

Early references to the rhinoceros on the Chinese island of Hainan

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The rhinoceros was once widespread in the southern part of China. It is generally understood that the animals disappeared due to human pressure about two centuries ago.¹ There is, however, one record of a rhinoceros shot in the province of Yunnan as late as 1957.² Despite the existence of the animal in China as well as in regions which border the southern border, it is quite unexpected to read in older sources about the existence of these animals on the island of Hainan, off the south-east coast of China. There are, however, a few nineteenth century references which seem to imply this possibility, and as these are easily overlooked, they may be placed on record here.

The German orientalist Julius Heinrich Klaproth (1783–1835) published a description of 'Hai-Nan' compiled from Chinese sources.³ Enumerating the fauna, he stated that the rhinoceros was once plentiful, but had greatly declined in numbers when the island became populated and cultivated: 'le nombre des rhinocéros, autrefois très-considérable, a singulièrement diminué depuis que l'île a été plus peuplée et plus cultivée'.⁴

A similar assertion is found in the article about Hainan in the geographical dictionary by Vivien de Saint-Martin,⁵ copied by Tournafond⁶ (1898). Again it is stated that both tigers and rhinoceroses live in the mountains of the island, although there are fewer now than before: 'les montagnes servent de retraite à des tigres et à des rhinocéros, dont le nombre diminue'. Vivien of course could have merely repeated the statement by Klaproth⁷ which he cites. Likewise Madrolle⁸ stated that tigers and rhinoceros had almost disappeared from Hainan: 'les tigres et les rhinocéros ont à peu près disparu de Hai-nan', while Mouly⁹ believed that these two species could no longer be found in the Hainanese jungles.

It cannot, of course, be totally ruled out that there were once rhinoceroses on the island of Hainan. It is only 500 km from there to the northern part of Vietnam, where *Rhinoceros sondaicus* has been recorded until quite recently.¹⁰ It is probable, however, that the three late-nineteenth century sources in fact refer back to the statement by Klaproth.¹¹ Unless it can be discovered where he had read about the occurrence of the rhinoceros in the mountains of Hainan, we may never know if his remark was based on an actual observation, even if it may not have been his own. However unlikely

it may at first sight appear, maybe we should acknowledge the possibility that there was a small population of rhinoceroses on Hainan within the last couple of centuries.

Notes

1. L.C. Rookmaaker, 'Review of recent Chinese publications on the distribution and extinction of the rhinoceros in China', *Pachyderm*, 40, 2006.
2. Xu Zai-Fu (2000). 'The effects of paying tribute to the imperial court in the history on rhinoceros' extinction and elephant's endangerment in southern Yunnan', *Chinese Biodiversity*, 8 (1), 2000, 112–119. [In Chinese, with English summary]
3. J.H. Klapproth, 'Description de l'île de Hai-Nan, extraite des auteurs chinois', *Nouvelles Annales des Voyages*, 36, 1827, 145–186.
4. *ibid.*
5. L. Vivien de Saint-Martin, *Nouveau dictionnaire de géographie universelle*, vol. 2 (D-J). Paris: Hachette, 1884.
6. P. Tournafond, 'Les îles d'Hai-Nan, de Formose et de Chusan', *L'Exploration, Revue des conquêtes de la civilisation*, 17 (363), 1898, 137–142.
7. See note 3.
8. C. Madrolle, 'Etude sur l'île d'Hai-Nan', *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie*, (series 7) 19, 1898, 187–228, map 1.
9. R.P. Mouly, *Hai-Nan, l'île aux cent visages*. Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1900.
10. L.C. Rookmaaker, 'The distribution of the rhinoceros in Eastern India, Bangladesh, China and the Indo-Chinese region', *Zoologische Anzeiger*, 205 (3/4), 1980, 253–268, figs. 1–2.
11. See note 3.