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*The White Rhinoceros and the  
Chinese Tiger  
— Li Quan*

## CHAPTER 25

# The White Rhinoceros and the Chinese Tiger - L. Quan

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Wildlife consumption, poaching, vanity and greed are global phenomena. While we are now focusing on the plight of a charismatic species, the rhinoceros, we should not forget that many battles have been fought for endangered species. If we were to measure the success by survivors' numbers, only a few of these battles have been won.

### China's Own Fight for Wildlife

To begin, I would like to mention the story of a relatively successful fight in China against the poaching of Tibetan antelope by an international criminal ring to profit from the worldwide demand of Shahtoosh shawls. I say relatively successful because the poaching was halted, but the remaining numbers did not return to their previous level. It is a lesson for us that cure may come too late for other endangered species, and that effective preventive measures can never begin too early. Once the effective number of a threatened or endangered species drops below a critical level, it is an uphill battle to recovery.

In the 1990's the Shahtoosh shawl was all the rage around the world. The shahtoosh shawl is an incredibly fine textile, so fine that an entire shawl could be passed through a pinky ring. The Tibetan antelope (aka chiru) is the source of this fine wool, and it is the reason why they were ruthlessly exploited. It takes three to five antelopes to make one shahtoosh shawl, and each one can fetch up to US\$ 20 000.

The Chinese book "Weeping Kekexili" by Wenyong Hua (华文庸) recounts the story of heroic Chinese men and their battle against cross-border international crime gangs. In a region of Kekexili, once a silent and peaceful land filled with wildlife, these well-organized gangs caused the chiru population to plummet from one million to just 30 000 in ten years. The author recounts that Kekexili was crying, first for the chiru, then for those brave men who fought against the poachers and thirdly also for those poor poachers who were hired at pathetically paltry wages but who had to fight for their own lives and their own subsistence. Lastly, Kekexili was crying for the workers who left friends and family far behind to labour in the gold mines of Kekexili, only to discover that their dream for a pot of gold was just a dream. It was a dream that as they turned to poaching, became a nightmare for both the land and the wildlife.

Summarizing the tragedy of the chiru, the author referred to a quote by a British writer that appears in “Das Kapital” by Karl Marx: “With adequate profit, capital is very bold. A certain 10% will ensure its employment anywhere; 20% will produce eagerness; 50%, positive audacity; 100% will make it ready to trample on all human laws; 300% and there is not a crime at which it will scruple, nor a risk it will not run, even to the chance of its owner being hanged. If turbulence and strife will bring a profit, it will freely encourage both. Smuggling and the slave-trade have amply proved all that is here stated.” Do we need to say more?

Considering the drama and the tragic loss of lives on both sides of the anti-poaching battle, it would be hard to find Chinese who are unaware of the tragedy that befell this antelope, or the stories behind China’s efforts to stop poachers. In contrast, only a small percentage of Chinese are aware of China’s successful conservation program to save the Crested Ibis, the national bird of Japan. China’s innovative strategy was generously co-funded by Japanese donors and speaks to profound strength when nations come together.

The Crested Ibis used to be found widely in the northern central part of China. It was also believed to be extinct until a few individuals were found in early 1980’s. A concerted effort was undertaken to save the Crested Ibis. There were many moving stories surrounding the rescue of this beautiful bird. For example, where it occurred, fertilizer usage was banned as the fertilizer was found to have weakened the shell of the bird’s eggs, causing easy destruction of the eggs. Local farmers were encouraged to stand guard under trees where Crested Ibises were found to nest, and they were generously compensated for the loss thus incurred on their land. Thanks to such positive cross-border joint international effort, the population of Crested Ibis has now bounced back to as many as two thousand.

### Africa Inspired My Passion for Wildlife

Growing up in what was then a relatively pristine and undeveloped suburb of Beijing; I enjoyed the presence of grass, trees, cicadas and other living things in my early childhood. However, despite my love of nature and animals, I didn’t know what “wildlife conservation” really meant until I went on a safari in Zambia in 1998 in search of close encounters with wild felids. It dawned on me there and then that wildlife conservation is not simply about saving wildlife, but also about the interests of people living with it. Over and again we see this problem around the world. Wildlife is rapidly disappearing because of human encroachment on their habitats, poaching by the poor and the greedy and by those who kill with poison, traps and other means set to dispel humans’ fear that the wildlife may endanger individual interests.

Later, in South Africa, I was to have first-hand experience of such cause-and-effect when my project saved caracals, servals, bat-eared foxes and more from neighbouring farmers. My earlier visit to Zambia’s South Luangwa National Park was the origin of the Chinese Tiger Conservation Model that I proposed to China’s State Forestry Administration in an effort to save the world’s most ancient yet most endangered South China Tiger (*Panthera tigris amoyensis*).

## South Africa as a Springboard to Save China's Tigers

After establishing the charity "Save China's Tigers" in UK and several others, we followed the conventional strategy followed by many wildlife organizations: surveying the wild population of the South China Tiger. But we didn't stop there. Instead of simply accepting that the South China Tiger was not worth saving and should be written off, we decided to take on the challenge of bringing as many of them as we could from the severely-challenged zoo-born South China Tiger population to South Africa. We worked to *rewild* them, to breed them, and to prepare them for their eventual re-introduction back to China's natural habitat, fully taking full advantage of the enormous amount of wildlife management expertise, availability of land, and readily available prey items.



*Li Quan with a Chinese tiger cub*

Our reasoning behind that was manifold. The Chinese Tiger has been a symbol of Chinese culture for thousands of years. It is a part of China's history that permeates many facets of Chinese life. By restoring the South Chinese Tiger, we could also rehabilitate a large area of land, thereby saving other wildlife in the area. This was our simple logic: if we were going to give up saving this most charismatic animal species, we will lose even more wildlife and nature. This, certainly, would be a tragedy not just for wildlife, but a tragedy for humanity. At that time the approach was certainly obtained by thinking outside the box. It was not just simply frowned upon but it was relentlessly criticized. However, nearly 10 years on, while the population of wild tigers had severely declined in most tiger range countries, the conventional conservation approach had failed, as was discussed in the CITES Conference of the Parties 15 conference in Qatar; "Save China's Tigers" augmented the population of South China Tigers that are capable of hunting for themselves from zero to 14, and it has produced 11 healthy offspring. We can now boast the support of many wild felid biologists around the world who believe that our model may well be the future for supplementing wild tigers in some places in Asia.

This demonstrates yet once more what can be achieved when two countries work together. When we carefully evaluate our past, that is what worked and what did not work, we can find answers. The rewilding model we implemented with the South China Tiger is now being emulated elsewhere, and I look forward to the day when the roars of the South China Tigers can be heard echoing in China's wild once more, as the Lord of Hundred Beasts rightly deserves.

## Which Way Will the Rhinoceros Go?

That will all depend on how we act now.

Over the ten years I've been working in South Africa, I've grown increasingly committed to wildlife conservation. I have become friends with many dedicated conservation practitioners and scientists. It saddens me to see the white rhinoceros, an animal the great Dr. Ian Player and his team managed to save from extinction, through self sacrifice and creative thinking, may now go the way of the black rhinoceros. Since CITES banned the legal trade of



rhinoceros horns the numbers of black rhinoceros have dwindled to a perilous 2000 heads from 65 000. If number is any indication, the ban, though put into practice through good will, has miserably failed to protect the black rhinoceros. Will the ban also fail the white rhinoceros? Experiencing the desperation, I wanted to help my conservationist friends, my adopted country South Africa, my beloved continent Africa, and my most cherished companions such as the sweet little meerkats outside the window of my study, the cautious porcupine and her young outside my bedroom and the rehabilitated caracal that lost her mother to poisoning by neighbouring farmers. I would hate to see the effort by the likes of Dr. Player, a great mentor and inspiration to me, go down the drain 50 years after he sold the first white rhinoceros outside South Africa in order to save them.

It is time to put our emotions and ideologies aside and think rationally what practical measures will save the rhinoceros. It is time to discard failed conservation methods and ponder what is good for the rhinoceros' long-term survival, instead of concerns for our own images. It is humanity's duty to conserve the rhinoceros for future generations and for, hopefully, a better world. We will all bear the blame if we allow the rhinoceros to go extinct in our lifetime, and this, I am afraid, is exactly what the culprits are hoping for.

Appealing to all of you to help the rhinoceros with effective measures is the least I can do. I hope you agree it's time to put aside our pride, admit our failures and evaluate alternative methods that can really save the rhinoceros or any other wildlife. A friend working in animal welfare once argued that governments should spend more money and resources on education, anti-poaching, and law enforcement. I agree entirely. In an ideal world these ideal solutions may even be achievable. Many of us would like to spend more money on educating the public, mete out severe penalties to anyone caught in wildlife crimes, and increase spending on anti-poaching.

Let's have a quick look at what China has done in these areas. Approximately 200 million dollars worth of free TV advertising space has been provided to an international NGO by the Chinese government to educate the public. Its celebrity-based ads are a permanent feature on Chinese TV. Although a growing number of people in China condemn the exploitation of endangered wildlife, the illegal wildlife trade continues unabated. This is due to sheer numbers; if there is only a tiny percentage of the enormous Chinese population continues to consume wildlife, the absolute number of users will still be significant.

China has perhaps the toughest laws against wildlife crime and may well be the only country with a death penalty for such crimes. China has been quite efficient in uncovering illegal wildlife trade. An example can be seen in a local provincial paper in Guangxi Province where it was reported in October 2010 that an ordinary citizen who bought two rhinoceros horns at the Sino-Vietnam border was arrested by police and shortly afterwards was sentenced to 12 years in jail plus RMB 30 000 Yuan in fines. Further, a large load of ivory and rhinoceros horns was confiscated in 2011, worth millions of dollars. Yet illegal trade has not ceased. Concerning anti-poaching, my South African colleagues have commented elsewhere in the book.

I wish hundreds of millions more dollars could be dedicated to such initiatives. But today, it appears to be a luxury for many countries when they also face pressing human and economic problems. Even if resources are available, it still cannot guarantee that a small number of criminals will not risk their lives to reap the huge profits provided by such highly-valued objects. In truth, the fewer rhinoceroses there are, the more incentives the criminals will have due to continued high demand and rising prices caused by decreasing supply. Despite deaths among poachers, it has not deterred more people, both rich and poor alike, from participating in illegal wildlife poaching and trafficking because they may be rewarded quickly and lavishly. Many consumers of wildlife products may not even know what the animals look like, be it rhinoceros or chiru. All they care about is to possess something valuable and desirable. To make solving the problem of consumption of wildlife more challenging, unlike drugs, these products pose far less or possibly no hazards to the health of humans.

Faced by proposals by our South African colleagues to legalize the trade of the rhinoceros horn as a possible solution, the same friend argued that she'd rather let the rhinoceros go extinct than seeing them in small game reserves, farmed for their horns. I understand her sentiment. But do we really have the right to condemn the rhinoceros to extinction because of our own idyllic view of what the world should be, and not what it is? For me that is not an option. I want to see this ancient species survive for future generations to appreciate, and maybe the day will come that the health of the planet will be better for us all.

We can easily accuse other countries or cultures for harming "our own wildlife", but in my view, wildlife belongs to humanity as a whole, not bound by the borders of a particular country or people. A Chinese person may be born in Africa, or a French person in America. Saving wildlife should have no borders - all human beings share responsibility for their long-term survival. *We must work together.*

Hopefully our successful result with the rewilding and breeding of the Chinese Tigers in South Africa has set a positive example for international collaborations in wildlife conservation.

Now that the rhinoceros is facing a dire future, perhaps we could think outside the box again, much like when Dr. Player sold the first white rhinoceros outside South Africa to successfully save them in the 1960's.

China has taken a lead in reversing the fate of a cultural icon-the South China Tiger-with the help of South African expertise. China can also become an important player in reversing the decline of the rhinoceros by working closely with South Africa and other nations to find solutions for the crisis, and to ensure that rhinoceros will exist in the wild for generations to come. There are many areas that China and South Africa can work together on.

Further, you may find this little known fact interesting: the rhinoceros actually occurred naturally in China, until fairly recently. The last rhinoceros disappeared from Yunnan province of China about 200 years ago. Perhaps, we could consider bringing the rhinoceros back to China with the assistance of South Africa's amazing wildlife expertise?

*With respect for each other's cultural, history and traditions, South Africa and China could collaborate on many initiatives such as:*

- Joint investigations to catch culprits and hand them over to be charged under the more strict Chinese Laws.
- Create habitat in China and relocate rhinoceros there that can act as custodians. After all, China was the natural range country of the rhinoceros in not too distant past.
- Conduct joint research projects on the pharmacology of the rhinoceros horn and suitable alternatives.
- Addressing the issues of collection of rhinoceros horns for aesthetic purposes and as a status symbol.
- Bring influential Chinese citizens to South Africa and educate them about rhinoceros conservation.

I am confident my expert colleagues are more competent than I am in proposing workable co-operations. Certainly, rapid human population growth is making it hard for other life forms to exist, and therefore we need to explore unconventional rhinoceros conservation approaches in order to ensure their long-term survival without compromising the lives of the human species.

### **South Africa and China must do joint research on the pharmacology of rhinoceros horn**

Experimenting with an unorthodox "innovative" approach is helping the South China Tiger, previously condemned to death by the inaction of some of the world's biggest environmental organizations, to have the possibility of recovery. It is now time for all who care about the fate of the rhinoceros to work together on practical and sustainable solutions instead of holding onto the same ineffective and failed strategies. I am grateful for being given the chance here to share my thoughts with the reader.

