

Fears of Japanese aggression in wool trade

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A Murdoch University researcher has uncovered a little known nugget of Australian history about a Japanese push to challenge the nation's wool dominance in the early 20th century.

Dr James Boyd of Murdoch University's Asia Research Centre said he became curious about Japanese plans to crossbreed a Merino sheep with a hearty Mongolian breed during the 1930s after being asked about the story at a conference.

"Out of pure curiosity, I typed the words Mongolia, Japan, Australia and sheep into the newspaper archives for the 1930s. To my surprise, hundreds of newspaper articles came up," Dr Boyd said.

"It turns out that fear of a Japanese challenge to the [wool](#) trade was a very real concern. This may be because Australia was coming out of the Great Depression, which hit the nation very hard, and agriculture played such a big role in the economy."

Dr Boyd said investigations into Japanese archives revealed that the scheme was real and part of the country's 'humanitarian imperialism' in Mongolia.

"Japan set up a fairly substantial program to improve animal science and husbandry in Mongolia. The program got off to a bit of a rocky start, however, with claims that some of the sheep from the first shipments of Merinos were eaten by the locals, but it carried on well into the 1940s," he said.

Dr Boyd said fear of the project ebbed and flowed throughout the decade.

In the first years of the 1930s, the Australian Government went so far as to impose a trade embargo on the export of Merino rams, which led the Japanese to source the animals from South Africa and the United States.

Tensions lessened in the mid-1930s due to two on-the-ground investigations.

"In 1934, Sydney Morning Herald journalist Frederic Morley Cutlack took part in the Latham Mission to Asia and looked more closely into the program, reporting that it was unlikely to succeed," Dr Boyd said.

"A year later, Ian Clunies Ross, who would become one of the CSIRO's early directors, was sent by the New South Wales Graziers' Association to do an 'expert survey' and came up with similar conclusions.

"Still, the story continued to be a source of public anxiety and media debate up until the outbreak of the Pacific War."

Provided by Murdoch University

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