

Taiwan and the African rhino horn trade

by Esmond Bradley Martin

Taiwan has now taken over from North Yemen as the world's major importer of rhino horn. As much of this horn is exported from South Africa, there are fears that that country has now replaced Burundi as the key entry point to the international market for poached African rhino horn.

Could some of the horn from rhinos poached in East Africa be paying for the Taiwanese-made necklaces and bracelets proliferating in Nairobi's jewellery shops today? I do not know, but when I went to the Republic of China (Taiwan) in July 1988, I discovered that Taiwanese traders have taken over from North Yemenis as the world's major importers of rhino horn, and that they are abetting the illegal trade in many African and Asian countries where there are still rhinos in the wild.

Although the government of the Republic of China prohibited imports and exports of rhino products in August 1985, the law has not been enforced, and considerable amounts of horn from white and black rhinos have been imported from South Africa. It is a bit of a mystery about the white rhino horn. Even though South Africa has the largest white rhino populations, it does not have a poaching problem. Some horn could, of course, have been marketed from private ranches or individuals who decided to part with their door-stops (the traditional European use of rhino horn in South Africa); and, as far as neighbouring countries are concerned, there were still white rhinos in the early

1980s in Mozambique, and some could have come from them. Even so, there would not have been that much available. However, it has come to light that there have recently been at least two major thefts of white rhino horn from government stores in southern Africa. Possibly herein lies the answer.

Horn from black rhinos killed in Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Tanzania used to move into Burundi for re-export to the United Arab Emirates, North Yemen and a few eastern Asian destinations. When Ian Parker was in Bujumbura in 1986, he saw about 700 horns that were said to have originated from Mozambique. Now that Burundi has closed down trade in elephant ivory and rhino horn (as of November 1987), it appears that at least some of the horn from rhinos poached in the Zambezi Valley is making its way into South Africa and from there directly to Taiwan. There are regular flights between Taipei and Johannesburg on South African Airways, and traders in Taiwan quite openly told me that horn is imported on these flights. Many Taiwanese Customs officers are unaware that it is illicit, and if there were any 'problems', I was assured

that a bribe of the equivalent of about US\$ 70 would make sure a consignment of the horn could come in.

Both political and economic ties between South Africa and the Republic of China have strengthened in the past few years. The South African government is actively wooing investors from Taiwan, and there are more than 120 factories financed by Taiwanese and 2,000 Taiwanese residents in the country. South Africa is a convenient place for Taiwanese traders to buy African rhino horn.

When I carried out a survey of the medicine shops in the central business districts of Taipei and Kaohsiung (the second largest city), I was amazed at how much rhino horn I saw. Of the 60 pharmacies I visited in Taipei, 44 were selling it, and of the 20 in Kaohsiung, 18 were. Customers purchasing the horn for their own use, mainly as a fever-reducing drug, were primarily interested in that from Indian and Sumatran species. They believe that Asian horn is much more efficacious and have the funds necessary to pay what are probably the highest retail prices in the world for it, over US\$ 40,000 per kilo.

Money is no object in Taiwan, which is one of the richest countries in Asia due to its phenomenal economic growth during the past 20 years. Per capita income is 15 times greater now than it was in 1970, and the Taiwanese currency is one of the strongest anywhere. Taiwan has built up over US\$ 75 billion in foreign exchange reserves, the third largest in the world.

Several medicine shops in Taipei and Kaohsiung have in stock as many as a dozen horns from African rhinos. However, if someone wishes to buy more than a few grams of one as a dose or two of required medicine, the shopkeepers hesitate. Learning that they were not keen to sell a whole or even a substantial part of an African rhino horn at first baffled me; in the ten years I have been studying the international trade in rhino products, dealers have always wanted to realise their profits in these as quickly as possible. However, wholesale prices for African rhino horn in Taiwan have doubled in less than a year, and there is a strong feeling that they will

Average retail prices for rhinoceros horn in the Republic of China

Year & Place	Total Number of Pharmacies Visted	Number and Percentage Selling Horn	Type of Horn	Average Price per kg in US \$
1979 Taipei	9	9 100%	African	1,596
			Asian	17,090
1985 Taipei	34	26 76%	African	1,532
			Asian	23,929
1988 Taipei	60	44 73%	African	4,660
			Asian	40,558
1985 Kaohsiung	20	18 90%	African	2,077
			Asian	21,365
1988 Kaohsiung	15	13 87%	African	3,347
			Asian	42,880

Source: Survey taken by the author.



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African horn collected in Taiwan is exported to China to make rhino horn medicines.

continue to rise significantly. Both the owners of medicine shops and the traders have consequently begun stockpiling African rhino horn. Well aware of the sharp decline in the number of rhinos in Africa, they are vying with one another in frenzied activity to build up supplies for investment.

Since their customers generally prefer to use Asian rhino horn, shopkeepers immediately become suspicious of any interest shown in their holdings of African rhino horn. Naturally, they want to make the most money selling it themselves, and they fear that a would-be buyer might have a contact to whom to sell the horn for even more than what the medicine shop is presently pricing it. It is a vicious circle, and the matter has become worse because of a persistent demand for African rhino horn in mainland China, to which Taiwanese traders have been largely catering since 1986.

For a long time, medicine factories in Chinese cities including Beijing, Guangzhou and Tianjin have been making patent tablets containing rhino horn. Exports of these and other traditional kinds of medicinal preparations earned China US\$ 700,000,000 in 1987, up a hundred million from the previous year, and are among China's most important foreign exchange earners. Since the international trade in raw rhino horn has become more heavily restricted but little has been done to stop imports of it in manufactured form, many people in eastern Asia are making greater use of the Chinese-made rhino horn tablets now. They are readily available not just in places like Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok, but in small towns. Also, of course, these medicines are time-saving, requiring no preparation before being consumed. Yet today China is in very short supply of horn for producing them. The medicine factory managers have not bought the more expensive Asian rhino horn in order to keep their costs down as much as possible, but now they are acquiring antique rhino horn cups and carvings made in China during the Ching Dynasty, which they are breaking up to use in bits and pieces for the medicines.

Although no trade is officially allowed between Taiwan and China, there is nothing to stop the Taiwanese traders from making deals with Hong Kong businessmen who are willing to supply mainland China with raw African rhino horn illicitly. According to wholesalers in Kaohsiung, Hong Kong businessmen collected a thousand kilos from Taiwan, which were moved off the island and sold to the mainland between early 1987 and June 1988. The Taiwanese traders could also take advantage of the services offered by their own countrymen who crew fishing vessels plying the Formosa Strait, bartering Taiwanese-made calculators, watches and other items with mainland Chinese sailors for live rare birds, walnuts, dates and Chinese liquors. However, this does not seem to be the case, perhaps because too many middlemen would be involved before the horn reached the medicine factories. On the other hand, some Chinese patent medicines containing rhino horn are smuggled into Taiwan in this manner. Curiously, neither the mainland Chinese nor the Taiwanese authorities are trying to close down the illegal trade link made by these sailors.

Having become the major entrepot for rhino horn in Asia, and probably in the world, Taiwan is now posing the greatest threat to the survival of rhinos in Africa. In Taipei the wholesale price for African rhino horn is US\$ 2,486 a kilo, more than twice as much as the highest amount offered by importers in North Yemen, the United Arab Emirates or Macao. Dealers in southern Africa have responded to the Taiwanese demand by increasing their own financial incentives to poachers and middlemen. The largest black rhino population, that in Zimbabwe, which was secure until 1984, has been hard hit, and a minimum of 450 have been killed since then for the trade. What chances are there for the estimated remaining 400 rhinos in Kenya, 350 in Tanzania, the few dozen in Ethiopia and the mere 12 in Rwanda? ♪

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