

Polishing off rhinos - why chinese revere the horn

As wildlife investigators unearth a flourishing new trade between Vietnamese carvers and Chinese tourists for rhino horn artefacts, the probable reason why rhino poaching continues to increase, Felix Patton tries to find an answer to the question “why are the Chinese so obsessed with owning something made of rhino horn?”



Felix Patton is a rhino ecologist, who writes about the species from Africa and Europe. He has an MSc in Conservation Biology and a PhD based on research on individual rhino identification and social behaviour. He is a frequent contributor to SWARA.

China was home to the gigantic one-horned rhinoceros *Elasmotherium* which survived in prehistoric times becoming extinct only about 10,000 years ago.

During the Bronze Age (2500-800 BC), when the climate of northern China was warmer than it is at present, various species of Asian rhinos were known, including the two-horned Sumatran (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*) and the one-horned Javan (*Rhinoceros sondaicus*). The gradual cooling of the climate throughout this period probably affected the habitat and caused a southward migration towards Vietnam and Laos.

A claim that the State of Wu equipped 103,000 of its troops with rhinoceros hide and fish-scale armour suggests that there were still a great many rhinos extant in Southern China during the Warring States period (475-221 BC). However, the demand for armour during the horrific conflicts of the period decimated the indigenous rhinoceros population.



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TOP RIGHT: The Elasmotherium

BOTTOM: Pre-historic Chinese one-horned woolly rhino

BELOW RIGHT: Illustration rhinoceros hide armour



Through the Qin Dynasty (221-207 BC) and then the Han Dynasty (206 BC-220 AD), rhinos became scarce in the North. By the end of the Han they were all gone from the area of Guanzhou, the region containing the imperial palace, and rhino horns were imported by sea from Sumatra.

During the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD), while vast numbers of rhinos were recorded along the Yangtze River, the general scarcity of rhino made the horns extremely valuable. The popularity of the rhino horn after the Tang Dynasty never waned even though they mostly had to be

imported from Sumatra, Java, India and Africa.

By the 19th century, China's rhinos had been hunted to virtual extinction. The last record of a rhino being killed appears to have been in 1957 in southern Yunnan.

MYTHS AND LEGENDS

According to an ancient Chinese legend, during the Neolithic period, China was ruled by the great Emperor Shun (circa 2255-2205 BC). With the assistance of his Minister of Justice, Gao Yao, he formulated the first law code. Gao Yao was a very wise counsellor but sometimes, when even his acumen was baffled, he would appeal to his infallible one-horned goat *zhi* (the Chinese unicorn) to butt the guilty person with its horn.

The ancient Chinese also held a superstitious belief that a rhino horn had accessibility to the heaven as, unlike horns of water buffalo and cattle, it pointed upwards. Heaven was sovereign and rhinoceros horn was believed to have a sovereign power to access the heaven. This led to Chinese people believing the horn had a miraculous effect in the treatment of disease and driving out of evil spirits. According to the earliest written record rhino horn as an ingredient in medicine began in China, in 2600 BC.

Ancient Chinese found that rhinos ate many herbs, some of them poisonous, but which had no ill effects on the animal. This led them to believe that rhino horn must have had an effect of detoxification. Rhino horn was used as an antidote to a common poison that was produced by pouring rice wine over the feathers of the *zhen* or "poison feather bird"

The Chinese came to believe that when drinking from a wine cup fashioned from rhino horn, its curative elements would be dissolved into the



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TOP: Chinese rhinoceros-unicorn in clay

BELOW Chinese rhinoceros-unicorn in wood

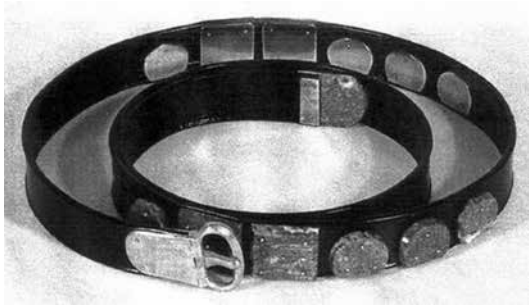
wine, thereby easing their pain and lengthening their lives. This belief may have arisen as a result of the growing interest in finding "The Elixir of Life" which became the focus of "The Search for Immortality" during the third century B.C. Thus two of the most ancient uses of rhino horn, as a medicine and as a wine cup, became linked together in people's minds.

The use of rhino horn cups for wine and the use of dice made of rhino horn links rhinoceros horn with games of chance in ancient China. Fate and good luck, which were also closely associated with the mythic unicorn *zhi* because of its uncanny ability to determine one's guilt or innocence in a court of law, also played an important role in such games.

During the late Warring States and the early Han Dynasty, an extraordinary transmutation occurred whereby images of the mythic goat-unicorn *zhi* began to merge with images of the only other one-horned animal known to the ancient Chinese, the rhinoceros. This melding of images was only made possible by the fact that by that time rhinos were rarely seen in central China. And just as familiarity may breed contempt, extinction often gives birth to myth. By the Western Han Dynasty at the latest, the rhino had acquired the status of a mythic beast and rhino horns came to be considered magical. Images of mythic goat-unicorn *zhi* were transformed into mythic rhinoceros-unicorns based on the power of their respective horns - the horn of the unicorn to guard against injustice and evildoers, the horn of the rhinoceros to ward off disease and poison.



CONSERVATION



Between the end of the Han Dynasty in 220 AD and the beginning of the Sui Dynasty in 581 AD, various supernatural qualities came to be attributed to rhinoceros horns. During the winter months the 'cold dispelling' rhinoceros horn was said to spread warmth and impart a genial feeling to man while the 'heat-dispelling' rhinoceros horn cooled off the hot temperature during the summer months. The 'dust-dispelling' rhinoceros horn had the effect that dust kept away from the body. The 'wrath-removing' rhinoceros horn caused men to abandon their anger.

The philosopher and alchemist Ko Hung (283-343 AD) was the first to mention the use of rhino horn to detect the presence of poison, rather than simply as an antidote, suggesting that 'when on a journey in foreign countries, or in places where contagion from gu (poison) threatens, if a man takes his meals in other people's houses, he first ought to stir his food with a rhinoceros horn hairpin. The horn is a safe guide to the presence of poison; when poisonous medicines are stirred with a horn, a white foam will bubble up and no other test is necessary; when non-poisonous substances are stirred into it no foam will rise'

USES

During the Shang Dynasty 16th - 11th centuries BC and Zhou Dynasty 11th century - 256 BC, rhinos were captured and killed mainly for their tough, thick skin. The hide was considered to be ideal for the helmets, body armour and shields commonly worn by soldiers. After drying, the hide became extremely hard and, when folded seven times provided excellent protection against bronze weapons. Rhino hides and horns were also melted down for glue to make compound bows.

DURING THE HAN DYNASTY RHINO HORNS WERE IMPORTED FROM SUMATRA TO FILL THE GROWING NEED FOR MEDICINE TO TREAT LIFE-THREATENING TROPICAL FEVERS.



TOP LEFT: Belt with rhinoceros hide plaques

TOP RIGHT: Rhinoceros horn Buddha figure

The introduction of a more powerful type of crossbow meant that leather armour began to be replaced with armour made of iron and steel.

During the Han Dynasty rhino horns were imported from Sumatra to fill the growing need for medicine to treat life-threatening tropical fevers. Rhino horn cups (for longevity) were buried with their owners along with many imitation rhino horns made of wood and clay for those who could not afford the real thing.

By the Six Dynasties period (220-589 AD), the Chinese began to wear belts with buckles and plaques made of rhino horn in imitation of nomadic fashion. By Tang times (618-907 AD), rhino horns had become extremely scarce so only those with great wealth could afford them and only those with high status were permitted to wear personal adornments made of rhino horn.

Officials at the Tang court wore moleskin belts adorned with rhino horn buckles and plaques made of slices of their horn. The Emperor and Crown Prince wore rhino hairpins to hold the crowns in place. Rhino horn cups and other

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objects were presented to students and scholars upon the completion of their examinations.

Records suggest that rhino horn was used as currency inside the Imperial Palace in the Song period (960-1279 AD).

The carving of rhino horn came into its own in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) Dynasties. Due to the extreme scarcity of the horns, carvers rarely worked solely with the material, but did so only when it became available usually as a special commission for high ranking government officials or wealthy merchants.

One of the most popular decorative themes for rhinoceros horn cups is that of the lotus plant, one of the eight treasures of Buddhism. Buddhism was introduced into China in 67 AD of the Eastern Han Dynasty.

Karma beads were made in a variety of materials, most commonly wood from the Bodhi tree; those carved in rhino horn were rare. Each individual bead would have been made from the carver's stock as horn itself was expensive and none could be wasted.

P'ei Wen Yun Fu, an 18th century Chinese literary dictionary, gives a list of objects made from rhino horn – toilet boxes, hairpins, combs, writing brush handles, beads (for rosaries), bracelets, top of a cap, vase, sceptre, scroll ends, paper weights, weights for curtains, box covers, flagpoles and cart handles (shaft tips). Other rhino horn products known from the period include a tea bowl, swagger stick, walking cane, snuff bottle, opium pipe and ash tray and lighter.

During all these times up until the present, the use of rhino horn for Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) continued and even after it was made illegal in China in 1993. As rhino horn became scarcer so some people ground up rhino horn artefacts for medicinal purposes. While trade in new horn has been illegal since China joined CITES in 1981, antique horn/horn products could be bought and, despite the high prices at auction, many artefacts have been destroyed for TCM.

Today, Chinese tourists are visiting the horn carving workshops in Vietnam buying, illegally, a range of polished rhino horn products replicating those owned by the wealthy of former times from Karma beads to Buddha statues, bangles to libation cups. Nothing is wasted with the shavings sold for medicinal use. It is its historic significance, superstitious beliefs of the powers it possesses, its unique polished finish and its scarcity as an endangered animal that together leads to a Chinese obsession with owning something produced from rhino horn. ●



PHOTOS BY: KARL AMMANN



TOP PHOTOS:
Historic Chinese artefacts fashioned from rhino horn

MIDDLE: Cutting rhino horn

BOTTOM: New rhino horn products