

# Taoist Self-Transformation and Christian Redemption: A Chinese Heraldic Rhinoceros Cup for Antão Vaz Freire

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This early seventeenth-century rhinoceros horn cup (figs. 1–2) from the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (inv. KK 3742) is carved, both inside and out with complex imagery of local South Chinese origin, with Daoist characteristics combined with European iconographic and heraldic elements. The full-tip cup, of dark brown rhinoceros horn, probably carved from a posterior horn of a Sumatran rhinoceros (*Dicerorhinus sumatrensis*), was dyed and polished, revealing a warm cinnamon colour. Despite some damage by rodents, and it being somewhat less refined than other contemporary carved rhinoceros horn cups, its small size (16.2 cm in height) and the minute character of much of its unique imagery are a testimony to the ingenuity of South Chinese craftsmen working for a new European clientele in the final decades of the Ming dynasty. The iconographic reading of this vessel follows an upward direction, from the tip of the horn to the rim (and the pond scene on the interior bowl). This is further highlighted by the ascending nature of the stepped rocky formations depicted, which form the mineral background to the rich animal and plant imagery. The tip, or bottom-most section is carved with scrolling fungus, the sacred Chinese mushroom of immortality (*Ganoderma lucidum*), known as *língzhī* 灵芝, from which the first stepped rocky formations seem to emerge. Over the scrolling fungus rises a Chinese white pine (*Pinus armandii*), which represents long life and endurance, beneath which lies a reclining *qilin* 麒麟, with its head turned backwards. A mythological creature usually depicted with a scaled deer's body with hooves, a dragon's head with two horns, and a bear's bushy tail, the *qilin* is symbolic of benevolence, virtue, longevity, happiness and wisdom.

Above this scene, occupying pride of place in the overall decoration of the main side of the cup, there is a Portuguese coat of arms. The escutcheon features a bend swallowed by two dragon or serpent heads (used by the Freire family), accompanied by a tower dexter by a crescent

in chief, and a dagger in base, within a bordure charged with five triple arrows. Over the shield there is a poorly depicted helm surmounted by a crest (possibly three plumes) and flanked by a mantling. Based on a surviving seal (fig. 3) from a letter by Antão Vaz Freire (c. 1560–c. 1630) to King Philip II of Portugal (Philip III of Spain), dated 10th February 1616, it has been possible to identify the heraldry on this cup with that of this royal officer who served as the first financial superintendent or *vedor da fazenda* of Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) between 1608 and 1617.

At the top of the coat of arms, over the rocks, there is a tree which has been erroneously identified as the Canary Islands dragon tree (*Dracaena draco*), native to the Canary Islands, Cape Verde, Madeira, and western Morocco. This misidentification, and the idea that this species was abundant in South India along the coast of the Gulf of Mannar, was at the basis for the attribution of this object to Cochin (Silva 2000). The shrub depicted is the sweet olive (*Osmanthus fragrans*), native to Asia, indigenous to southern China and known as *guihuā* 桂花. A symbol of nobility (homophone with *guì* 貴, >high-ranking< or >noble<), it is associated with the moon (depicted on the coat of arms). According to legend, the moon possessed a magical tree from which the elixir of life was extracted.

The identification of the tree as the osmanthus (also depicted on the interior bowl of the cup) is strengthened by the presence of two hares at the side of the tree, which are also symbols of longevity and intimately associated with the moon. The jade rabbit (or *yùtù* 玉兔) was the companion of the Moon Goddess and was entrusted with making the elixir of immortality under the osmanthus tree. Flanking the sweet olive tree on our cup is a tiger (*lǎohǔ* 老虎) on the left,



Fig. 1: Cup made from carved rhinoceros horn, South China, c. 1600–1619, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



Fig. 2: The other side of the rhinoceros horn cup, South China, c. 1600–1619, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

and a guardian lion (*shī* 獅) on the right. While the first represents military prowess and protection (homophone with *hù* 護, >to protect<), the second is homophone with >teacher< or >master< (*shī* 師), which, coupled with other elements in the cup points to an elderly high-ranking patron and client for whom this object was made, probably Antão Vaz Freire who died in his late sixties. On the left of this composition emerges a tall, sinuous cypress tree which may be identified with the >China-fir<, the *Cunninghamia lanceolata* which, like the pine trees depicted elsewhere in the cup, represents longevity. On the opposite side, we see a Portuguese huntsman on horseback. Alongside his hunting dog, he takes aim at a deer with his bow and arrow. Above, there is an Asian elephant with its long legs and small ears (*Elephas maximus*), representing strength, protection, wisdom, and good luck. And opposite, we see an ox (*Bos taurus*), a symbol of diligence, strength, honesty, and wealth.

The most striking iconographic elements of this cup are deployed in the interior decoration of its bowl (fig. 4), which depicts a pond scene. Extending the rocky formations seen on the exterior, the imagery on the bowl highlights the transformative, multi-layered, and stepped nature of the overall symbolic meaning of this cup. Conceived as a drinking vessel, the side from which the cup is raised features a large fish (which unlike most of the imagery is carved in high relief) emerging from the side over the rim. Similar to a dragon that rises in the air, this carp, probably the silver carp (*Hypophthalmichthys molitrix*), native to China and eastern Siberia, overcomes obstacles and the strong river currents. The rocky landscape along the interior rim features sweet osmanthus and Chinese pine trees, bamboo (a symbol of endurance, humility, and integrity), plantain plants (symbolic of an introspective, melancholic atmosphere), rice plants and flying birds (the Oriental magpie or *Pica serica*, symbol of happiness). There are two

opposing >narrative< scenes on the rim: one depicts a serpent (*yīn*) facing a tiger (*yáng*) with a squatting monkey in the centre; and the other a large pig-like creature (*yīn*) facing another tiger with a monkey in the centre threatening the pig with his stick. The monkey may be identified as Sun Wukong (孫悟空), the mythical and Taoist-trained Monkey King, recipient of the 72 Earthly Transformations and bearer of a magical staff. He is best known as one of the main characters of the sixteenth-century Chinese novel *Journey to the West* based on earlier folk tales. The pig is probably Zhu Bajie (豬八戒), also a major character in the same novel, always jealous of Wukong, who was reborn after his exile on Earth as a



Fig. 3: Seal from a letter by Antão Vaz Freire to King Philip II of Portugal, 10<sup>th</sup> February 1616. Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Lisboa.

man-eating pig-monster. Both scenes represent the balance between darkness and light as perceived in Taoist metaphysics. The interior of the bowl features precisely arranged aquatic animals, namely four fish, three shrimps (*xiā* 蝦) and three large crabs (*xié* 蟹). These, which may be identified with the Chinese mitten crab (*Eriocheir sinensis*), native to South China, symbolise >harmony< (*xié* 諧) and >longevity< or >many years with harmony<. They share their symbolic meaning with the finely depicted freshwater shrimp (homophonous with *xiá* 遐, >advanced age<), clearly highlighting the elderly nature of the patron who commissioned this cup. The shrimps depicted may be identified with the Chinese white shrimp (*Penaeus chinensis*). The four fish (scaled-covered carp, or *lǐ* 鯉) symbolise surplus and wealth (*lǐ* 利).

Also carved in high-relief, and opposite the carp, there is a squatting naked male figure. Covering his genitals with his left arm resting on the rock at the edge of the pond, he reaches to the water with a bowl with his outstretched right arm. This figure, with its curly hair, naked body and daring pose, stands out from the rest of the imagery deployed on this and other contemporary Chinese carved libation cups and, alongside the coat of arms, it is surely European in origin and meaning. Mention should be made of contemporaneous drawings and prints representing St. John the Baptist in the Wilderness, either naked or slightly covered depicted in a somewhat similar pose. One such image is an etching by Jacopo Palma il Giovane († 1628), an example of which belongs to the British Museum, London (inv. X,2.24). Nonetheless, in a 1553 engraving of *The Baptism of Christ* by Hieronymus Cock (fig. 5) after a design by Andrea del Sarto (from a mural in the Chiostrò dello Scalzo, Florence), there is a figure of a naked boy waiting to be baptised by St. John which is strikingly similar to the one on this cup. It is conceivable that Antão Vaz Freire provided the carver not only with his personal coat of arms but also a design possibly inspired by this or a similar print, conveying the Christian belief of redemption through water, a message which is perfectly in keeping not only with the function of this vessel, but also with the Christian values of its patron.

We know little of Freire's personal life apart from some conflicts with Jerónimo de Azevedo (c. 1560–1625), who served as viceroy of the Portuguese State of India (*Estádo da Índia*) between 1612 and 1617, and who had been governor (*capitão-geral*) of Portuguese-ruled Ceylon from 1594 to 1612. Freire served as *vedor* until 1617, having returned to Goa later that year after completing his mission, that of surveying the lands now under



Fig. 4: Top view of the rhinoceros horn cup, South China, c. 1600–1619, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.



Fig. 5: Hieronymus Cock after Andrea del Sarto, *The Baptism of Christ*, 1553, engraving on paper, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Portuguese control and recording them in detail with the assessment of their value in four large volumes or *tombos*. Having apparently never returned to Ceylon, Freire served as the financial overseer (*provedor-mor*) of the Exchequer of Goa (*Contos de Goa*), the highest administrative position of the *Estádo*. He returned to Portugal in 1619. We know from a petition dated 26th July 1620 that Freire was claiming the outstanding payments of his wages as *vedor*, and that on 13 March 1626 these had not yet been processed. This same year, King Philip II chose him for a committee entrusted with solving some administrative and financial problems regarding Ceylon, from which Freire excused himself. As late as November 1639 Amaro Rodrigues, who served as *vedor* in Ceylon after Freire from 1633 to 1636, reflects on his predecessor's shortcomings, writing that he failed to do some vital work because >maybe he eagerly wanted to leave that island<.

We do not know the date of his death, nor how he was able to commission this cup in South China, if directly or, more likely, through agents and middlemen. His high social standing and revenue certainly enabled him to acquire such a prestigious luxury item, beyond the reach of many in late Renaissance Europe (Crespo 2018). Also unknown are the ways by which this object came to the Vienna *Kunstkammer*, where no early imperial inventories seem to record it.

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Urte Krass/Miguel Metelo de Seixas (eds.)

# Heraldry in Contact.

Perspectives and Challenges of a  
Connective Image Form



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