had bees/honey at the center of their business (**Exhibit 12**).

Consumers

Chinese honey consumers typically bought honey once or twice a year. They preferred buying Chinese-branded honey that was sold in supermarkets or from local beekeepers, see (**Exhibit 13**) and (**Exhibit 14**) for a breakdown on Chinese consumer trends. They preferred liquid honey and had no preference of monofloral honey and polyfloral honey. Majority of honey was sold in bottles or glass jars, (**Exhibit 15**). Those living in China consumed honey in a variety of diverse ways, as a natural food sweetener, in cooking sauce, as a health supplement, as medicine, in their beauty or cosmetics, or right from their tables.

Government Involvement

China had a tight F&B regulatory system in place for imported goods. The regulatory system ensured quality and safety in the F&B products that are brought into the country. China's F&B safety was monitored by multiple agencies and departments (SAMR, NHCC, & GACC). Every year, a significant portion of goods failed to reach Chinese consumers because companies failed to comply with these requirements. Starting in April 2016, the Chinese government strengthened its regulation on imported honey products. One of the new measures was defining a list of countries/regions whose products were eligible to be imported to the Chinese market. Only 15 EU Member States were on the list.

Japan

Market size

The projected market size of natural honey in Japan for 2021 was 743.4 million U.S. dollars. It had been increasing its size in value year over year which represented a huge opportunity for Apis Alba. Although honey was a kitchen staple in Japan, most of the honey was imported and the domestic honey produced in the country came from European honeybees. Most of the honey produced in Japan came from the island of Tsushima. The honey was not heated to preserve its aroma and medicinal properties. The mountains and the abundance of flowers in the area made it special to produce honey.

Chinese honey kept the top share in Japan market for 40 years. In 2014, China's export volumes to Japan comprised about 64 million U.S dollars, which was 53% of Japanese total import. The first reason of Chinese honey success in Japan was price competitiveness and the second one was that Chinese honey had similar floral origin to Japanese light-colored honey like acacia and milkvetch. However, this honey did not represent quality and its success was primarily due to the low price of the Chinese honey sold in the Japanese market.

Market growth rate

The Japanese honey consumption had been increasing over the past years with a 14% growth average from (2015-2020).

Main competitors

The main competitors in the Japanese honey market were Yamada Bee, Sugi Bee, Shin-ra-bansho Tian Shian Mountain Honey. Japan was characterized by selling honey in its department stores with its own boutique section allowing customers to shop for their high-quality honey while browsing for other items (**Exhibit 16**). Shopping for honey in Japan could also be a total adventure as there were specialized honey shops that arranged their honey jars by forming small mountains on display tables. (**Exhibit 17**).

Yamada Bee Farm had been producing honey and royal jelly for over half a century. This honey company succeeded in the trial production of a "Yamada-style" honey tube filler and became the first company in Japan that produced honey in tubes. It was a famous company in Japan for preserving fruits in honey.

Sugi Bee Garden was founded in 1946 in Kumamoto, Kyushu Island (Japan), when Takeo Sugi, the founder, jumped into the beekeeping world with only 3 beehive boxes.

Shin-ra-bansho Tian Shian Mountain Honey was a historic honey company from the highlands of Japan. It had been cultivated for many years and the process from land to table was very minimal as described by the company owners.

Consumers

Japanese tended to prefer light-colored honey. An interest in healthy food alternatives was increasing across all demographics in Japan. For example, honey was used in Japan as a natural sweetener as well as for its medicinal purposes. The Japanese tended to use honey to soothe sore throats or mouth ulcers. Honey was also a food staple in the Japanese cuisine. It was used in desserts, like honey and Japanese honey toast, or in sweet and savory recipes like honey soy chicken. The honey was packed in glass jars all in the same shape and size (**Exhibit 18**).

Government involvement

While the Japanese government had no intervention in the companies that tried to import goods into Japan, there were certifications for exports coming into the country. The Ministry of Agriculture clearly laid out general food laws that importers had to follow. For instance, the food safety basic act, the food sanitation act, and the health promotion law were strictly required. In addition, organic honey products like *Apis alba* needed to follow regulations and appropriate labeling.

Stakeholder position to the challenge

Olga and Alex felt that it was important to further expand their international portfolio for the distribution of their Raw Honey products globally. While they wished to maintain their production and manufacturing in Belarus, they were interested in entering new markets to further grow their business through eCommerce or local partnerships in new markets.

Decision to make

Although Apis Alba was already set up to export to a limited number of countries, due to the declining economy in Belarus and political sanctions, they would need to explore new markets to continue to grow their business and increase their profitability. Olga and Alex which option, newly entering into China or expanding deeper into Japan, would better align with Apis Alba and give them the greatest benefit.

Appendix of Exhibits

Exhibit 1: Apis Alba Facts

Founded	November 26 th , 2011
Sales	\$325,000 USD (2020) \$385,000 USD (2019) \$2018 297,000 USD (2018)
Internal Employees	CEO Sales Director Production Director Sales Director Sales Manager Beekeepers (3)
Outsourced Employees	SMM Logistics Quality Control Events Social Projects Marketing R&D
Headquarters	Grodno region, Poreche, Belarus
Owner's	Olga and Alexander Gravilik
Target Audience	Women; Age 25-34
Products	5

Exhibit 2: Map of PFTZs in China

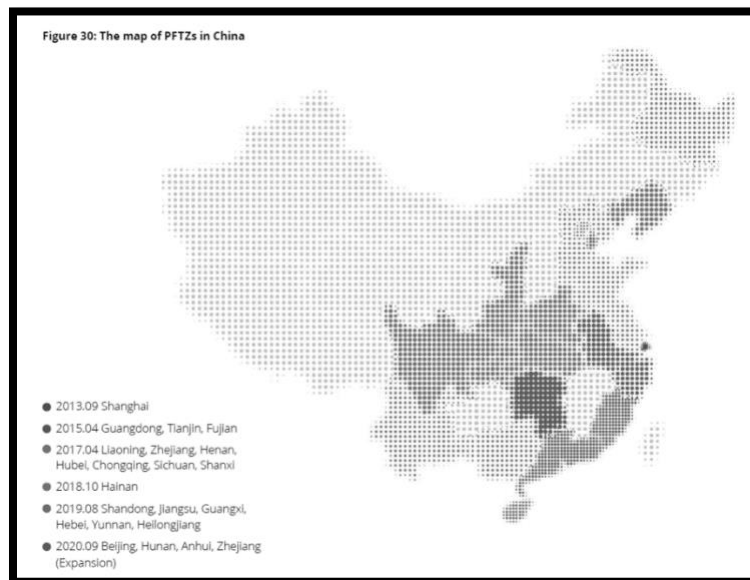


Exhibit 3: PESTEL Analysis

PESTEL Dimension	Japan	China
Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collectivistic society • Democratic nation • Political will from government to foreign businesses • State Ministers involved in the process to give confidence • Green card for highly skilled individuals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collectivist Society • Communist Nation • Political will from government to foreign businesses • Government officials at all levels involved in business processes • Various VISA options for foreigners
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High PPP and food/beverage consumption in general • Third largest economy in the world • Large honey importer worldwide: 174 million dollars in 2020 • Not a major honey exporter • Easy to import F&B goods into the country 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High PPP and food/beverage consumption • 2nd largest economy per GDP, growth is very steady • Mid-sized honey importer \$89.23 million in 2020 • Large honey exporter 444 tons in 2020 • Challenging to import F&B goods into the country
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More than half population between 20-64 and more than half are men • High level of human development (0.919) • Large consumers of honey • 14% market growth rate and increasing sales: 695 million dollars in 2020. • Specialized honey shops are part of the honey consumption culture. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 65% of population between 20-64, more than half are men (male dominated society) • High level of human development (0.758) • Largest global consumers of honey • 10.9% growth rate & growing sales, some push back result of counterfeit honey production • No specialized honey shops, but honey products are found easily in popular grocery stores
Technological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High internet penetration for potential e-commerce presence • High quality of trade and transportation infrastructure. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Largest online pop (854+ users), good for potential e-commerce presence • High quality of trade and transportation infrastructure in urban areas. Poor/nonexistent infrastructure in rural areas.

Environmental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most developed cities: Tokyo, Yokohama and Osaka. • Acquired taste for honey and high consumption in these metropolitan areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most developed cities: Shanghai, Beijing, and Shenzhen • Acquired taste for honey and consumption in these metropolitan areas. Growing desire for pure, healthy, and natural F&B in China.
Legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High Business Competitive country (6/141) • Ease of Doing Business score of 86 • Efficient customs clearance • Organized entities and structure of the export/import system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High Business Competitive (28/141) • Ease of Doing Business Score 94.1 • Inefficient customs clearance, F&B products often are sent back to home country/held up in customs for a long time • Organized entities and structure of export/import system

Exhibit 4: Hofstede Cultural Dimensions

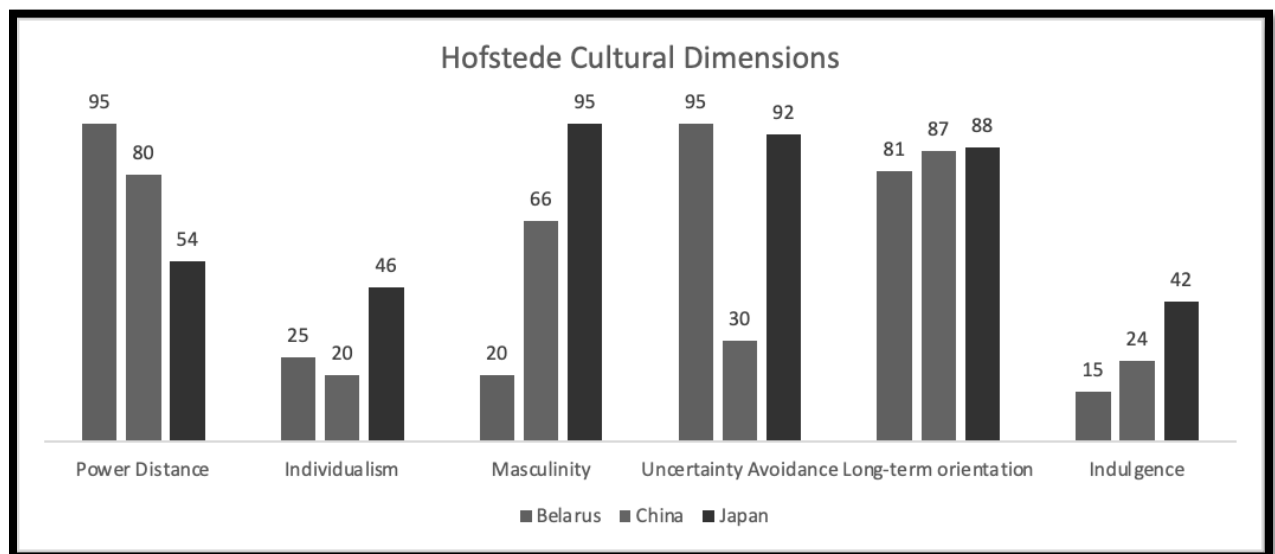


Exhibit 5: Market Analysis

	Japan	China
Market Size	\$ 743 M (2021)	\$124,795m USD in 2021
Market Growth Rate	+14% (2017-2022)	+2.4% (2017-2020)
Competitors (See images below)	Yamada Bee, Sugi Bee, Tian Shain Mountain Honey Shop	Yishouyuan (Beijing) Bee Products Co., Ltd, Baihua Bee Industry Technology Development Co., Ltd, Wang's Bee Industry Group

Consumers	Interest in healthy food alternatives is increasing across all demographics.	Considered a healthy snack type food for all demographics. Also used for medicinal purposes.
Government Involvement	Certifications and licensing requirements to export to Japan.	Strict import/export laws. Since 28 April 2016, the Chinese government has strengthened its regulation on imported honey products. One of the new measures is defining a list of countries/regions whose products are eligible to be imported to the Chinese market. Only 15 EU Member States are currently on the list.

Exhibit 6: Leading producers of honey in the world as of 2019, China biggest producer

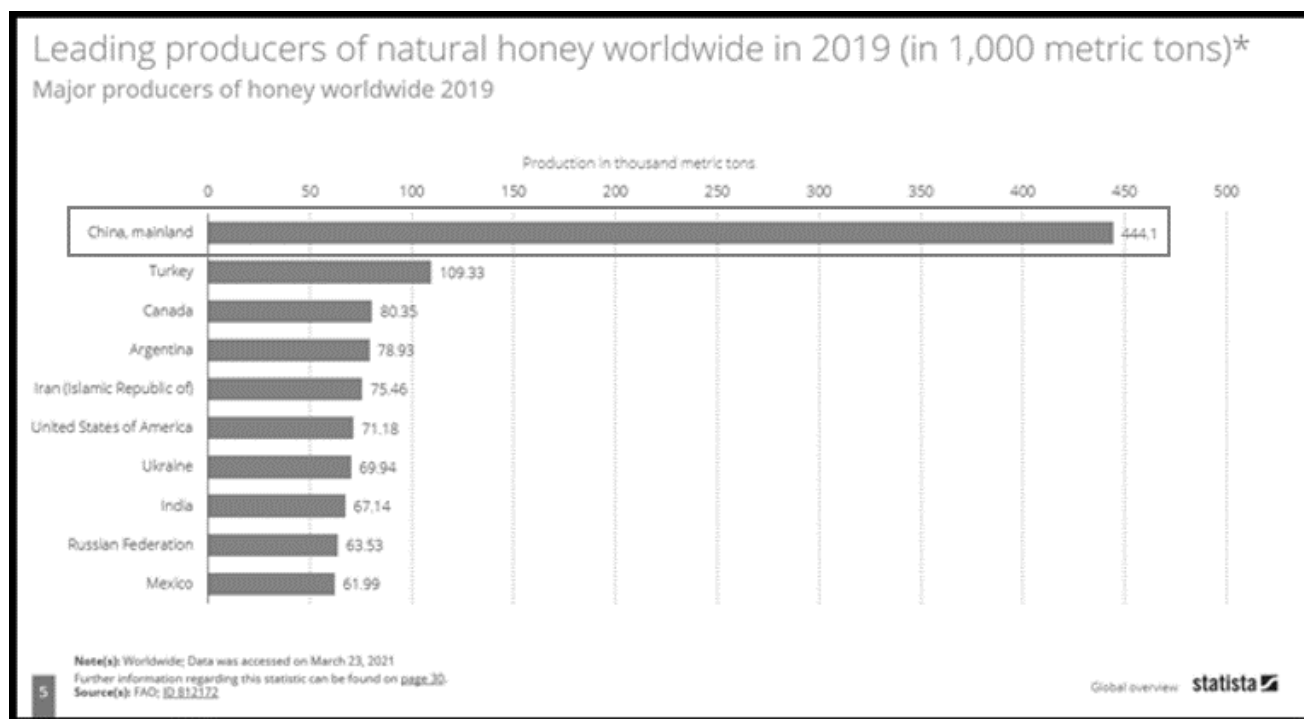


Exhibit 7: Leading importers of honey in the world as of 2020 in U.S Dollars

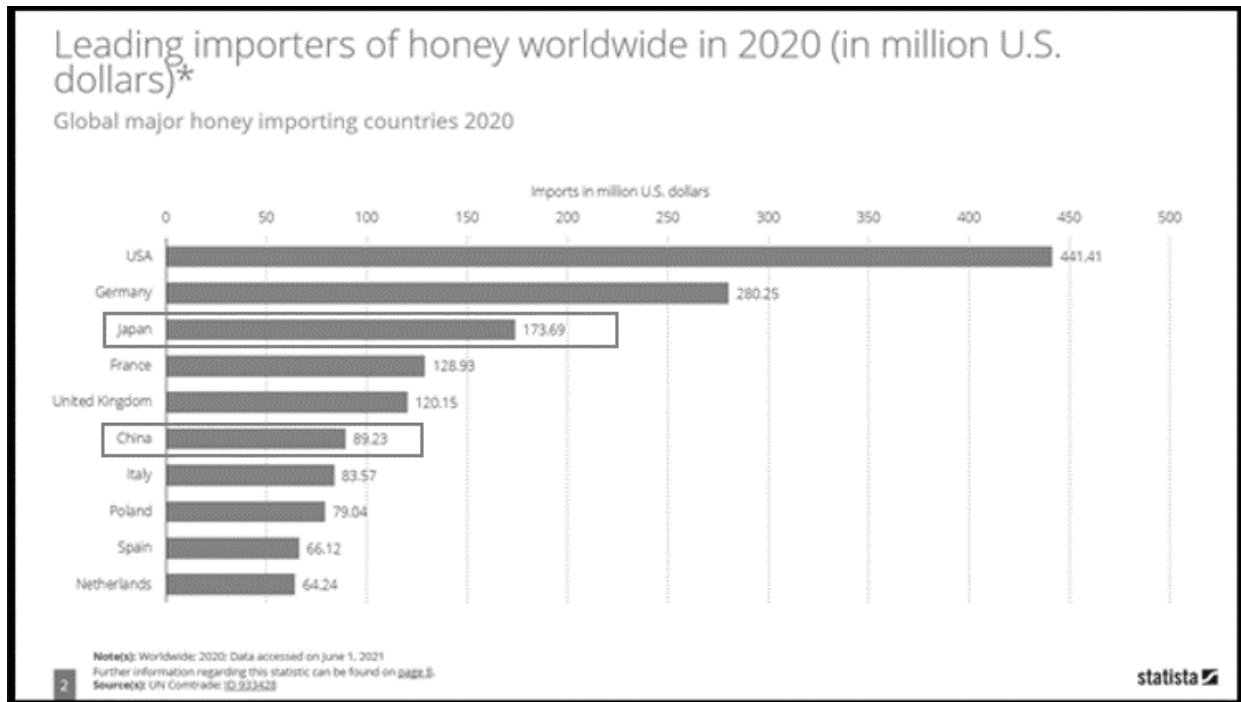


Exhibit 8: Retail sales of honey in Japan by year

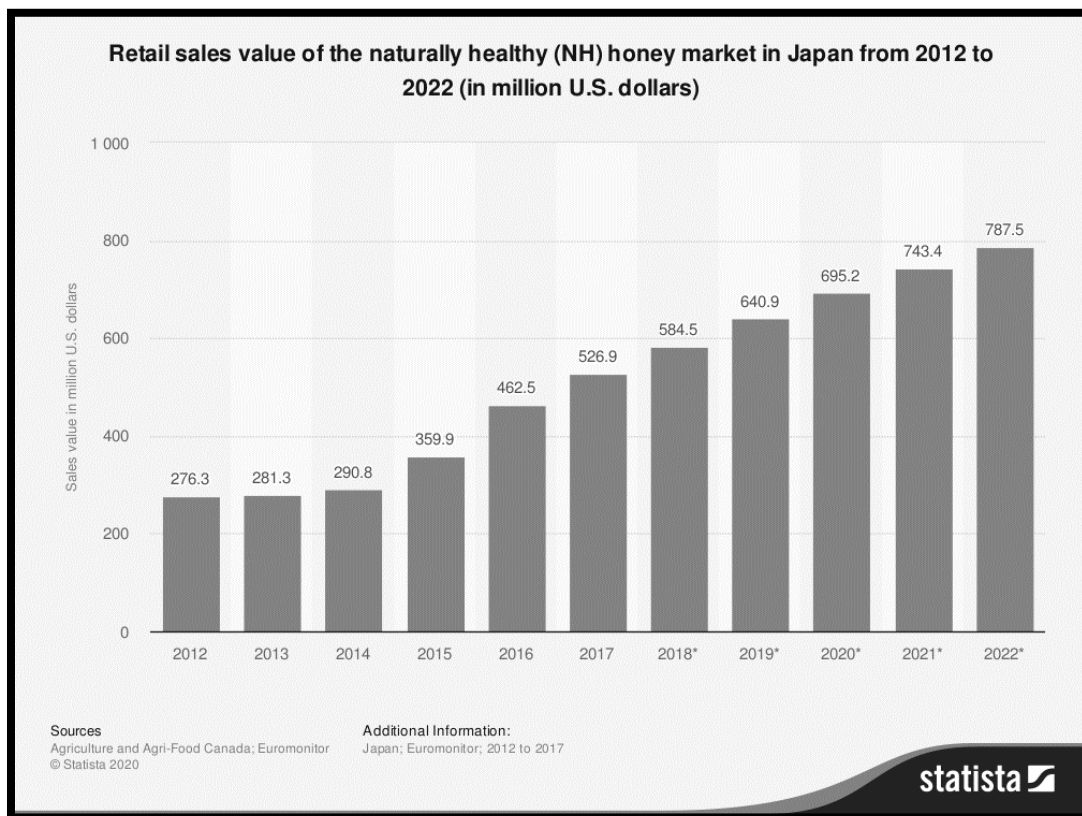


Exhibit 9: Most developed cities in Japan and China



Exhibit 10: Chinese Consumer Trends

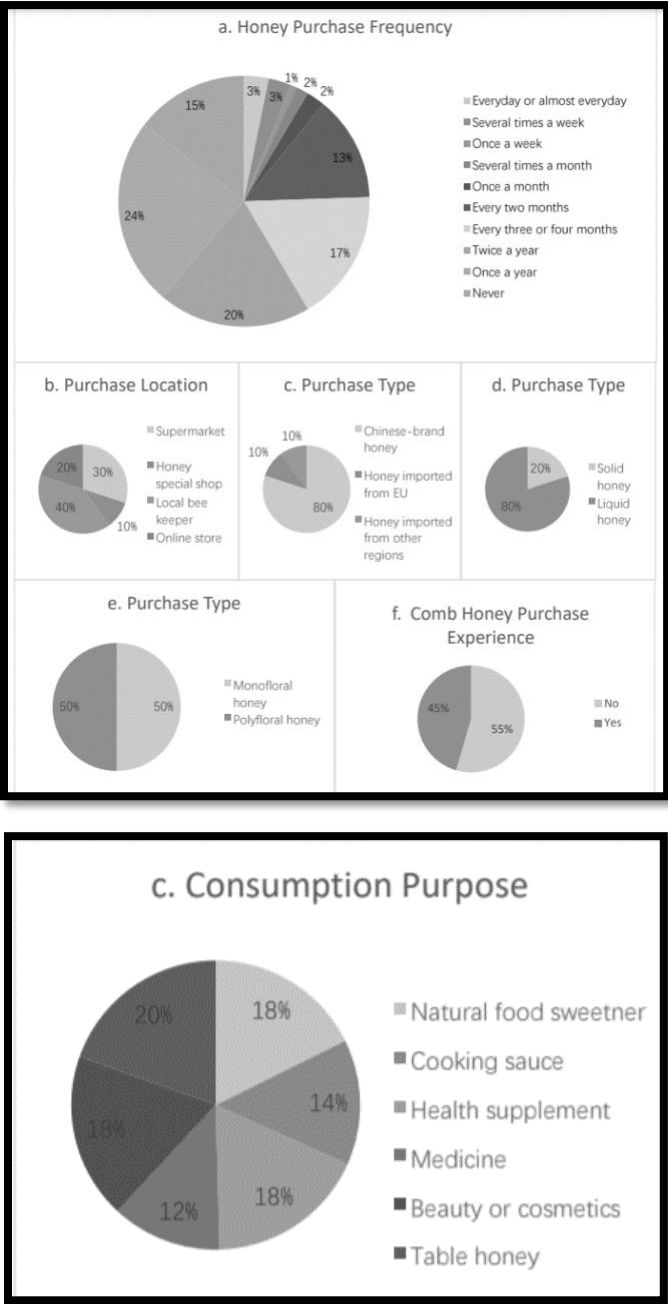


Exhibit 11: Chinese Consumer Honey Preferences

Table 3: Consumer images of Chinese-brand honey, honey from local bee keeper, honey imported from EU and their comparisons,

	Chinese-brand Honey (Mean \pm SD) ⁽ⁱ⁾	Honey from local bee keeper (Mean \pm SD) ⁽ⁱ⁾	Honey imported from EU (Mean \pm SD) ⁽ⁱ⁾	p-value
Heathy	3.92 \pm 1.02	4.07 \pm 1.04	3.57 \pm 1.14	<0.001**
Safe	3.95 \pm 1.07	4.05 \pm 1.01	3.59 \pm 1.11	<0.001**
Tasty	3.94 \pm 1.02	4.08 \pm 1.00	3.58 \pm 1.13	<0.001**
Authentic	3.87 \pm 1.05	4.09 \pm 1.01	3.55 \pm 1.14	<0.001**
Sustainable	3.89 \pm 1.05	4.01 \pm 1.06	3.49 \pm 1.13	<0.001**
Environment friendly	3.87 \pm 1.05	4.02 \pm 1.05	3.56 \pm 1.12	<0.001**
Affordable	4.13 \pm 1.04	4.15 \pm 1.01	3.32 \pm 1.16	<0.001**
High value for money	3.93 \pm 1.07	4.03 \pm 1.03	3.24 \pm 1.14	<0.001**
Trustworthy	3.87 \pm 1.05	4.06 \pm 0.98	3.55 \pm 1.12	<0.001**
Free of hazards	3.78 \pm 1.07	4.05 \pm 1.01	3.59 \pm 1.09	<0.001**

⁽ⁱ⁾denotes that values were measure in a 5-Likert scale.

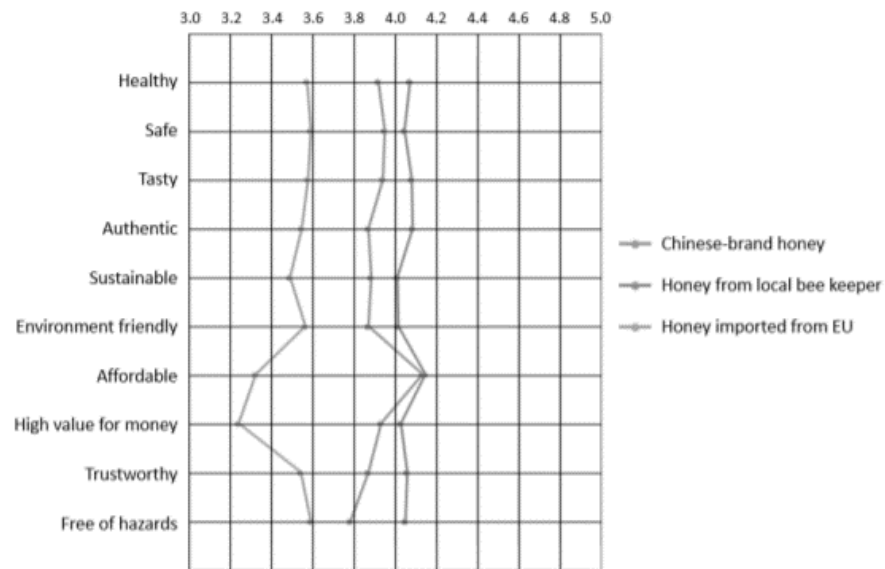


Exhibit 12: Honey Packaging China

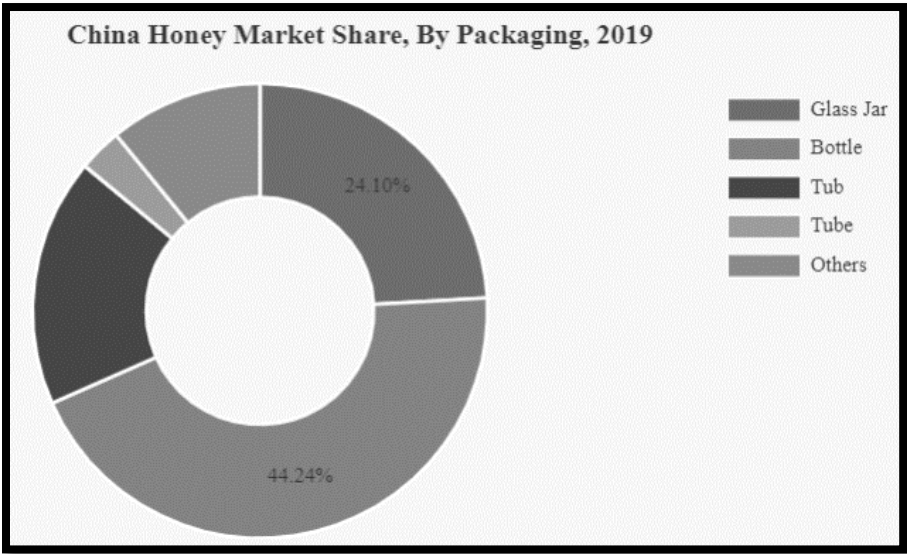


Exhibit 13: Yishouyuan Bee Pollen with Lotus (Chinese Competitor)



Exhibit 14: Baihua Royal Bee Jelly (Chinese Competitor)



Exhibit 15: Wang's Bee Industry Group (Chinese Competitor)



Exhibit 16: Honey boutique shop in a department store in Japan (Japanese Competitor)



Exhibit 17: Interior of a Japanese honey shop (Japanese Competitor)



Exhibit 18: Honey jars display in a honey boutique shop (Japanese Competitor)



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