

CHINESE RHINOCEROS HORN CARVINGS AND THEIR VALUE AS DATING TOOLS

THERE are many students and connoisseurs of Chinese decorative arts who would not be able to identify a Chinese rhinoceros horn cup¹ if one was placed before them. This is simply because these cups are comparatively rare and, as a result, there are several general reference books on the subject which do not contain a single example of them. To make matters worse, many museums that contain collections of Chinese art do not possess any examples, and many of those that do keep their cups permanently in storage. But it is not only their rarity that has led to the virtual exclusion of rhinoceros horn carvings from the accepted field of Chinese decorative art; it must also be admitted that a great many cups are both poorly carved and uninteresting in appearance. Just as in the case of Chinese porcelain, where the mediocre examples often seem to outnumber the fine pieces, so, too, do we mostly see examples of badly damaged and second rate rhinoceros horn cups when they sporadically come up for sale in the great auction houses. In New York recently I had the opportunity of showing slides of some superb cups from the Chester Beatty Collection, and heard audible gasps when they appeared on the screen. After the lecture I was approached by two members of a famous auction house who, after apologizing for making the gasps, told me that "they didn't know cups like that existed". Because so few people have had an opportunity to examine large numbers of these cups and see the finest examples of their kind, their value in terms of decorative art has been completely overlooked. The best quality cups are incomparable examples of carving, well able to take their place among the finest examples of works in jade, ivory, lacquer and bamboo.

But the purpose of this article is not to plead the case of Chinese rhinoceros horn cups on artistic grounds. The aim is to point out that until now these carvings have been totally ignored as important tools in the attempt to arrive at an acceptable chronology for dating every type of Chinese decorative art. In order to establish an acceptable chronology it is patently obvious that the starting point has to be made from a few securely dated examples, and the reason for the importance of rhinoceros horn cups in this

attempt is that some of the cups and figures carry seals or inscriptions which date them not only to a reign period but, in some cases, to a specific year within that reign period. This article, however, is not the place for an analysis of these dated cups, and no comparisons of technique and decoration will be made.² Instead, it is hoped to set out the scope of the evidence from Chinese rhinoceros horn carvings that has so far emerged.

Arguments are liable to sound loud and long over the authenticity of any inscription, whether on a painting, a bronze, a pot, or a carving—the propensity of Chinese connoisseurs and forgers for adding spurious information to these objects is only too well attested. Be that as it may, let us consider here the sort of information that exists on Chinese rhinoceros horn cups and figures.

About ten per cent of all known rhinoceros horn carvings carry an inscription. Some are inscribed with poems, and some with an explanation of the subject of the decoration that is carved on the exterior of the cup, but it is only those pieces bearing inscriptions which refer to the date or period when they were carved that concern us here. This group of dated cups can be divided into three categories, and then numbered one to three in accordance with the strength of the evidence inherent in the inscription. The three categories are as follows:

- (1) those bearing a "definite" date;
- (2) those bearing a "provisional" date;
- (3) those bearing a "cyclical" date.

All the inscriptions will be treated at face value.³ In other words, the question of authenticity will not be considered, since it is essential that these inscriptions be compared with other inscribed articles of decorative art such as lacquer, ivory and bamboo—a task which is outside the scope of this article.

(1) Cups bearing a "definite" date:

Any cup that carries sufficient written information to enable it to be dated to within a specific reign period is considered to have a "definite" date. A reign period (*nianhao*) is the title by which a certain span of years during a single reign is known. At the beginning of his reign the Emperor selected an auspicious name such as Qianlong, which means "celestial prosperity".

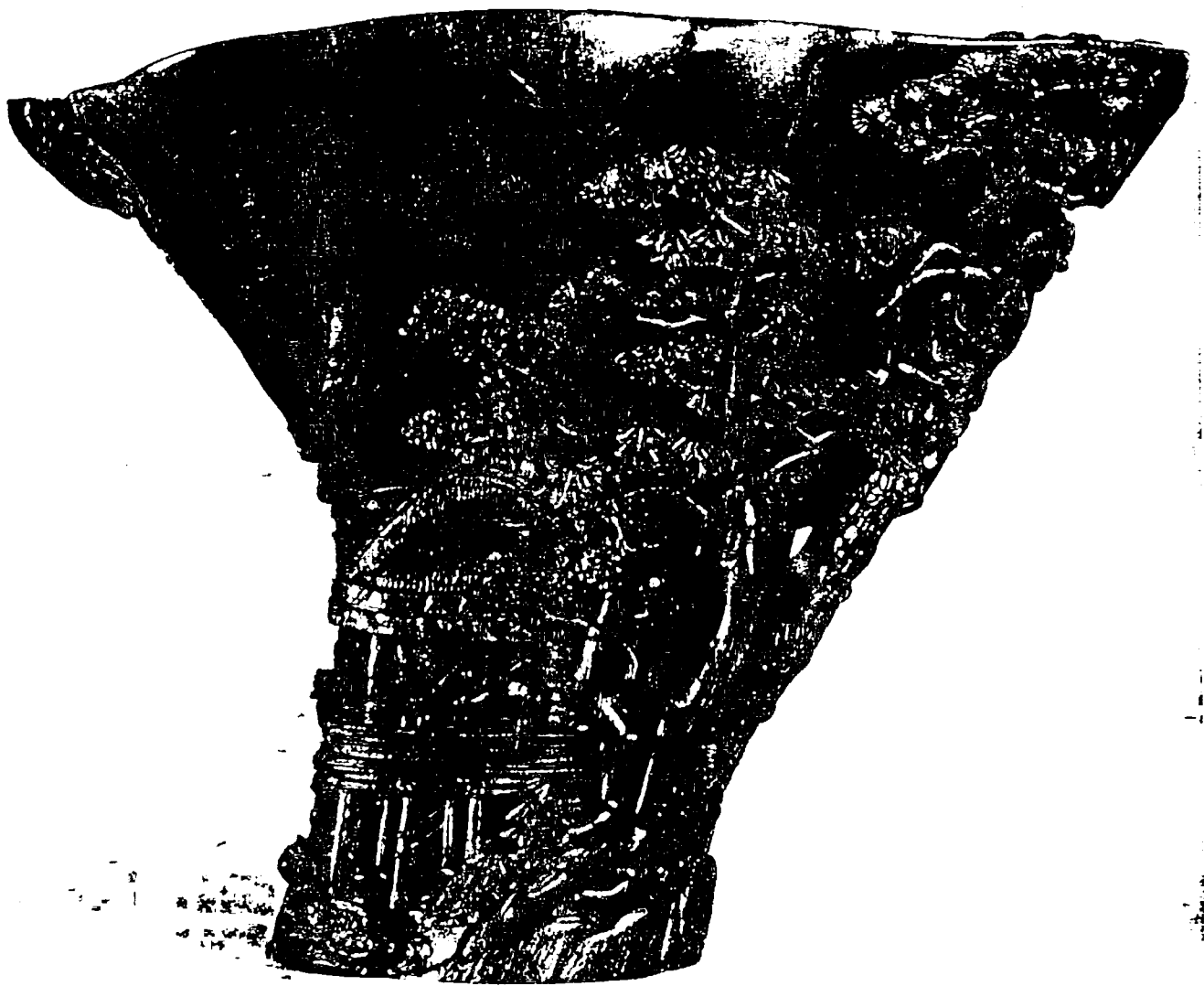


Fig. 1. Carved rhinoceros horn cup with an inscription by the (late Ming?) carver. Wen Shu. Chinese: 16th/17th century. Chester Beatty Collection, Dublin.

The reign period name is not the Emperor's dynastic title which, in the case of the Qianlong period, was Gaozong. During the Ming and Qing dynasties the Emperors used only one *nianhao* for the whole period of their reigns, but in earlier dynasties one Emperor may have used several *nianhao*. The Emperor Huizong, for example, used the *nianhao* Xuanhe which means "Proclaim Peace" for a period of only seven years out of a reign which lasted twenty-five years.

Normally the reign period characters are written on the base of rhinoceros horn cups using the normal handwritten script called *zhengshu*. In addition, there are many cups on which the reign period characters are carved on the base, either in relief or intaglio, using the ancient seal script called *zhuanshu*. I have so far recorded six cups which bear the seal of the Song

dynasty Emperor Huizong who reigned between A.D. 1101–1126 (Fig. 2). The seals in question read either Xuanhe or Xuanhe *nianzhi*. Xuanhe is the reign period name he used between 1119–1126, and *nianzhi* means "made in the year of". Only one of the six seals in question can be immediately rejected as a later forgery,⁴ but the question of the validity of this group of seals and their importance in the dating of other items of Song dynasty art will be dealt with more fully in a forthcoming article.

The only seal of the reign period Xuande (1426–1435) to come to light so far is inscribed on the base of an exceptionally beautiful cup which was formerly in the Menasce Collection but now belongs to a private collector in Hong Kong. According to Soame Jenyns "there seems every reason to accept this piece as of the period and its mark until some good



Fig. 2. Base of a rhinoceros horn cup showing the carved seal of the Emperor Huizong (1101–1126). The two characters read Xuanhe, the title used by the emperor in the period 1119–1126. Chester Beatty Collection, Dublin.

reason appears to disprove it".⁵ I have no reason to doubt that this is one of the earliest cups bearing a "definite" date that we can accept.

Of all the cups which bear a reign period inscription or seal, about a quarter can be dated to one specific year. Two methods were used that enable us to decide which year within a given reign period was the one in which the cup was carved. The simplest of these methods was to follow the two characters naming the reign period with a number to indicate the year of that reign, and the Wanli period (1573–1619) seems to be the earliest in which this practice took place. There are two cups which are dated to the eighth year of Wanli (1580) so far recorded. One was previously the property of Mme Wannieck of Paris⁶ but this cup is now the property of the Museum für Kunsthandwerken in Frankfurt. The second cup dated 1580 is in the collection of the Museum voor Land en Volkekunde in Rotterdam (Jenyns, *ibid.*, plate 22D and E). The two cups are totally different in type, the Rotterdam cup being completely plain whilst the Frankfurt cup is carved to resemble an ancient Chinese bronze goblet.

An even earlier inscription appears on the base of a beautifully carved figure in the Marcel Lorber collection. The figure depicts one of Buddha's disciples, Budai, who is said to have lived in the 6th century A.D. He is shown seated on the ground with his huge bare stomach bursting out of his robe and a small boy clambering on his shoulder to examine the contents of the sack slung on his back. On the base of this figure is written: Buddha's birthday in the fifth year of Wanli. This approximates to 25th February 1577 in the western calendar.⁷

A second method used by the Chinese for identifying a particular year is to use the reign date in combination with two characters from the ancient sexagenary cycle. The workings of the sixty-year cycle are fully explained under the heading "Cups bearing 'cyclical' dates" below.

(2) Cups bearing a "Provisional" date

There are, in the Chester Beatty Collection and elsewhere, cups which are signed by a carver who is listed in the reference books but whose dates are not given. A typical entry would be as follows:

Jiang Renxi^a

Qing dynasty carver born in Shanxi province

Until such time as additional information comes to light concerning this carver, the cup in question can be dated no more precisely than as belonging to the Qing dynasty (1644–1911).

I have, therefore, designated cups which cannot be more accurately placed than belonging to one of the five relevant dynastic periods, i.e. Tang (618–907) Song (960–1280), Yuan (1280–1368), Ming (1368–1644) or Qing (1644–1911), as having "provisional" dates.

The description "provisional" has been selected for the reason that it is occasionally possible to move a cup out of this category and into category one, which includes cups bearing a "definite" date. An example of this change occurred in the case of the carver Zhi

Chun.^b Zhi Chun, which means Lucky Spring, is either the fancy name adopted by a carver or else the name of a studio. Two examples of this seal are known to me, one on a cup in the Chester Beatty Collection (see Fig. 3) and the other on a cup in the Marcel Lorber Collection. The Chester Beatty cup, which is exceptionally large in diameter, has been described by Soame Jenyns as follows:

"There is also in this collection what appears to be a rhinoceros horn brush pot covered with figures of immortals under pines in high relief, and with a long inscription on the base to say that it was carved by imperial order, but giving no date or name of carver. This piece might belong to as early as the K'ang Hsi period".⁸

These two cups might have stayed in the "provisional" category, being dated merely to the Qing dynasty, had I not had the opportunity to examine the rhinoceros horn collection at the National Palace Museum in Taipei. A cup in that collection, which was also carved with a Daoist Paradise scene, carries the same seal of Zhi Chun on its base. On the Taipei cup, however, the seal appears at the end of a twenty-eight word inscription, incised and gilded, which includes the following vital information:

Qianlong *xinchou* . . . The emperor Qianlong
cyclical date *xinchou*

which corresponds to the year 1781.

More important by far is the fact that we can now be certain that the seal Zhi Chun was used on cups of imperial manufacture during the reign of Qianlong, and for this reason the Chester Beatty cup and the Lorber cup should be elevated to the securely dated category number one.

The more inscribed cups that come to light, the greater is the likelihood that the missing links can be filled in and a secure dating system formulated.

(3) Cups bearing "cyclical" dates

Many inscribed cups fall into the third category which includes those which bear two Chinese characters indicating the cyclical date of the year in which they were carved. Unfortunately this is not as simple as it seems. Whereas in the West we have a system of dating the years in chronological order before and after zero, the date of Christ's birth, the Chinese continue to use a system which goes back to the beginnings of the use of writing in the Shang dynasty (16th–11th century B.C.).

The Chinese use a dating system which lasts only for a single sixty-year period, referred to as the sexagenary cycle. They use a combination of two sets of characters, one called the 10 stems and the other called the 12 branches. Taken in combination, with the stem character always written first and the branch character last, it is possible to make sixty different pairs. Each of these pairs thus becomes the name of a year.

The great drawback to this system is that any given year name, for instance *jiazi* (the names of the first stem character and the first branch character) could refer to numerous dates in the western calendar, for

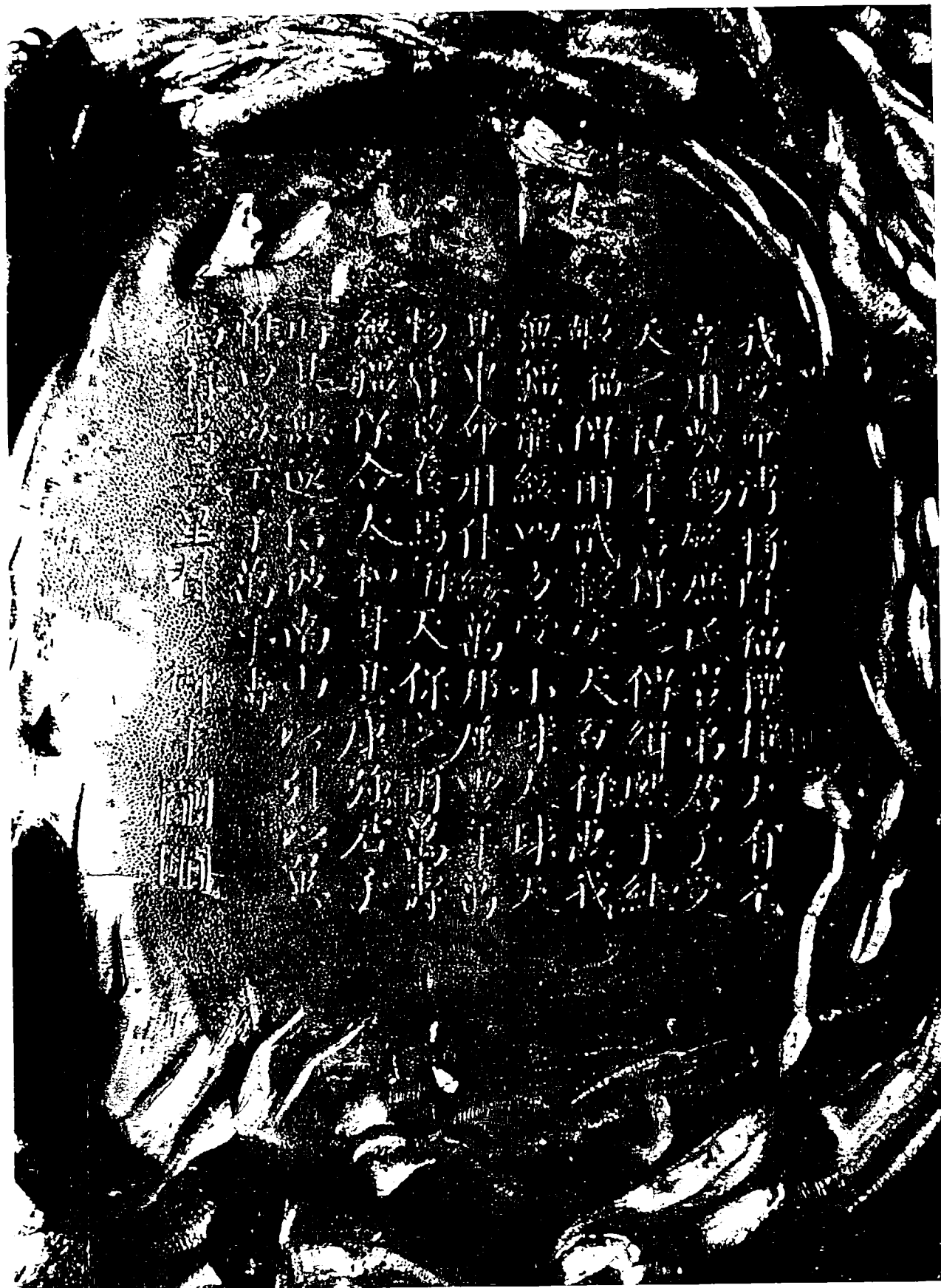


Fig. 3. Base of a rhinoceros horn brush pot showing the inscription and the seal "Zhi Chun". Qianlong period (1736-85). Chester Beatty Collection, Dublin.

instance 1864, 1804, 1744, 1684, 1624, 1564 and so on at sixty-year intervals. So, taken by themselves, the two-character year indicators are of limited use, and we must always rely on additional information to enable us to be certain which of the many sexagenary cycles is the one in which the cup was carved. This additional information can come in many forms yet still not provide information sufficient to move the cup from category 3 to either of the two preceding categories which contain more securely dated cups.

A case in point concerns a superbly carved cup (see Fig. 1) which tells us the maker's name, gives the subject matter of the decoration carved on the exterior, and states the cyclical date *wuxu*. *Wuxu* is the thirty-fifth combination in the sexagenary cycle, and could refer to any of the following dates: 1898, 1838, 1778, 1718, 1658, 1598, 1538, 1478 and so on.

The cup in question was carved by Wen Shu,⁶ and is one of nine recorded examples by this artist, all of which are of superb quality. The inscription reads:

"I made this cup in the summer of *wuxu* as a copy of a painting by Wufeng. (signed) Wen Shu"

The hidden clue which provides additional information regarding the cyclical date in this inscription relates to the name Wufeng. Wufeng was a name used by a well-known Ming dynasty artist called Wen Boren who specialized in painting landscape scenes. The all-important additional information contained in this inscription is the fact that Wen Boren's dates of birth and death are known to us. He lived between 1502 and 1578. Assuming that Wen Boren did not start to produce paintings until 1525 or thereabouts, we can therefore confidently assert that the *wuxu* cyclical date of Wen Shu's cup cannot refer

to any date earlier than 1538, and the cup is perhaps more likely to have been carved in 1598 after Wen Boren's death.

Unfortunately the carver Wen Shu is not mentioned in any of the usual Chinese reference books, and, despite an intensive and continuing search, I have been unable to discover anything about him beyond the evidence of the cups themselves. Nevertheless, close study of a group of nine cups bearing the signature of Wen Shu has led me to believe that they were carved at the end of the Ming or the beginning of the Qing dynasties, that is, during the mid 17th century. This opinion was based on two criteria, those of decorative style and of carving technique. The carving of this cup is exceptionally brilliant, and undoubtedly done by Wen Shu at the height of his powers, which is the justification in deciding that this artist almost certainly lived in the closing years of the Ming dynasty.

Although the three categories of dated cups described in this article are of different values from the point of view of their use as dating tools, I hope that I have been able to demonstrate how important this information can be. Despite a long search amongst museums, dealers and private collectors round the world, only two thousand or so cups have so far come to light, of which a small proportion are dated. Nevertheless, I have no doubt that in the next few years many more dated cups will come to my notice, and so shed additional light on this fledgling research. Already it is apparent that a secure knowledge of the styles and techniques of carving that were used on dated rhinoceros horn cups will be of immeasurable benefit to broadening our knowledge of all other forms of Chinese decorative art.

CHAPMAN CHINESE CHARACTERS

(a) Jiang Renxi	蔣仁錫
(b) Zhi Chun	吉春
(c) Wen Shu	文樞

NOTES

¹ The term "cup" applies only to those carvings which can act as containers of liquid.

² The forthcoming catalogue of the *Chester Beatty Collection of Chinese Rhinoceros Horn Cups* which are at the Chester Beatty Library and Gallery of Oriental Art in Dublin, will set out a classification to cover all known types, and also suggest a terminology. Each cup has been placed in chronological order as a first step in determining an acceptable system of dating.

³ Of all the inscriptions that I have examined, only a handful could be rejected out of hand as deliberate fakes.

⁴ The Xuanhe seal on the base of cup 1950.125.50 in the Field Museum of Natural History collection in Chicago is so obviously forged that it can be immediately rejected. The other five Xuanhe seals are very similar and are all well carved.

⁵ Jenyns, Soame, "The Chinese Rhinoceros and Chinese Rhinoceros Horn Carving" in *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, 1954-1955. Vol. 29. London, 1957, p. 51 and plate 21C and D.

⁶ The cup is illustrated in Plate 22C of Jenyns, *ibid.* but he does not show the inscription which actually reads *Wanli banan Wangheng canggu* which can be translated: ancient treasure authorized by the Wang family.

⁷ Another carved rhinoceros horn figure showing Budai or the Calico Sack Monk, with five children clambering about him, is in the Sackler Collection, New York. The Sackler carving bears the written inscription: *Daming Wanli mianzhi* ("made in the Wanli period of the Great Ming Dynasty" (1573-1619)).

⁸ Jenyns, Soame, *ibid.*, p. 57.