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COWRIE SHELLS AND COWRIE MONEY

A GLOBAL HISTORY

Bin Yang



Cowrie Shells and Cowrie Money

Originating in the sea, especially in the waters surrounding the low-lying islands of the Maldives, *Cypraea moneta* (sometimes confused with *Cypraea annulus*) was transported to various parts of Afro-Eurasia in the prehistoric era, and in many cases, it was gradually transformed into a form of money in various societies for a long span of time. Yang provides a global examination of cowrie money within and beyond Afro-Eurasia from the archaeological period to the early twentieth century.

By focusing on cowrie money in Indian, Chinese, Southeast Asian and West African societies and shell money in Pacific and North American societies, Yang synthesises and illustrates the economic and cultural connections, networks and interactions over a longue durée and in a cross-regional context. Analysing locally varied experiences of cowrie money from a global perspective, Yang argues that cowrie money was the first global money that shaped Afro-Eurasian societies both individually and collectively. He proposes a paradigm of the cowrie money world that engages local, regional, transregional and global themes.

Bin Yang is Associate Professor of History at the University of Macau. His research interests include Chinese history, frontier and ethnic studies, Sino-Southeast Asian-Indian triangular interactions, world history and history of science, technology and medicine. His dissertation “Between Winds and Clouds: The Making of Yunnan (Second Century BCE – Twentieth Century CE)” won the 2004 Gutenberg-e Prize of the American Historical Association, and it was published online as well as in print by Columbia University Press. He has published research papers in some internationally prestigious journals such as *The China Quarterly*, *Modern Asian Studies*, *Journal of World History*, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* and *Journal of Women’s History*. He is one of the founding members of the Asian Association of World Historians and serves as Managing Editor of the *Asian Review of World Histories*.

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A Global History

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Foreword

This remarkable book tells the worldwide story of the cowrie, the humble mollusc with the small but elegant shell. The beauty and uniformity of the shell caused a demand for it at the edge of the tropical waters where it originated – and the attraction spread to lands thousands of kilometres away. Much like the case for silver and gold, the shine and beauty of cowrie shells meant that they were valued for jewellery and were sometimes placed strategically in the burials of loved ones. And just as for silver and gold, cowrie shells became used as money once commercial markets expanded sufficiently. The cowrie world was large indeed. While Roman coins are known to have spread far beyond the boundaries of the empire, cowries spread further. Even before Roman times, cowries reached North China via Central Asia and reached Italy via the Persian Gulf.

More than a tale of the cowrie, this is a global synthesis of the cowrie world. Bin Yang has produced a major achievement in world history, because the book shows the hemispheric breadth of the cowrie world at the same time as it shows the regional and local specificity that sustained the global system. From the cowries themselves to the picture of the rise and decline of the world of the cowries, the book traces cowries in some six plus regions of the Eastern Hemisphere. Meanwhile, he has discussed not only in many regions where, why and when cowrie shells were taken as money, but also in some areas such as early China where, when and why cowrie shells, although seemingly highly likely, did not come into being a form of money. Bin even reaches beyond the cowrie world itself to show that similar shell moneys arose in New Guinea and along the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of North America.

Cowries grow everywhere in the Old World tropics, yet *Cypraea moneta* is a particular type of cowrie, small and colourful, and this species of cowrie has thrived most productively for millennia in the Maldives Islands. The Maldives, a coral archipelago of thousands of islands, near to the equator and near to South Asia, produced *Cypraea moneta* in enormous quantities. When did they begin to be exploited? It is not known for sure, but by 2,000 years ago the trade in cowries from the Maldives was well developed by settlers who followed Hindu and Buddhist religions. Thus, the uniqueness of the Maldives combined with the uniqueness of *Cypraea moneta* to create a world-historical contribution – the first global currency.

The core of the narrative begins in Bengal in the fourth century CE. While this region had an active commerce, its monarchs became undependable in producing coins, so commoners began to use cowries as money. The shells – small, uniform, impossible to counterfeit and easily accessed from the Maldives – became a money supply that satisfied the needs of merchants small and large. In the centuries to come, the Indian Ocean commercial system spread and deepened, with cowries for local purchases and for interregional exchange. Cowrie currency was adopted in other parts of India, then in the lands of Southeast Asia. Northward in the high altitudes of Yunnan, cowries from the Maldives served as a principal currency for nearly a millennium. Cowrie shells moved westward to the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and beyond. In far away West Africa, where gold was mined in the savannas, cowries became the money supply as early as the eleventh century and spread thereafter.

Bin Yang is an experienced world historian, one of the first to receive a Ph.D. in world history. His 2004 dissertation won the Gutenberg-e Prize of the American Historical Association, so that it was published online as well as in print. He came from Renmin University in Beijing to complete his doctoral studies at Northeastern University in Boston under two leading scholars who have since passed away, Christina Gilmartin and Adam McKeown. It was my great pleasure to work with him as well, commenting and observing as he developed and implemented a two-millennium study of Yunnan and its global connections. He taught world and Asian history for over a decade at the National University of Singapore. He is now Associate Professor of History at the University of Macau and Managing Editor of the *Asian Review of World Histories*. After detailed research around the globe, his elegant synthesis shows how cowrie currency sustained the growth of the world economy for at least 1,500 years.

Bin Yang's research ranges widely and in great depth. He compares and connects Chinese, Indian, Tai and Western sources to clarify the elements of his story, exploring the documents left by travellers and archaeologists. He is generous and attentive in quoting previous authors, recovering their evidence and perspectives. It is his own interpretation, however, that holds together the many stories within the tale of the cowrie world. He portrays the multi-lingual, multi-cultural marketplace that linked the Indian Ocean region over two millennia, plus the previous exchanges leading up to the cowrie world, and followed by the interpenetration of Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds that brought us global capitalism. He builds his tale, region by region (but not confined within the framework of region), and in the final chapter he reconfirms the contributions of the cowrie world to our understanding of world history.

The cowrie world was sustained most basically by the marketplace of the Indian Ocean region – the need for a dependable currency for the exchange of goods. In addition, however, a succession of religious and imperial traditions had their influence on the cowrie system. Thus, the Buddhist commercial tradition, overlapping with a rising Hinduism, accompanied the initial establishment of the cowrie currency and its expansion in India, Southeast Asia and Yunnan. As Islam arose, Persian and Yemeni mariners sailed to India and even to China to trade, so that

they entered the cowrie zone. Yemeni vessels returned home with cowries as ballast, and some of the cowries reached Egypt, the Mediterranean and crossed the Sahara to Mali on the Niger Bend, where cowries became money along with gold. Through these contacts, the Maldivian king converted to Islam in 1153, and the Maldives have since remained a Muslim community.

In the thirteenth century Mongol conquerors expanded and combined China and the Islamic world into a hemispheric commercial system. The cowrie world retained its extent and formed a large portion of this great marketplace. Imperial governments of this era sought to impose their own coins, but came to recognise the value of cowrie currency. Only in the seventeenth century did the cowrie zone undergo shrinkage, as Yunnan gave up its use of cowrie currency after the arrival of numerous Han Chinese migrants even before the conquest by the Qing Dynasty.

In a third imperial expansion, Europeans came to the Indian Ocean from the sixteenth century. Portuguese and later Dutch merchants joined in shipping cowries from the Maldives to the Indian Ocean mainland. But the Portuguese also began buying cowries for delivery to West Africa as money. There the cowries purchased up to one-third of the slaves sent to the Americas to labour in plantations that enriched Europe. In a follow-up, Europeans bought Indian cotton textiles to exchange in Africa for slaves. Thus, up to the eighteenth century, European visitors to the Indian Ocean were part of the cowrie world. In that time, European merchants sent silver from the Americas to China and India, then took cowries the other way, from the Indian Ocean to West Africa. In the late eighteenth century, England and other European powers, strengthened by centuries of trade with the Indian Ocean, were able to conquer Bengal and other Asian territories. Only then did they seek to repress the use of cowrie currency. As Bin shows, each regional story of the decline and replacement of cowrie currency in the same global colonial context is interesting and complex.

Cowries ceased to be money at the beginning of the twentieth century. Even then, these petite shells retain their beauty and continue to be used in dress and decoration. Now we have this book, to show us how the memory of cowries can broaden and deepen our understanding of at least fifteen earlier centuries in world history.

Patrick Manning
Andrew W. Mellon Professor of World History, Emeritus,
University of Pittsburgh & Past President,
American Historical Association

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A monograph, whether good or bad, cannot simply be written by the author himself/herself, let alone one with such a broad scope.

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The loss of these eminent scholars helps me to appreciate how precious my association with Professor Patrick Manning has been to me. Pat served as the director of the World History Center, Northeastern University when I was admitted to its world history program in 1998. He, Adam and Chris saw how little I understood world history, and they were always ready to extend their hands to help me take my first steps into this field whenever I needed it. It was Pat in the autumn of 2000 who mentioned cowrie money in West Africa to me when I shared some information about shell money in Yunnan after my trip there. Pat kindly read through my manuscript (as he had done with my dissertation proposals and drafts), corrected various errors, provided many sources, comments and suggestions and wrote a foreword for the book. It is such a shame that I am unable to incorporate more of his knowledge and wisdom into this book, due to the tight publishing schedule. My gratitude to him is beyond words, whether in Chinese, English or any other language.

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The book is dedicated to my family in Singapore, Zhejiang, Beijing and Xiamen.

1 Global phenomenon, local varieties

Lord Zhi of Yan paid his first court visit to Ancestral Zhou; the Zhou king bestowed upon Zhi twenty strings of cowry shells. Zhi cast this precious vessel for Si.

– Inscription on the Yan Hou Zhi Ding¹

The only money they have here are these cowries or shells we carry them, being brought from the East Indies, and were charg'd to us at four pounds per cent, of which we gave 100 *lb.* for a salve.

– Thomas Phillips, Captain of the *Hannibal*, 1694²

Across Afro-Eurasia

The *longue durée* existence of cowrie money across the broad territories of the Afro-Eurasian continent and beyond requires a global explanation.

There are over 250 species of cowrie shells living across the world,³ but when cowrie money is mentioned, only two are the main forms: *Cypraea moneta* (*Monetaria moneta*) and *Cypraea annulus* (*Monetaria annulus*). The first one, native to the Maldives Islands, is the most important and is also called the money cowrie, as its scientific name indicates; the other is commonly known as the ring cowrie. Originating in the sea, especially in the waters surrounding the low-lying islands of the Maldives, *Cypraea moneta* (sometimes confused with *Cypraea annulus*) was transported to various parts of Afro-Eurasia in the pre-historic era, when it was often conferred a certain value, and where in many cases it was gradually transformed into a form of money in various societies for a long span of time.

As early as the turn of the last century, archaeologists and ethnographers found the wide use of cowrie shells in various societies, historically and contemporarily.⁴ Assuming diverse functions in politics, economy, culture and religion, cowrie shells were used in various rituals and daily decorations, and were widely believed to possess the powers of fertility, protection against evil or of warding off bad luck, but their most distinctive feature was their monetary role. Collected in the Maldives, cowrie shells were shipped to Bengal in exchange for rice, and it was in India that they gradually became money, probably as early as the fourth century. From India, cowries reached mainland Southeast Asia, where they functioned as

2 *Global phenomenon, local varieties*

money only in some places and societies. Cowrie shells were used as a medium of exchange in Assam, Arakan, Lower Burma, Siam, Laos and Yunnan. Cowries (both genuine cowries and their imitation forms made of jade, stone, bone, earthenware, gold, tin and bronze) have been found in archaeological sites throughout north China, and numerous bronze inscriptions record a popular cowrie-granting ritual during the Western Zhou period (1046 BCE–771 BCE), which has misled many scholars to assume that cowrie shells were first used as money in early China. They were not, but these shells played a dynamic part in shaping Chinese civilisation and culture.

Cowries also moved westwards to Africa. While evidence from the earlier period is vague, it is clear that by the fourteenth century, cowrie money had reached the upper and middle Niger River region, penetrating first the Mali Empire and then Songhay. From the sixteenth century onwards, Europeans brought cowries from the Indian Ocean to West Africa in such quantities that these shells eventually ruined the local money systems and economies, but greatly contributed to the prosperity of both the Atlantic slave and the palm oil trades, thus helping bring about the European domination of the world. From Africa, some cowrie shells were brought by European merchants to the New World for the fur trade or during the Middle Passage passing through North America and the Caribbean.

Therefore, there existed a cowrie money world which can be traced back to as early as the fourth century in India. It expanded to coastal areas in lower mainland Southeast Asia in the following centuries, and moved northwards to include present-day Yunnan in the ninth to tenth century transition; by the fourteenth century, the cowrie money world had already incorporated various societies in South Asia, Southeast Asia and West Africa; by the sixteenth century, with the arrival of the Europeans, the cowrie money world interacted and overlapped with part of the European world system into a global world in which cowrie money played a key role for the transatlantic slave trade and the European Industrial Revolution up until the nineteenth century.

In addition to this India-based cowrie money world, cowrie shells and other shells were also used as money in the Pacific Islands (particularly in New Guinea) and in native and colonial North American societies. These shells were crucial not only to local economies and their intra-trading with neighbouring groups or European traders, but also were significant for the maintenance and reproduction of these indigenous societies. Although not connected with the Indian cowrie monetary system, each mini cowrie monetary system within these societies had many parallels with the Afro-Eurasian one, especially in terms of its supply, inflation and demise, while each possessed its own local features and trajectory. Indeed, the pattern of European contact and collapse was shared with these cowrie monetary systems across the world.

Probably before being made into money, and certainly during and after being money, cowrie shells were used as ornaments, decorations, symbols of fertility and amulets for protection. Their aesthetic, political and religious functions assumedly predated their economic one, while the latter might have enhanced the former. Cowrie shells in gift granting and gift exchange in early China, for

example, have indicated their multi-purposes conceptualised by Chinese elites in the early times.

This book provides a global examination of cowrie money within and beyond Afro-Eurasia from the archaeological period to the early twentieth century. The rise, evolution and fall of cowrie money from the fourth to the early twentieth century is a global phenomenon with local dynamics and varieties. By focusing on cowrie money in Indian, Chinese, Southeast Asian and West African societies and shell money in Pacific and North American societies, this book illustrates the economic and cultural connections, networks and interactions over a *longue durée* and in a cross-regional context, analysing locally varied experiences of cowrie money from a global perspective, arguing that cowrie money was the first global money that shaped Afro-Eurasian societies both individually and collectively, proposing a paradigm of the cowrie monetary world and thus engaging many local, regional, transregional and global themes.

The life of the cowrie mollusc

The term “cowrie” (“cowry” or “gowrie”) in Greek means “little pig,”⁵ and that is why early European texts referred these shells as pig shells. The very origin of the term can be traced to Sanskrit,⁶ as Paul Pelliot observed. But before going into the human view and uses of the cowrie, let us consider the biological story of this mollusc.

With a history of more than 100 million years, cowrie shells have been discovered in prehistoric archaeological sites in India, China, Southeast Asia, Europe, Africa and other parts of Afro-Eurasia. Today, they are widely found in most subtropical and tropical oceans between 30° N and 30° south of the equator.⁷ Most of them live in shallow waters no deeper than five metres, while a few occasionally live as deep as fifty metres or more. While algae seem to be their main source of food, most of them are carnivorous, some are omnivorous, and some mollusc-eating fish are their natural predators.⁸

The body of the cowrie mollusc consists of its hard shell and the soft parts the shell encases, which include the mantle, foot and many external organs, such as syphons and tentacles (Figure 1.1). The mantle is the soft part that can envelop the shell completely, and it has many functions, such as secreting calcium and adding pigment to the shell, protecting and repairing cracks and holes, as well as being camouflage for the mollusc; the foot is used by many of the species to confuse predators such as reef fish; the syphon takes in water continuously and the tentacles gather information about the nearby surroundings; the radula, consisting of 50 or more rows of teeth, is the tool to grasp algae or cut pieces out of a sponge.⁹

There are two different methods of cowrie reproduction: either predominantly by laying eggs or by direct reproduction.¹⁰ Cowries mature fairly quickly. Some take a year to reach adulthood while *Cypraea moneta* and *Cypraea annulus* take two or three years.¹¹ *Cypraea moneta* and *Cypraea annulus* are abundant in the warm and shallow waters of the shores and lagoons of the Indian and Pacific oceans (Maps 1.1 and 1.2). Their habitats range from the Red Sea to Mozambique

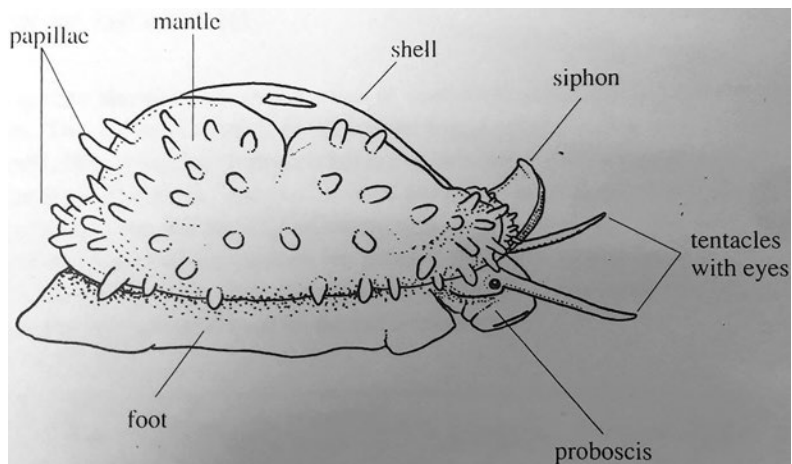
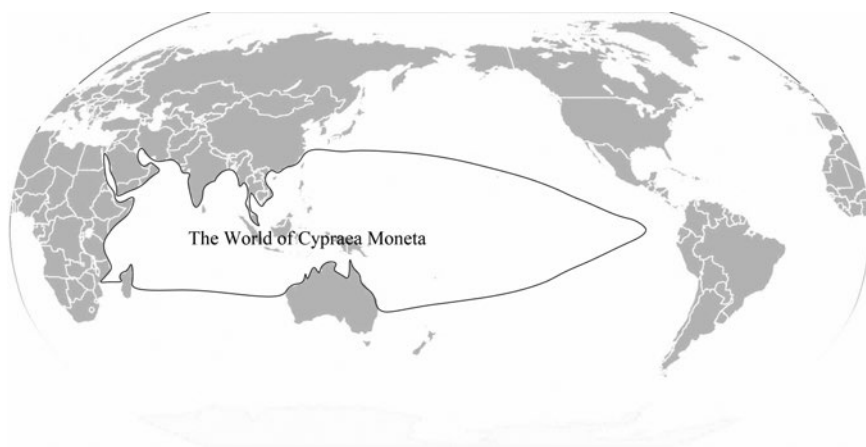
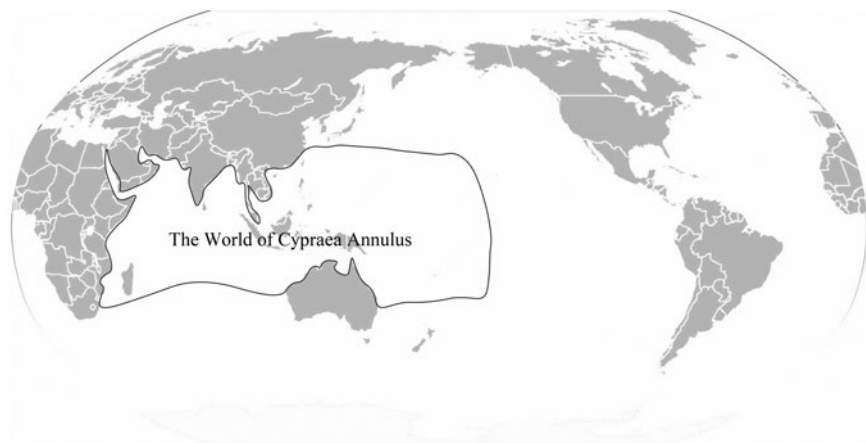


Figure 1.1 External Anatomy of Cowrie¹²



Map 1.1 The World of *Cypraea Moneta*¹³



Map 1.2 The World of *Cypraea Annulus*¹⁴

in the west, to Japan, Hawaii, New Zealand and the Galapagos in the east.¹⁵ The Maldives was one of the main sources that places in Afro-Eurasia, such as Thailand, Burma (Arakan and Pegu) and Bengal looked to for acquiring cowrie shells (*Cypraea moneta*), being at that time the most important and oldest cowrie zone.¹⁶

Why *Cypraea moneta*? And why in the Maldives?

Why was it the species *Cypraea moneta* (and to some light extent *Cypraea annulus*) that was selected to be used as money in diverse societies?¹⁷ Principally, it was the cowrie shell's particular physical features that made it an ideal form of money, especially for low-value transactions, at least in the beginning. First of all, cowries can be "accurately traded by weight, by volume or by counting."¹⁸ They are light, on average slightly over one gram each and weighing about a pound for 400 pieces; they are solid, durable and difficult to break; they retain their shine and colour, unlike other species; and each and every one is of a similar size, with negligible differences.¹⁹ They are as durable, portable and firm, as is metal money, and their size and manufacture are even more convenient than metal coins, the latter requiring considerable labour and governmental effort to process (including mining and minting). These features made cowries incomparable with many other natural items used in the past as media of exchange.

Second, *Cypraea moneta* is special in that this species is naturally different from other cowries, in terms of size, colour or shape.²⁰ *Cypraea annulus* was confused with *Cypraea moneta* in many archaeological excavations, as they look rather similar, but the former has a little yellow-orange circle on its crown, and so it can in fact be easily identified. Nature itself does not provide any possibility for counterfeit, nor human beings either.

Furthermore, *Cypraea moneta* were readily available and easily processed and shipped from the Maldives, which meant they were of very low value.²¹ This very attribute of low value created a double advantage. It made them more attractive than the costly manufacture of metal coins, and their low value and plentiful supply caused them to become popular as the preferred form of money for small daily transactions.

Finally, although cowrie shells fulfilled many cultural and religious functions, due to their low value and huge numbers, these non-monetary uses did not pose a challenge to their monetary role. In fact, it was the shortage of other forms of money such as gold, silver and copper that often threatened their supply as a medium of exchange.²² In sum, cowrie shells were long lasting, extremely durable, easy to handle, portable, hard to counterfeit and of the right unit value for market needs,²³ which made them the first choice for a medium of exchange when they were first introduced in the early Bengali trading world. However, one may ask, since cowrie shells existed across the large global belt of warm seas, why were the Maldives the main supplier for Afro-Eurasia? This can be understood by appreciating the special features of these islands.

More than 130 of the over 200 described species of cowries are associated with coral reefs that provide the former an ideal environment.²⁴ Coral reefs

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Table 1.1 Habitat and Length of *Cypraea Moneta* (mm)²⁵

Habitat	Maldives	Hawaii	West Australia	Philippines	Ryukyu	East Pacific	Guam	Thailand
Length	12.5–16	21.00	18.8	16.4	15.0	25.1	16.8	23.0

constitute a marine forest, hosting a greatly varied mixture of animals and plants, living and dead, including fish, sea cucumbers, molluscs, sponges, worms and so on. Cowries have evolved to live on coral reefs: their shell, colour and mantle are matched with the physical colours, shapes and shadows of the reef; their large feet help them move smoothly over the prickly surface of the corals and they can attach themselves to the reef; and all their feeding needs are provided in the shelter of the coral reefs.²⁶ Such an association between cowries and reefs has made the Maldives a wonderland for cowries, as the Maldives is composed of 1,192 coral islands, grouped in a double chain of 26 atolls (ring-shaped coral reefs). Mediaeval travellers, whether they were Chinese, Muslim or European, all claimed there to be over 10,000 islands making up the Maldives. In sum, the abundant reefs, with ideal conditions such as warm waters, temperature and abundant food for the cowries to flourish made the Maldives a paradise for cowrie shells, particularly *Cypraea moneta*.²⁷ It is no small wonder that early writers documented how countless and abundant money cowries (*Cypraea moneta*) were in the Maldives.

One may ask, money cowries are found all over the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, so why was it that those from the Maldives were favoured? At first sight, money cowries tend to live in relatively pure colonies, and the quantity of *Cypraea annulus* is extraordinarily limited, thus making the job of sorting the shells much lighter.²⁸ There is also something very special and essentially advantageous about the Maldives' money cowries. Compared with those in other parts of the world, the size of the *Cypraea moneta* from the Maldives is distinguishably smaller, thus enjoying the advantage of easier transportation and storage (Table 1.1). According to the Bergmann's Rule, the warmest waters produce the smallest specimens, and the smaller size in the Maldives results from the location of the islands on the equator, affording greater solar radiation on the warm and shallow waters.²⁹

All these physical attributes, their proximity to the bustling and sophisticated markets of India and their location on maritime trade routes in the geo-economical context made the Maldives an incomparably suitable source of *Cypraea moneta*.

Money and cowrie shells becoming money

What is money? What are the definitive features of money? And how did some objects become money while others did not?³⁰ These are tough questions to answer.

Money is generally defined by its three functions: a medium of exchange, a measure of value and a store of value. With the establishment of government,

a fourth function, a means of state payment, was added. Although an object can only be called true money if it fulfils all three or four roles (general money, all-purpose money, full-fledged money and so on), the first two functions indeed are primarily crucial to understanding the origins of money. Its function as a medium of exchange is regarded and emphasised as the essential feature of money by the classical and early neoclassical economists;³¹ nevertheless, money as a means of exchange and as a measure of value are intricately connected, and the precise origin of money as to which use of these two uses was earlier than the other remains unclear.

Our common but often wildly inaccurate use of such terms as money, commodity money, specific-purpose money, general money, general-purpose money, primary money, small money, traditional money, abstract money, e-money and so on have made readers with little economic or financial background even more confused. In this book, I prefer to reserve the use of the terms “commodity money” and “money” for their identical one, general money, to refer to a medium of exchange that possesses at least two or three of the monetary functions defined above.

According to Adam Smith, specialisation is the driving force behind the use of money. Specialisation makes it possible for people to not necessarily consume what they produce. Certain intrinsic properties possessed by an object (money candidate, as I call it) as a critical factor determining whether or not this object can serve as a medium of exchange is essentially and decisively related to people’s faith in it. Therefore, “the use of money necessarily involves strategic elements and certain aspects of social custom.”³² In other words, money is not arbitrarily made.

Economists point out the inconvenience of the barter trade in which a “double coincidence of wants” must be fulfilled. Two individuals must have precisely the goods that are desired by the other party. The introduction of a medium enables people to overcome such a difficulty. A medium of exchange must possess some key qualities. First of all, it must represent value in a concentrated form; it should also possess the characteristics of divisibility; and it should be portable and durable.³³ Scarcity is a prerequisite for attributing value to any form of money. According to economists, first and foremost, scarcity prevents counterfeit; moreover, it “bounds the growth path of the monetary base and facilitates price stability.”³⁴ However, scarcity serves as a double-edge sword in the process of selecting and ruling out certain money candidates. While scarcity excludes most common objects and favours a few rare and usually foreign or exotic ones in a society, the continuous process of being scarce, due to the difficulty of supply, proves to be the key barrier for certain money candidates becoming money. In words, scarcity makes and fails money, simultaneously. Under the prerequisite of scarcity, sufficiency constitutes the subsequent prerequisite. Without a relatively appropriate supply, a certain money candidate could not meet the demand of commercialisation and marketisation, and thus remain itself a highly valued object. Without being adopted frequently in transaction, a money candidate has no chance becoming money.

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Hence, I would like to highlight one key feature in the making of money: the accessibility or supply of such a money candidate. It should not be too easily accessible, nor should it be extremely rare. In the former case, its value would soon be diminished nearly to zero and in the latter, it would be unable to meet the growing needs of a market that would soon seek alternatives. As such, some objects serve as candidates for a medium of exchange better than others. Precious metals such as gold and silver fit the bill well, and that is why they were popularly adopted as money in most, if not all, early societies. Cowrie shells probably also met these needs. Cowries accumulated little value through the process of their collection and transportation via sea and land, but their exotic value made them sought after; they were of almost the same size and were small, light, durable and possible to count; they were abundant in the ocean, but were foreign and thus appealing and just plentiful enough for inland communities. Such features made cowrie shells an ideal candidate as a medium of exchange across Afro-Eurasian societies.

One must bear in mind that money is formed by a process, an actual historical process that distinguishes it from economic logic and conceptualisation.³⁵ This is certainly true in the case of cowrie money. It must have taken ages for cowrie shells to function as money in certain inland societies. In the beginning, because of their rare and exotic nature in such societies that were hundreds of miles away from the ocean, cowrie shells were deemed precious items and a unit of value, sometimes in exchange for other treasures in the barter trade. Highly favoured and thus valued by the inland elites, cowrie shells gradually came to be used in the political rituals of gift-granting and gift exchange. Step by step, they began to take on the role of a standard of value in the barter trade, assuming a certain monetary function. Consequently, they had been a kind of monetary commodity before they were accepted as a medium of exchange or as general money.

Equally important in understanding this process, the scope and frequency of exchange constitute other determining factors as to whether cowrie shells were seen as general money or not. As a medium of exchange, cowrie shells had to be accepted by a society with an appropriate geographical size and had to be used regularly and frequently in transactions. Based on this understanding, sporadic cases of cowrie shells being utilised for deals confined within a small group of people hardly qualify as determining that these cowries acted as general money.

For cowrie shells to be recognised as money by inland societies, supply was the key.³⁶ Sufficiency or near sufficiency is mandatory, but there should not be an oversupply. In the regions where cowries were money, the supply of cowrie shells must have been continuous to meet the local market demands of economic development. That is why cowrie money initially commanded quite a high exchange rate against silver and was only gradually devalued with the relatively greater supply in subsequent eras.

The actual process of how cowrie shells came to be taken as money cannot now be reconstructed; nevertheless, it can however safely be assumed to go something like as follows. Around the fourth century CE, in northeast India, accidentally (but also logically and naturally), cowrie shells began to be used as a

medium for exchange in which both parties agreed on their value. This action must have been repeated by others and eventually spread from one local market to another. Gradually, cowrie shells transformed from being a one-time medium of exchange into a general medium of exchange, or commodity money. Both market traders and local authorities accepted this practice, and cowrie shells came to be used for more functions in diverse deals, finally becoming a form of general money. Due to their relatively low value, cowrie shells were mainly utilised in local markets, but they were also exchanged with gold and silver, the latter two being considered of higher value and therefore reserved more for large transactions, especially over regional and cross-regional markets. With an increasing demand for them by trade and commerce, although not issued by local governments, more and more cowrie shells were shipped by merchants who found the transportation profitable from the Maldives to coastal and eventually inland areas. The newly arrived cowrie shells were purchased as commodity products from coastal areas by these merchants and were then turned into money in marketised societies. With the expansion of cross-regional economic transactions in any given society or economy, any neighbours would be influenced or inspired to follow the trend. They would have been thus either incorporated into the expanding cowrie money economy or might simply have approved of cowrie money circulating in their markets. First used as money probably in Bengal, cowrie money soon expanded into the neighbouring areas, eastwards to Southeast Asia and westwards to West Africa. Over the ages, cowrie money gradually broadened its horizon, both as a cause and effect of the connected and globalised Afro-Eurasian societies.

World history: global and local

World or global history examines cross-regional links, connections and interactions, and in many cases, it challenges or deconstructs boundaries or divides of many geopolitical units.³⁷ In a narrow sense, global history focuses on the process of making our global world and promotes approaches, perspectives, themes, topics, paradigms and methods that both transcend and connect localities. Nevertheless, there has emerged a tension between global history and local history (with national history as its most visible agent). Indeed, global history neither assumes nor claims to replace local history; rather, it is firmly based on the solid platform of area studies that global history has desired, demanded, called for and emerged from.

With the slow but steady acceptance of global history from the 1990s onwards, the term “global” has become fairly popular amongst academia, being a preferred term to, synonymous or exchangeable with “cross-regional,” “transnational” or “cross-cultural,” amongst other labels. Meanwhile, on one hand, the term global at first glance seems to highlight one side of globalisation, that is, something being spread globally or being globalised, while on the other, the specific locality that is exposed to the globalisation process, seems to be secondary, or marginalised,³⁸ and has not equally or appropriately been addressed. Furthermore, would something that becomes global remain the same during and after its having been

globalised? Obviously not! As such, proponents of global history and the global perspective have cautiously avoided such asymmetric impressions by underlining the equal role of a locality both participating in and shaping global forces, elements, processes and results. After all, global history has not been invented to oppose local, regional or national themes, perspectives or narratives. Quite the contrary, it derives from and coordinates with them. It helps tremendously to understand the nature of a locality. In the case of Southeast Asia, the eminent scholar Anthony Reid has wisely noted, "I believe there is rhythm to Southeast Asian history which can also be read as interplay between globalization and localization."³⁹ Victor Lieberman in his recent efforts to place Southeast Asia in a global context, "seeks to connect diverse changes in local structure to global patterns."⁴⁰ Mirani Litster argues based on the Maldivian archaeological record that globalisation, though often associated with global homogenisation, "might be the impetus" behind the settlement and development of this remote island society, and indeed is "better conceived as also having the capacity to generate significant cultural diversity."⁴¹

For many scholars, the concept of globalisation is too broad, vaguely defined by encompassing all cross-regional or transnational processes, and thence arises the necessity for refining the field.⁴² It is perhaps from such a context that the term "glocal" has come into being, which might be seen as a paradigm (if not a new stage) of global history. Roland Robertson, a pioneering scholar of glocal studies, has elaborated the relationship between glocal and local by arguing that "the glocal is not in and of itself counterpoised to the local. Rather, what is often referred to as the local is essentially included within the global."⁴³ In this respect, globalisation not only links the local, but is also involved in the process of making localities.

The idea of the invention of a locality under the trans-local or supra-local context or process is unconventional and inspiring. Indeed, "what is called local is in large degree constructed on a trans- or supra-local basis. In other words, much of the promotion of locality is in fact done from above or outside."⁴⁴ Previous assumptions held by some scholars of progressive global versus passive local are biased, and vice versa. Globalisation does not simply destroy, smother, shroud, dissolve or swallow, nor does it replace local culture, tradition or society. Rather, it interacts with the local by inviting/being invited, requesting/being requested and of course, sometimes, reluctantly, it leads to the localisation of the global as well as and as much as the globalisation of the local, including the creation of a locality.⁴⁵

As such, both global and local are not the starting points of the process of globalisation. The two factors, inasmuch as historians have always seen all history as process rather than stasis, are part of the process of globalisation, and they are open to change at every second all throughout the process. Based on both his empirical and theoretical analyses of Chinese migration in modern times, Adam McKeown once commented,

History does happen as a result of local choices, often with effects that are at odds with global trends. But global trends do exist, and may have

an important role in structuring possible local choices. Neither perspective is truer than the other.⁴⁶

To put it simply, both global and local are being produced and changed during the process. The term globalisation or globalising thus sees the interactive process from both sides and the two ends.

To theorise global history only based on the global-local unity is an oversimplification, somehow. There exist many other supra-local, sub-regional, regional and interregional intermediaries creating, participating in and shaping the cross-regional and global process, as Sugata Bose reminds us.⁴⁷ Meanwhile, Takeshi Hamashita has also pointed out how globalisation has shaped the layers of regions and regional networks and therefore regional studies should be combined with global and local studies.⁴⁸ In this book, I have no intention to ignore the intermediaries between the global and the local, and whenever possible, those intermediaries such as various peoples, cultural faiths and networks will be brought into discussion. My use of local is broadly defined, for comparing, contrasting, paralleling and pointing to the global. Indeed, regional units or actors such as the Bay of Bengal, the Arabian Sea, mainland Southeast Asia, early China or the Buddhist world are vaguely and relatively seen as “local.” My global-local unit indeed is the abbreviation of the global-regional-local formula of multiple scales and levels.

While global, regional and local constitute the key players in the process of globalisation, it must be pointed out that the result of globalisation is not necessarily global, and this is probably not new, as globalisation did not, or does not always lead to a globalised ending. Sometimes, globalisation is confronted by fierce regional and/or local resistance, or non-cooperation; this will mean an abrupt break, abortion or end of a global process. Nevertheless, the initiative and the process remain global.

Employing the metaphor of an ocean wave, though not precise, may help us to understand globalisation. Global is like an ocean wave, while the local aspect is the seabed, with its mountains, valleys, peaks, trenches, rivers and forests. When the wave washes over the seabed, it is blocked, shaped, pulled, absorbed, twisted and divided by the diverse topography of the seabed. As a result of this interaction, a new terrain is formed, with new changes at any moment with each successive wave. Simultaneously, the seabed creates, joins and pushes the wave to advance, retreat, linger, zig-zag, hover or circle. Then a new wave is formed, and the surrounding ocean movement is changed. Thus, both global and local change each other during the interactive process.

Nothing is better for illustrating this phenomenon of globalisation than cuisine. Tea, for example, originally a Chinese drink, was soon adopted in Japan, Tibet, the Arab world and Europe. The most famous tea ceremony hails from Japan, not China, and the classic British afternoon tea has been a symbol of the British Empire for over 200 years. Another example: McDonald's. Some scholars once used the McDonaldisation as worldwide homogenisation, arguing that this process has distributed the features of being efficient, cheap, fast, predictable and controllable

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to the rest of the world; recent researches, however, have found that the reality is quite different, if not largely reversed.⁴⁹ McDonald's meals are expensive, slow due to the long queue and unappreciable due to the difficulty to control so many branches around the rest of the world. In Moscow or Beijing, both McDonald's and KFC have been symbols of elitist status from the beginning and of urban life in general. The global success of McDonald's, indeed, largely lies in its local adaptation, with a recent eye-catching change in Beijing. After the fast food chain sold the bulk of its Chinese mainland and Hong Kong business to the financial conglomerate CITIC Group (one of the Fortune Global 500 companies and a state-owned investment company in China) and American investment company Carlyle Capital, it changed the company's name from *Maidanglao* (麦当劳), a loose transliteration of the English name, to *Jingongmen* (金拱门, meaning Golden Arches, a pictorial symbol of the logo M, while another possible translation is Gold Snout Door). These successful commercial cases in globalisation times should have been accredited to the local strategies that have made them successful in the Chinese locale.

The story of cowrie shells provides a rare opportunity to reveal a rich global history. While cowrie shells were carried over vast areas to diverse societies across Afro-Eurasia, the Pacific Islands and North America, thus creating a global cowrie culture, the significance, emphasis, practice and tradition differed in each locale. Likewise, while the use of cowrie money was a global process and phenomenon, each local process, realisation and result varied. In India, Southeast Asia and Yunnan, for example, the three regions were part of an expanded Bengal cowrie monetary world, but their local monetary systems had their own local features in terms of the relationship between cowrie money and other currencies such as gold, silver and copper coins. In addition, the disappearance of cowrie money in these regions while sharing a global context, namely, the Atlantic slave trade, each had its own local factors and trajectories. Finally, early China provides a case to discuss why the global monetisation process of cowrie shells could not have taken shape there. Numerous sources have illustrated that cowrie shells assumed certain monetary functions in early China, and were regarded as a strong money candidate, but they did not succeed! Clearly, both global and local aspects were at play that helped to shape this first global form of money.

Scholarship, sources and structure

The idea of writing this book could not have come about without relying on the solid scholarship built by historical and contemporary scholars, who have inspired me and to whom I am wholeheartedly grateful. Numerous archaeological and inscriptional findings and studies in China, India and Thailand have provided first-hand sources for information on cowrie shells, cowrie trade and cowrie money. Invaluable accounts by legendary Chinese and non-Chinese travellers such as Wang Dayuan and Ma Huan, and their contemporary counterparts and latecomers such as Marco Polo, Ibn Battuta, Tomè Pires and François Pyrard have amazed me and opened my eyes to many previously unknown connections.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars such as J. Wilfred Jackson and J. Gunnar Anderson discussed the use of cowries across the world and in China, respectively, the former with primarily textual and the latter with archaeological evidence.⁵⁰ Jackson's commendable efforts to provide a broad profile of cowrie shells and cowrie money in the world, were nonetheless somewhat compromised by his occasional oversimplification or overinterpretation. Paul Einzig was the first dedicated scholar to examine cowrie money from an economic and monetary history perspective; unfortunately, his Eurocentric stance could only perceive cowrie shells to have been small money.⁵¹ Paul Pelliot, a scholarly genius with an incomparable knowledge of language and source, carried out an intensive exploration of textual sources, from both east and west, and provided an exhaustive bibliography and an almost perfect summary and analysis of the use of cowrie shells across the world, probably as perfect an ending of this subject as was possible in the 1950s.⁵² He examined cowries in term of various textual records, origin, range, exchange rate, linguistic terms and archaeological findings available in his era, only leaving Africa undiscussed. Jan Hogendorn and Marion Johnson adopted an economic (particularly quantitative) approach to the cowrie trade and cowrie money in West Africa, accompanied with many other scholars of West African history.⁵³ Unlike what Jan Hogendorn and Marion Johnson had believed that "all shells entering West Africa must have been retained there,"⁵⁴ some cowries destined to West Africa were unsold and moved to the New World. Barbara J. Heath has illustrated how the interactions of global, regional and local elements shaped the distribution and functions of cowrie shells by examining their discoveries in Benin, South Dakota, and particularly Virginia, which has made a fresh contribution to the understanding of the transatlantic voyage of cowrie shells and the uses of cowrie shells in the New World as a part of the widely known global story of cowrie shells and cowrie money.⁵⁵ Robert S. Wicks in his studies of money in early Southeast Asia provides a sketch of cowrie money in the region.⁵⁶ As to the region of East Asia, Egami Namio was the first East Asian scholar who made a major effort to discuss the migration of cowrie shell culture.⁵⁷ Within East Asia, Yunnan distinguishes itself by its close relationship with South Asia and Southeast Asia. Paul Pelliot first noticed the existence of cowrie money in Yunnan, followed by Chinese scholars such as Fang Guoyu and Jiang Yingliang, while Hans Ulrich Vogel has made an almost conclusive study of cowrie money in Yunnan from the ninth to the seventeenth centuries.⁵⁸ Li Yung-Ti, and many other scholars besides, has examined the use of cowrie shells amongst the Shang-Zhou nobility in early China.⁵⁹ In addition, archaeological excavations and studies in twentieth century China have provided a great opportunity to cross-check textual records including both oracle and bronze inscriptions on the use of cowrie shells in early China from the Neolithic period to the first Chinese empire. Similar developments on the study of cowrie shells and cowrie money have also been made in India and Southeast Asia. Finally, following colonial interests in the nineteenth century, from the 1960s onwards, many anthropological studies have picked up the topic and examined cowrie or shell money in specific societies, particularly in the Pacific Islands and North America,

which thence provided an opportunity for comparative studies. All these empirical studies and theoretical analyses have established solid local cases and an impressive platform for the potential global understanding of the subject. By contrast, very few world historians have ever discussed the cowrie trade or cowrie money in global history. Cowrie shells have been occasionally mentioned when the slave trade was examined, but they have never been placed at the forefront of any world or global history discussion. A holistic analysis, with diverse sources, based on solid local cases, crossing regional boundaries and for a global conceptualisation, is the bold goal this book sets out to achieve.

Cowrie shells and their uses have been of interest to me ever since the summer of 2000, when I first came to study them during my dissertation research. My dissertation (late monograph) touched upon the cowrie issue in Yunnan.⁶⁰ Over the past eighteen years, I have collected various sources that have inspired me to raise and ponder over many local and cross-regional questions. As a result, a few papers were published and have been revised and incorporated into the current book.⁶¹

World history is criticised for its heavy reliance on secondary literature, which remains largely true for this book. If our fellow historians cannot be trusted, how could we scholars have a meaningful dialogue? Meanwhile, what world historians are doing is more than simply eating off secondary literature. The huge body of research amassed on cowrie shells in India, China, Southeast Asia, West Africa and other regions must be respected by diligent reading, holistic understanding and critical reflection, a disciplinary process no different from any local historian. And in many or most cases, the absorption of secondary scholarship requires the reading of primary sources. A world historian is not born – he or she is firmly based in local or regional training, but attempts to transcend these confines. During my research and writing, I was ever deeply grateful to past and present scholars on this topic. I have also read hundreds of primary sources aside from the secondary works. Archaeological and inscriptional reports and studies in Chinese and English, inscriptional texts and legal codes found in Siam and India but already translated into English, colonial documents including archives, reports, diaries, travel logs, letters and many others besides were all consulted. Visits to many museums and archaeological sites in China and Southeast Asia have been made, in addition to lively dialogues and consultations with scholars of different fields and disciplines.

The ultimate goal of this book is to write a global history of cowrie money. The structure of the book is regionally designated and roughly follows the chronological evolution of the cowrie monetary system. Nevertheless, the use of such terms as India, China, Yunnan or Southeast Asia are only for the convenience of expression and understanding. Indeed, the very study of cowrie money in this book poses a challenge to the boundaries that have formed these regional units.

Including Chapter One, the book consists of ten chapters. Chapter Two, “The Maldives: Procurement and Export,” sets up the background for the book by introducing the Maldives as the primary supplier of cowrie shells, in terms of accounts of its history from early times and up until the seventeenth century.

Chapter Three, “India: In the Beginning,” focuses on the first society that adopted cowrie shells as money. We review how these shells were utilised in India in various cultural and religious rituals and ceremonies and especially how they were utilised as a medium of exchange in local and transregional deals. We then trace the expansion of cowrie money from Bengal to Assam and north India, and discuss its changing role over time in the complicated monetary system in India. In its end, the chapter highlights how the British acknowledged, exploited and finally replaced cowrie money in India.

Chapter Four, “Southeast Asia: Intra-Asian Interactions,” examines Tai, Chinese and European sources to trace the spread and connections of cowrie money in Southeast Asia. The use of cowrie money in Southeast Asia was not only an extension of the Indian influence, but it also was a springboard to spread cowrie use to the borderland between imperial China and Southeast Asia, that is, Yunnan.

Chapter Five, “Yunnan: An Indian Influence in the Southeast Asian-Chinese World,” moves on to discuss the rise and fall of cowrie money in pre-modern Yunnan, an interaction zone between mainland Southeast Asia and China. The case of Yunnan is inspiring because, before its incorporation into the Chinese empire in the Yuan-Ming-Qing period (thirteenth to seventeenth centuries), it was more Southeast Asian than Chinese, ethno-culturally and economically, as is illustrated by the prevalence of cowrie money from the ninth century onwards. The chapter also discusses how cowrie money prospered, continued but gradually declined under the Chinese administration, a result of both local and global factors.

Chapter Six, “Why Not in Early China?,” examines archaeological findings and textual records of cowrie shells in early China. It refutes the South China Sea as the origin and source of cowrie shells for early China, discusses the role of cowrie shells as symbols of wealth, power and social status and analyses the nuance and significance of cowrie shells in understanding the formation of Chinese civilisation and Eurasian communication. It particularly probes the question of why cowrie shells were unable to develop into China’s first general money, even when its imitation versions (bronze cowries) served as one of the earliest forms of money in China.

Chapter Seven, “West Africa: Connecting the Worlds, Old and New,” reviews the western part of the cowrie money sphere. Cowrie money was adopted in West African societies as late as the fourteenth century and from the sixteenth century up until the nineteenth century, the Europeans shipped cowrie shells from the Indian Ocean via Europe to West Africa. They utilised cowrie shells as money to buy slaves in West Africa for the New World, and then palm oil for European industrialisation. This Indian-European-African-Atlantic network contributed to European entry and penetration into Asian and African societies, as much as it aided the creation and enhancement of its American colonial institutions. While cowrie shells helped Europeans to enter and engulf various local economies, they also shaped local societies in West Africa such as the Kingdom of Dahomey. The oversupply of cowrie shells, first from the Indian Ocean and then from coastal East Africa, devalued and eventually destroyed cowrie money in West Africa.

Chapter Eight, “The Pacific Islands and North America: Out of the Bengali System,” introduces a few societies that used cowrie or shell money in the Pacific Islands and North America. Generally speaking, their cowries were not from the Maldives; their cowrie money systems had nothing to do with the Bengal-based system either and so these cases provide a great opportunity for comparison, in understanding the origin of money and the relationship between money and power. “European contact and collapse” seems to be the pattern for shell money in these societies. Nevertheless, cowrie shells from Africa indeed had been shipped to the New World, partially to North America and to the Caribbean, where they might have functioned as a means of exchange.

Chapter Nine, “More Than Just Money,” explores the non-monetary functions of cowrie shells in various societies, including memorabilia and legacies left by the cowrie trade. Following a summary of various functions of cowrie shells across Afro-Eurasia, it elaborates how western scholars in the early twentieth century rediscovered cowrie shells in various societies, and how they, with their European insights and biases, interpreted the social dimensions of cowrie shells in local (non-western) societies. Cultural and religious legacies of the cowrie trade and cowrie money left in African societies and its diaspora are also discussed to illustrate the invention of neo-traditions.

Chapter Ten, “The Cowrie Money World,” shares my reflections on the significance of the cowrie trade and cowrie money in local, regional and world history as well as in economic history. It reaffirms that cowrie money was the first global money and discusses how the cowrie trade and cowrie money, both crossing boundaries in nature, shed some new light to some important issues and paradigms in world history such as the rise of the west, Asian interactions, world system and Zomia. The wax and wane of the cowrie money zone is summarised and a new term of “the cowrie money world” that might serve as a meaningful paradigm in world history is proposed to complete this book.

As mentioned, cowrie shells have lived in a large area that crosses the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. As early as the Neolithic period, cowrie shells have been found in archaeological sites across Afro-Eurasia, as far north as northern Europe and Siberia. Used as ornaments, decoration, high-valued goods and amulets, these cowries were not necessarily of the Maldivian origin, especially considering the varieties of their size and physical form. However, when cowrie money is mentioned, people usually refer to cowries from the Maldives. Thus, this book starts with the Maldives.

Notes

- 1 Constance A. Cook and Paul R. Goldin, *A Source Book of Ancient Chinese Bronze Inscriptions* (Berkeley: The Society for the Study of Early China, 2016), 22. The Yan Hou Zhi Ding (tripod) has been dated to the early Western Zhou (1046 BCE–771 BCE).
- 2 Thomas Phillips, “A Journal of a Voyage,” in *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, ed. Awnsham Churchill and John Churchill (London: Printed by assignment from Messrs. Churchill, for H. Lintot [etc.], 1732), 227–228.

- 3 www.floridamuseum.ufl.edu/cowries/taxon_list.htm; Clarence M. Burgess, *Cowries of the World* (Cape Town, South Africa: Gordon Verhoef Seacomber Publications, 1985), 5; Felix Lorenz and Alex Hubert, *A Guide to Worldwide Cowries* (Wiesbaden: Hemmen, 1993), 24. The number of cowrie species varies, mainly due to the ongoing ambiguity and arbitration in taxonomy and nomenclature. The biological definition of a species is that no interbreeding between individuals of two different species will lead to fertile offspring. In the case of cowries, however, very little is known about the cowries found in deep oceans. Lorenz and Hubert, 1993, 25.
- 4 For example, see J. Wilfred Jackson, *Shells as Evidence of the Migration of Early Culture* (London and New York: Manchester at University Press; Longmans, Green & Co., 1917); J. Gunnar Anderson, *Children of the Yellow Earth* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1934).
- 5 Jackson, 1917, 126.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Burgess, 1985, 8; Lorenz and Hubert, 1993, 23, 28.
- 8 Lorenz and Hubert, 1993, 23.
- 9 Ibid., 6–14.
- 10 Ibid., 21.
- 11 Burgess, 1985, 5–6.
- 12 Ibid., 13.
- 13 Lorenz and Hubert, 1993, 205.
- 14 Ibid., 204.
- 15 Jan Hogendorn and Marion Johnson, *The Shell Money of the Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 7. The current book, unfortunately, omits the use of cowrie shells in Japan and Hawaii.
- 14 Hans Ulrich Vogel, “Cowrie Monies Circulation in Yunnan and Southeast Asia,” in *Marco Polo Was in China: New Evidence from Currencies, Salts and Revenues* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), 229.
- 17 According to the principle of competitive exclusion of closely related species, the rate of these two shells is about 100:1. Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 7.
- 18 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 6.
- 19 Ibid., 6.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid., 6–7.
- 22 Ibid., 7.
- 23 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 7; Vogel, 2013, 230.
- 24 Burgess, 1985, 8.
- 25 Ibid., 9–12.
- 26 Ibid., 8–9.
- 27 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 9.
- 28 Ibid., 9.
- 29 Ibid., 11.
- 30 Here may arise the difference between money and currency. Currency, more specifically fiat currency, is “cold hard cash” that used to be (but no longer is) backed by precious metals such as gold and silver. As such, currencies serve the function of being a country’s primary medium of exchange, in the form of coins or paper. Money, or commodity money, can literally be any type of commodity, from shells to salt, which can serve as a medium of exchange for goods, services and the payment of debts. Unlike fiat currency decreed or issued by governments, commodities like gold and silver have an intrinsic or “use value,” mainly derived from their scarcity. In this book, the term “money” is preferred, as it examines historical commodity monies.
- 31 Nobuhiro Kiyotaki and Randall Wright, “On Money as a Medium of Exchange,” *Journal of Political Economy*, vol. 97, no. 4 (Aug. 1989): 928.

- 32 Ibid., 927.
- 33 Leslie A. White, *The Evolution of Culture, the Development of Civilization to the Fall of Rome* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), 340.
- 34 Rainer Böhme, Nicolas Christin, Benjamin Edelman and Tyler Moore, "Bitcoin: Economics, Technology, and Governance," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, vol. 29, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 215.
- 35 Richard Von Glahn, *Fountain of Fortune: Money and Monetary Policy in China, 1000–1700* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 16.
- 36 Hans Ulrich Vogel, "Cowrie Trade and Its Role in the Economy of Yunnan: From the Ninth to the Mid-Seventeenth Century (Part II)," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 36, no. 4 (1993): 320.
- 37 Martin W. Lewis and Kären Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997). While world history and global history share things in common and yet differ from each other, in this book they are interchangeably used.
- 38 Roland Robertson, "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity," in *Global Modernities*, ed. Mike Featherstones, et al. (London and Thousand Oaks: Sage Publication, 1995), 26; George Ritzer, "Rethinking Globalization: Glocalization/Globalization and Something/Nothing," *Sociological Theory*, vol. 21, no. 3 (Aug. 2003): 207.
- 39 Anthony Reid, "Intra-Asian Networks: Global and Local in Southeast Asian History," *International Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Jan. 2004): 6. Another pioneering effort has been made by Patrick Manning, for example, in his edited book *World History: Global and Local Interactions*. Patrick Manning, ed. *World History: Global and Local Interactions* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2005).
- 40 Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context: Volume 1, Integration on the Mainland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 21.
- 41 Mirani Litster, *Cowry Shell Money and Monsoon Trade: The Maldives in Past Globalizations* (Ph.D. Thesis, The Australian National University, 2016), XV.
- 42 Ritzer, 2003, 207.
- 43 Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage, 1992), 75. For a brief literary review of glocalisation, see Roland Robertson, 2013, "Sitting Glocalization: A Relatively Autobiographic Intervention," in *Global Themes and Local Variations in Organization and Management: Perspectives on Glocalization*, ed. Gili S. Droi, Markus A. Höllerer and Peter Walgenbach (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 25–36. For a review of past globalisation, see Litster, 2016, 18–32.
- 44 Robertson, 1995, 26.
- 45 For a detailed discussion, see Victor Roudometof, "The Glocal and Global Studies," *Globalizations*, vol. 12, no. 5 (Mar. 2015): 774–787.
- 46 Adam McKeown, "Chinese Emigration in Global Context, 1850–1940," *Journal of Global History*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Mar. 2010): 97.
- 47 Sugata Bose, *A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 276–277.
- 48 Takeshi Hamashita, "Introduction to Intra-Asian Networks," *International Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2004): 3.
- 49 Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *Globalization and Culture: Global Mélange* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2015, third edition), 53–54.
- 50 Jackson, 1917; Anderson, 1934.
- 51 Paul Einzig, *Primitive Money: In Its Ethnological, Historical, and Economic Aspects* (Oxford, London, Edinburgh, New York, Toronto, Paris and Braunschweig: Pergamon Press, 1966, second edition).

- 52 Paul Pelliot, *Notes on Marco Polo* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, librairie Adrien-Maisonneuve, English version, 1959), vol. 1, 531–563.
- 53 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986.
- 54 Jan Hogendorn and Marion Johnson, “A New Money Supply Series for West Africa in the Era of the Slave Trade: The Import of the Cowrie Shell from Europe,” *Slavery & Abolition*, vol.3, no.2 (1982): 154.
- 55 Barbara J. Heath, “Commodification, Consumption and Interpretive Complexity: The Contingent Role of Cowries in the Modern World,” in *Material Worlds: Archaeology, Consumption, and the Road to Modernity*, eds. Barbara J. Heath, Eleanor E. Breen and Lori A. Lee, (Routledge, 2017), 56–76; “Cowrie Shells, Global Trade, and Local Exchange: Piecing Together the Evidence for Colonial Virginia,” *Historical Archaeology*, vol. 50, no. 2 (2016): 17–46.
- 56 Robert S. Wicks, *Money, Markets, and Trade in Early Southeast Asia: The Development of Indigenous Monetary System to AD 1400* (Ithaca and New York: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1992).
- 57 Egami Namio, “Migration of Cowrie-Shell Culture East Asia,” *Acta Asiatica*, vol. 26 (1974): 1–52.
- 58 Hans Ulrich Vogel, “Cowrie Trade and Its Role in the Economy of Yunnan: From the Ninth to the Mid-Seventeenth Century (Part I),” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1993): 211–252; 1993, II; 2013. For Chinese studies on cowrie shells in Yunnan, see Yang Shouchuan, ed., *Beibi Yanjiu* (Studies on Cowrie Money) (Kunming: Yunnan University Press, 1997). Qian Jiang has made a recent macro-conceptualisation that takes the Chinese use of cowries into the Indian Ocean economy. Qian Jiang, “Maerdaifu qundao yu Yinduyang de Haibei Maoyi (The Maldiv Islands and the Cowrie Trade in the Indian Ocean),” *Haijiaoshi Yanjiu*, vol. 1 (2017): 26–46.
- 59 Li Yung-Ti, “On the Function of Cowries in Shang and Western Zhou China,” *Journal of East Asian Archaeology*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Jan. 2003): 1–26.
- 60 Bin Yang, *Between Winds and Clouds: The Making of Yunnan (Second Century BCE–20th Century CE)* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, Gutenberg-eBook: www.gutenberg-e.org/yang/index.html); 2009, Hardcopy. For the convenience of citation, the 2009 hardcopy would be used.
- 61 Bin Yang, “Horses, Silver, Cowries: Yunnan in a Global Perspective,” *Journal of World History*, vol. 15, no. 3 (Sept. 2004): 281–322; “The Rise and Fall of Cowry Shells: The Asian Story,” *Journal of World History*, vol. 22, no. 1 (Jan. 2011): 1–26, revised as “Cowry Shells in Eastern Eurasia,” in *The Silk Road: Long-Distance Trade, Culture, and Society: Interwoven History* (the inaugural issue of Association for Central Asian Civilizations and Silk Road Studies, Cambridge, MA: Cambridge Institutes Press, 2014), 250–283; “The Bay of Bengal Connections to Yunnan,” in *Pelagic Passageways: The Northern Bay of Bengal Before Colonialism*, ed. Rila Mukherjee (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2011), 317–342, revised as “The Bengal Connections in Yunnan,” *China Report*, vol. 48, no. 1 and 2 (2012), Special Issue: Studies on India-China Interactions Dedicated to Professor Ji Xianlin (1911–2009): 125–146.

2 The Maldives

Procurement and export

[W]e reached these islands, which are one of the wonders of the world.

– Ibn Battuta¹

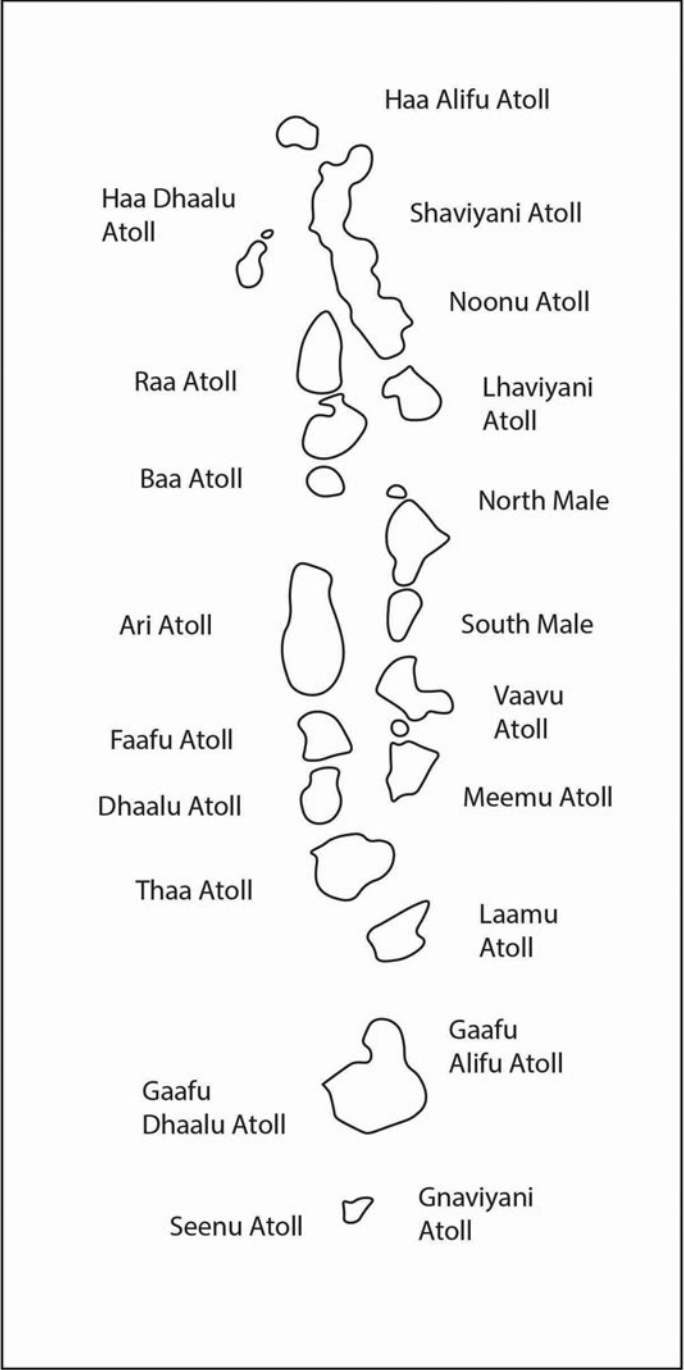
The term “Maldives” has its Sanskrit origin “*maladvipa*” which means “garland of islands,” with “*mala*” as garland and “*dvipa*” as islands, a vivid description of these islets and atolls forming themselves into a kind of garland. Meanwhile, the name of the Maldives is also connected with cowrie shells, illustrating their significance for these islands. In Bengali, the term *māla* means load or ballast, and it also denotes money.² No wonder the Maldives is known as the islands of cowrie shells.

While cowrie shells were economically crucial for the Maldivians until the nineteenth century, some other local products were similarly and even more important for the survival of the local people, and these were fish and coconut palms. These two products not only provided the necessary food for the people but were also processed into dried fish and coir rope, which together with cowrie shells attracted various merchants from Afro-Eurasia.

This chapter first gives a brief history of the Maldives, introduces its famous local products of dried fish and coir rope and then reviews historical accounts of cowrie shells in the Maldives, in terms of their collecting, processing, usage and export. In so doing, it sets the background of and prelude for cowrie money in Bengal and beyond.

The Maldives: a history

Known as the pearls of the Indian Ocean, the islands making up the Maldives lie across the equator, over 1,000 km southwest of Sri Lanka, and between the Lakshadweep Islands to the north and Chagos Islands to the south.³ According to government statistics, the Maldives consists of 1,190 coral reef islands that form an archipelago of 26 major atolls (groups of neighbouring coral islands), and stretches 820 km from north to south and 120 km from east to west (Map 2.1).⁴ Out of this incredibly large number of islands, only 200 islands are inhabited, and 44 islands have been adapted as exclusive resort islands, which the



Map 2.1 The Maldives

government officially claims as uninhabited. The local climate is generally warm and humid; the sun shines all year round, with a daily temperature range usually from 23° in night time to 31° in daytime. There are two monsoon seasons: the northeast monsoon from December to April, bringing dry weather, and the southwest monsoon from May to November, carrying torrential rain. However, because of its equatorial location, few severe storms buffet its shores.⁵ The two monsoon seasons were central in deciding the arrival and departure of ships in the cowrie trade.

Geologically speaking, the Maldives constitutes the central section of the Laccadive-Maldives-Chagos submarine ridge, an extension of the early Tertiary Deccan Traps of India as far as the volcanic zone of La Réunion, while the contemporary surface of this archipelago results from coral reef growth over the last 10,000 years.⁶ The 2,041 reefs with a total reef area of 4,513 km² are crucial for land and people; unfortunately, they are currently vulnerable to population pressure and global environmental changes and its associated sea level rise.⁷

While the Maldives has a history of longer than 2,500 years, its early period remains hazy.⁸ Archaeological studies have indicated that the islands of the Maldives were inhabited as early as 1500 BCE, but it was not until 500 BCE that permanent settlements were established by the Aryans from the Indian subcontinent.⁹ Located in the middle of the Indian Ocean along the ancient marine trade routes from the Pacific to Africa and the Mediterranean World, early inhabitants would have been exposed to many cultures. They adopted Hindu, Buddhist and later Islamic religions and practices. They also bore similarities in maritime culture from Southeast Asia all the way to the island of Madagascar. The local language Dhivehi is a mixture of Arabic, English, Hindi, Sinhalese and Urdu and has features similar to many of the languages spoken in north India, Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, demonstrating cultural interactions from neighbours both near and far.¹⁰

The early history of the Maldives is sketchy, largely relying on sporadic accounts by travellers who stopped there. Before its king converted to Islam, the Maldives had largely been a Buddhist kingdom. Buddhism probably spread to the Maldives in the third century BCE from India and also Sri Lanka. The Maldives prospered, culturally and economically, due to its strategic position in the maritime trade routes. It is said that in 1153, a Muslim saint came from Morocco and converted the king; since then, the Maldives have been ruled by a succession of 93 sultans.¹¹ The sultanate kingdom continued to prosper, as documented by many world travellers, especially Ibn Battuta.

During the age of European colonisation in Asia, the Maldives remained independent except for a brief period of fifteen years under Portuguese rule. In 1507, the Portuguese “discovered” the Maldives and forced the sultan to deliver an annual quantity of coir rope made from coconut fibre for their imperial navy. In 1558, the Portuguese seized the Maldivian throne, established a small garrison and tried to administrate the country from Goa, but in just fifteen years, they were ousted by a local revolt.¹² The Portuguese interregnum of the sixteenth century, brief as it was, has left a deep political and cultural imprint. The struggle

against foreign controls as a formative moment in Maldivian conceptualisation of their identity has continued to this day.¹³ In the mid-seventeenth century, the Dutch replaced the Portuguese and dominated Ceylon, but did not impose direct control over the Maldives. In 1796, the British repelled the Dutch from Ceylon. In 1887, the Maldives became a Protectorate in an agreement signed between the Maldivians and the British. The British took charge of foreign affairs but left the internal administration of the Maldives to its people.¹⁴ This situation remained thus until 26 July 1965, when the newly independent Maldives abolished the sultanate in a national referendum and established a republic.

One may wonder why, over its history, the Maldives was seldom invaded or occupied for long (as the Portuguese failed to do) by neighbours or outsiders, considering its rich resources and strategic location, especially its cowrie shells. Geography plays a key part in the answer to this question. The Maldives is far from the Indian subcontinent, and even far from Sri Lanka. A long-distance naval campaign proved impossible in the pre-modern era, considering the difficulty of logistics and supplies. The sea was also a huge barrier for any potential invaders and helped protect these islands. The very structure of the country was an effective impediment, with its plethora of islands and islets grouped into a double string of atolls, and great rings of living coral growing outwards and creating lagoons of up to 64 km across. The coral reefs hidden below the surface of the water, were nightmarish hazards for navigators, as the Arab and Chinese travellers well knew.

Ibn Battuta provided a vivid description of the reef labyrinth. The islands amounted to

about two thousand in all. Each hundred or less of them form a circular cluster resembling a ring, this ring having one entrance like a gateway, and only through this entrance can ships reach the islands. When a vessel arrives at any one of them it must need[s] take one of the inhabitants to pilot it to the other island. They are so close-set that on leaving one island the tops of the palms on another are visible. If a ship loses its course it is unable to enter and is carried by the wind to the Coromandel coast or Ceylon.¹⁵

The difficulty in navigation certainly helped the Maldives. "The Indian pirates do not raid or molest them, as they have learned from experience that anyone who seizes anything from them speedily meets misfortune."¹⁶ Ibn Battuta's comments make an excellent annotation.

Lastly, the large number of islands and islets would make it very difficult for any foreign authorities to oversee. This factor partially accounts for why, historically, maritime trade prospered with few harassments and invasions by Bengal and Chola, and only one occupation for a short period by the Portuguese. After all, the Maldives did not in any way pose a threat to neighbouring kingdoms such as Ceylon and Bengal. Quite the contrary, the Maldives proved to be a friendly and resourceful commercial partner to many throughout its history.

The Maldives are now well known to numerous travellers for their scenic beauty and constitute a favourite site for honeymoons. Few visitors may realise that these islets were once crucial for Afro-Eurasian cultures and economies, as they provided important materials for peoples, near or far, from the early times onwards.¹⁷ Dried fish and coir rope produced in the Maldives for sea voyages, for example, were well known for their superior taste and quality, respectively. This book focuses especially on the third (but by no means third in rank of importance) exported natural resource in the Maldives, the cowrie shells that had almost been monopolised by the Maldivians for many centuries.

Dried fish and coir rope

Fishing was crucial to the Maldivians for both food and trade. The islands' nearly ideal warm and shallow waters cultivated a rich variety of fish that provide protein until a devastating phase of coral bleaching has started over recent years. From early times, dried fish became an important trading product to sell to foreign ships. J. de Barros of the mid-sixteenth century, a clerk in the India Office in Lisbon, mentioned the local products of the Maldives, based on reports he had received:

These islands produce abundance of fish, of which great quantities of *moxama* are made. It is exported as merchandise to many quarters, and gives a good profit, as do also fish oil, cocos and jaggery, which the last is made from the cocos in the same manner of sugar.¹⁸

His mention of coconut points out another important local product: coconut palms, which grow abundantly on the islands. The coconut palm has been declared the national tree and have been incorporated into the national emblem for the Republic of the Maldives.

Coconut was not important just for direct consumption but was also made into other foods. "From the fruit are obtained milk, oil, and honey," Ibn Battuta wrote, "With the honey is made pastry, which they eat with the dried coconut. All the food made from the coconut, and the fish eaten at the same time, effect an extraordinary and unequalled vigour in manhood."¹⁹

Coconut was also vital for infrastructure, transportation, house building and ship building. It was used to make coir matting and coir rope, the latter being an essential equipment for ships. Coir, a fibrous material, strong, resilient and highly resistant to abrasion, is fashioned from the coarse husk of the coconut shell. The making of coir rope is a long process that takes many months and is indeed a test of patience as much as technology. Raw husks are first buried in muddy areas in a lagoon or swamp, where saltwater soaks into the husks. After a few months, the saltwater-sodden husks are dug up and the hard shells that cover the husks are removed. A handful of the fabric is held at one end and placed on a hard wooden surface, and wooden mallets are used to beat the husk, thus to separate the fibres from the pith and the outer skin. The separated fibres are washed with sea water

and dried under the sun. When completely dry, they are ready to be spun into rope, mats or brooms by Maldivian craftsmen. Coir rope produced in the Maldives was well known and popular amongst local and foreign sailors, because of its high tensile strength and ability to withstand continuous exposure to sea water.

François Pyrard, a French navigator, spent nearly five years in the Maldives after the shipwreck of his boat on the reef of Horsburgh Atoll on 2 July 1602.²⁰ Pyrard was one of the four lucky survivors amongst the forty-odd sailors and received exceptional treatment from the local inhabitants, partly due to his willingness to learn the local language. He lodged with a lord, an advisor to the sultan and was allowed to travel freely from island to island.²¹ He thus leaves us with a deep, vivid and detailed description of daily life in the Maldives of the seventeenth century. Pyrard noticed “merchants from all quarters” who arrived “to take away what the Maldives produce in abundance”; he recorded the importance of “the coco tree, which grows naturally at the islands without any cultivation, they make many sorts of goods in demand with the foreigners: for instance, cordage, with which all the vessels of the Indies are equipped”; and he emphasised that “the greatest trade is in cordage.”²²

The fish of the Maldives impressed Pyrard too:

The Maldives have also an infinite abundance of fish of all kinds . . . And so rich is the fishery, that not only have they always enough to fill their own bellies withal, but they also sell a large quantity, both cooked and dried, to foreigners. This commodity is in great demand in all parts of India, notably in Sumatra, whither whole shiploads are carried.²³

Pyrard took the trouble to write in detail about the process. Fish was so abundant that within three or four hours, a boat could be fully loaded; the fish caught there were commonly called black fish or *Cobolly masse* in the local language, because of the black colour of the fish. The fish were then cooked in sea water and dried in the sun upon trays. Pyrard noted that “there is great traffic in them, not only in the country, but throughout the rest of India, where they are in great request.”²⁴ The business of the export of products and the Indian Ocean trade network observed by François Pyrard indeed had a much earlier origin, as recorded by many travellers before him.²⁵ The following sections review those accounts that mention the processing in and export of cowrie shells from the Maldives.

Cowrie shells: in the eyes of the Arabs

Textual references to the Maldives appear fairly late in the actual length of Indian Ocean history. During his visit to Ceylon in the mid-sixth century, Cosmas the monk was probably the first person to mention the Maldives. He talked about a number of islands, close to one another and all with fresh water and coconut palms.²⁶ Then a long gap exists before the Arabs in the ninth century continued the story.

Suleiman, a traveller in the ninth century, claimed that there was a country made up of a vast number of up to 1,900 islands that were planted with coconut trees and that these islands were under the rule of a woman; he was the first person to mention cowrie shells, but not without misunderstanding some of their uses.²⁷ “Their money consists of cowries. The queen stores these cowries in her treasuries.”²⁸ He was also the first writer to record how cowries were collected. “The cowries come up to the surface of the water and contain a living creature. A coco tree branch is thrown into the water, and the cowries attach themselves to it. The cowry is called *Al Kabtadj*.”²⁹ Suleiman is correct in almost everything except for his assertion that cowries were used as an actual form of money in the Maldives. His misunderstanding, however, could be utilised to speculate that in some areas such as Bengal that he may have heard about or visited, cowrie shells were employed as a form of money.

Suleiman’s information seems to have been copied by El Mas’udi, who visited Ceylon in 916 CE. El Mas’udi calculated that the islands amounted to 2,000 in number and he persisted in Suleiman’s misconception of cowries being used as money when he claimed that the queen had no other money but cowries; he provided interesting details on the collection of shells, as he added that when the queen

sees her treasure diminishing, she orders her islanders to cut coco branches with their leaves, and to throw them upon the surface of the water. To these the creatures attach themselves and are then collected and spread upon the sandy beach, where the sun rots them, and leaves only empty shells, which are then carried to the treasury.³⁰

After this, El Mas’udi provided detailed information on the whole process of how living shells were processed before being stored in the treasury. Later writers could hardly add any further details to an account of this process.

Around 1030 CE, another Arab traveller, Alberuni, shared his insights when he called the Maldives “the islands of cowries” and the Laccadives “the island of cords,” based on their chief exports.³¹ Another traveller, Edrisi (1099–1186 CE), went on to claim that “Commerce is carried on by means of shells,” and “shells which compose the royal treasure are found on the surface of the water in calm weather. They throw into the sea pieces of coco-wood, and the shell-fish attach themselves thereto. They are called *El Kendj* [probably *Kaudha*].”³² The accounts of these two Arab travellers on the uses of cowrie shells in the Maldives are more or less identical. Cowrie shells constituted a major local product and while neither traveller detailed the export of cowries, they did say that these shells were primarily for exporting. They also both erred when claiming that cowrie shells were used as money in the Maldives.

Ibn Battuta in the Maldives

Before the arrival of Ibn Battuta (1304–1377), western travellers contributed little if any knowledge on the Maldives, except that they reported that there were

over 10,000 islands there. During his almost thirty years of travel (1325–1354), the Moroccan Ibn Battuta crossed Africa, the Arab Peninsula, Europe, India, Southeast Asia and China, and stayed in the Maldives twice, all together over eighteen months.³³ Ibn Battuta's first visit to the Maldives was from the beginning of 1343 to the middle of 1344, about a year and half long; his second visit took place at the end of 1346 when he returned to see a son born after his first departure.³⁴ He had in fact married four wives in the Maldives, so it is perhaps no wonder that he left behind some of the most detailed descriptions of almost every aspect of life in these islands.

The processing of cowries in the Maldives and the cowrie trade between the Maldives and Bengal came to his attention:

The inhabitants of these islands use cowrie shells as money. This is an animal which they gather in the sea and place in pits, where its flesh disappears, leaving its white shells. They are used for buying and selling at the rate of four hundred thousand shells for a gold dinar, but they often fall in value to twelve hundred thousand for [a gold] dinar. They sell them in exchange for rice to the people of Bengal, who also use them as money, as well as to the Yemenites, who use them instead of sand [as ballast] in their ships. These shells are used also by negroes in their land; I saw them being sold at Mállí and Gawgaw at the rate of 1,150 or a gold dinar.³⁵

Ibn Battuta's observation was crucial, as, by his time in the 1340s, cowrie shells were being used as money in West Africa, which supports the existence of a cowrie money system that expanded as far west as West Africa.

Understanding the role of cowries in Bengal, Ibn Battuta himself got involved in the cowrie trade. When he planned to leave the Maldives, he sold some jewels for cowries and hired a vessel to Bengal; however, the jewels were the gift from a minister who planned to marry his daughter to Ibn Battuta. When he heard the news that Ibn Battuta was leaving, he asked for the jewels to be returned. Ibn Battuta replied, "I have bought cowries with some of the jewels, so do what you like with those."³⁶ The answer was, "We gave you gold, not cowries." So Ibn Battuta "went to the merchants, asking them to buy back the cowries."³⁷ Under the pressure from the minister, the merchants refused, and Ibn Battuta decided to stay and get married. As was suggested by his new father-in-law, Ibn Battuta sent one of his companions to Bengal to sell these cowries, accompanied by a man sent by his father-in-law.³⁸

Ibn Battuta's second visit to the Maldives was to see his son. After a stay of five days, he decided to leave, and was presented with gifts of "robes and hundreds of thousands of cowries."³⁹ The frequent exchange of cowrie shells with gold and other materials, as well as the use of cowries as money in Bengal, Yemen and Mali where he had travelled probably caused Ibn Battuta to assume that cowries equalled money in the Maldives. After all, cowrie shells did assume certain monetary functions such as being a representation of wealth and frequently changing hands in gift giving.

What Ibn Battuta witnessed was a commercially prosperous society that contributed to and simultaneously benefitted from maritime trade, because of its location, abundant materials for consumption and trade and local hospitality. For local exports, “from these islands there are exported the fish we have mentioned, coconuts, cloths, and cotton turbans, as well as brass utensils, of which they have a great many, cowrie shells, and *qanbar*”,⁴⁰ and local coir rope also impressed him. Coir rope was made from coconut. “It has fibre like hair, out of which they make ropes, which they use instead of nails to bind their ships together and also as cables.”⁴¹

These cords are exported to India, China and Yemen, and are better than hemp. The Indian and Yemenite ships are sewn together with them, for the Indian Ocean is full of reefs, and if a ship is nailed with iron nails it breaks up on striking the rocks, whereas if it is sewn together with cords, it is given a certain resilience and does not fall into pieces.⁴²

As a man who had travelled on ships for many years, Ibn Battuta could well appreciate the high-quality rope cord from the Maldives for international markets. Ibn Battuta also noted that local fish were exported to India, China and Yemen.⁴³ He was amazed by the coconut palm and its products. “The coco-palm is one of the strangest of trees and looks exactly like a date-palm. The nut resembles a man’s head, for it has marks like eyes and a mouth, and the contents, when it is green, are like the brain.”⁴⁴ This fruit was almost magical to him:

Amongst its properties are that it strengthens the body, fattens and adds redness to the face. If it is cut open when it is green, it gives a liquid deliciously sweet and fresh. After drinking this one takes a piece of the rind as a spoon and scoops out the pulp inside the nut. This tastes like an egg that has been broiled but not quite cooked and is nourishing.⁴⁵

His impression of coconut juice seemed quite the same as my mother felt when she, a peasant in the south of the Yangzi Delta, saw the drinking of coconut for the first time in a revolutionary movie in Mao’s China. She described that scene in the movie many years later and recalled it many times, as far as I remember. She told me that she thought that the taste must be very, very sweet. Her first taste of coconut at Amoy, a few decades later, disappointed her greatly.

However, the magical power of the coconut seems to be much more than is described above:

One of its peculiarities is that oil, milk and honey are extracted from it. The honey is made in this fashion. They cut a stalk on which the fruit grows, leaving two fingers’ length, and on this they tie a small bowl, into which the sap drips. If this had been done in the morning, a servant climbs up again in the evening with two bowls, one filled with water. He pours into the other the sap that has collected, then washes the stalk, cuts off a small

piece, and ties on another bowl. The same thing is repeated next morning until a good deal of the sap has been collected, when it is cooked until it thickens. It then makes an excellent honey, and the merchants of India, Yemen, and China buy it and take it to their own countries, where they manufacture sweetmeats from it.⁴⁶

Ibn Battuta was surprised to find that local women in the Maldives “do not cover the hands, not even their queen does so.”⁴⁷ He felt very uncomfortable, as most women “wear only an apron from their waist to the ground, the rest of their bodies being uncovered”; in his own court, Ibn Battuta “tried to put an end to this practice and ordered them to wear clothes, but I met with no success.”⁴⁸ Meanwhile, he seemed to enjoy very much the fact that servant girls were very cheap, and he had quite a few in his house. Nor did Ibn Battuta hide his joy when he mentioned that “it is easy to get married in these islands on account of the smallness of the dowries and the pleasure of their women’s society.”⁴⁹ Easy marriage (and divorce) not only attracted Ibn Battuta, but probably also other sailors and merchants. “When ships arrive, the crew marry wives, and when they are about to sail they divorce them. It is really a sort of temporary marriage. The women never leave their country.”⁵⁰

People tend to think of islands as dull, backward places, except for their scenic beauty (which again, most visitors soon tire of) and the fresh fish diet, but the Maldives that Ibn Battuta lived in was rich and dynamic in every way. The islands provided almost everything that local and foreign people could need and desire, and it exported many things to distant lands. Perhaps this has been the essential nature of the Maldives throughout history: abundant and hospitable.

Mentions of India, Yemen and China occur quite often in Ibn Battuta’s accounts of the Maldives, indicating the broad trading network and probably diverse backgrounds of the merchants who visited the islands. These three vast areas denoted the Indian, Arab and Chinese worlds, and spanned a vast area to the north, east and west, with a Maldives-centred view. In addition, many specific areas and merchants were mentioned, such as Coromandel, Ceylon, Bengal, Persia and so on. The Maldives in the age of Ibn Battuta was closely connected to the international world, as confirmed by its numerous and varied visitors.

Chinese accounts⁵¹

The record Ibn Battuta left about life in the Maldives was preceded by Wang Dayuan, a Chinese contemporary who travelled twice to the Indian Ocean during the 1330s and visited the Maldives in the winter of 1330 until the spring of 1331. Wang was impressed with the Maldives (*Beiliu*; 北溜), stating that it was made up of hundreds and thousands of islands and islets (*qianyu wandao*; 千屿万岛); he recorded how changes in the monsoon winds might blow ships to the islands; he noted the danger of the reefs and rocks just under the sea’s surface and more importantly, he listed coir rope (*yesi suo*; 椰子索), cowrie shells (*bazi*; 贝子), dried fish (*yugan*; 鱼干) and cotton cloth (*da shoujin bu*; 大手巾布) as

local products. The Maldives did not produce cloth, and it seems that the Maldivians imported cloth from India and processed it in the Maldives for export. For cowrie shells, he understood that merchants shipped these shells to Pegu (*Wudie*; 乌爹) and Bengal (*Pengjiala*; 朋加刺) in exchange for rice and that each shipload of shells could exchange more than a shipload of rice; he specifically mentioned that cowries in Orissa and Bengal were used as money.⁵² Wang Dayuan's information perfectly matches that of Ibn Battuta. Unlike Ibn Battuta, however, Wang Dayuan understood that cowrie shells did not function as actual money in the Maldives.

One century later than Wang Dayuan and about sixty or seventy years after Ibn Battuta's accounts, Zheng He's treasure fleet stopped by in India, Ceylon and the Maldives. Ma Huan, an interpreter on the fleet, and Gong Zhen, a military solidier who later was promoted as a secretary on the fleet, both listed the same local exports from the islands, including cowrie shells.⁵³ They provided details on the geography of the Maldives. These islands were surrounded by an ocean; the atolls formed natural gates; they were mainly grouped into eight clusters, in addition to over 3,000 smaller groups; local people were of the Islamic persuasion; coconuts were so abundant that even foreign merchants came to buy them; local ships were not made by iron nails but bound by coir ropes; a kind of fish (*majiaoyu*; 马鲛鱼) was dried and exported, as was certain cloth; and cowrie shells were piled into mountains and when the flesh had decayed, they were sold to Siam and Bengal, where they were used as money.⁵⁴ Very importantly, they reported that Chinese ships occasionally visited the Maldives to purchase ambergris (*longxianxiang*; 龙涎香).⁵⁵ The mention of Chinese ships in the Maldives is significant, as it might explain why in the Jiangnan area (Lower Yangzi Delta) during the Yuan-Ming period (1279–1644) there were numerous cowrie shells stored in government treasuries. The shells might have been used as ballast from the Maldives to China, as did other ships bound for Bengal, Pegu or Siam.

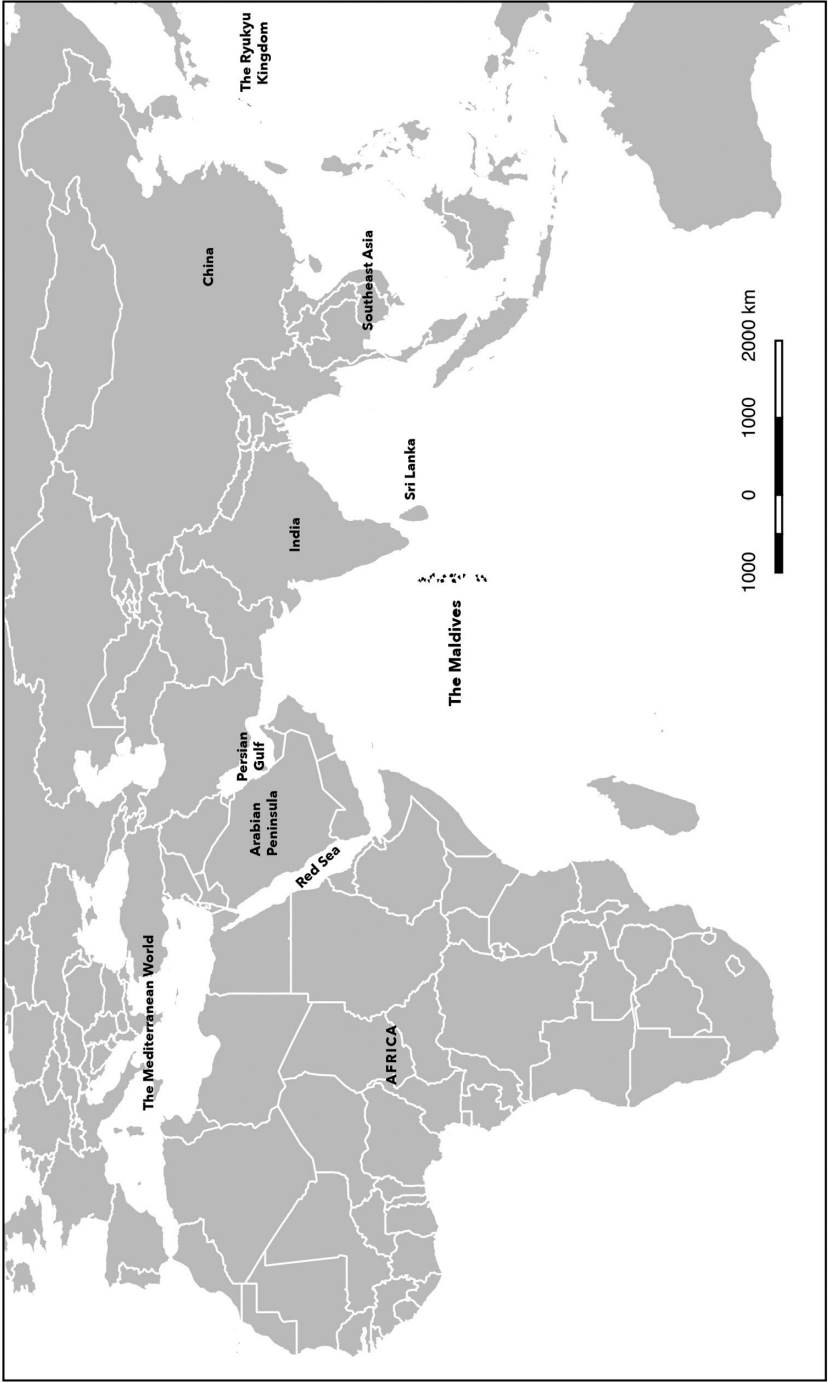
The Chinese name for the Maldives is worthy of attention. Wang Dayuan called the Maldives *Beilín*. Some scholars argue that the term *Beilín* was a phonetic translation of Malé, capital of the Kingdom.⁵⁶ Rockhill indeed points out the *Beilín* literally means “northern island,” which I agree with.⁵⁷ Xie Fang explains that the character *bei* means “north” or “northern,” while *lín* refers to “islets surrounded by turbulence.”⁵⁸ The character *lín* seems a bit puzzling. One basic meaning of the character *lín* is “turbulent current,” which might be the basis for Xia Fang's interpretation. In this case, *beilín* means “northern islands,” which accords with “garland of island,” the Sanskrit meaning of the Maldives. As there was a northern *lín*, there should have been a southern one, so where was that southern one? Xie Fang points out that the southern one would have been the southern atolls of the Maldives, including Suvadiva Atoll and Addu Atoll; he further explains that the southern atolls were not necessarily part of the trading route, and that Wang Dayuan only paid a visit to the northern part of the Maldives.⁵⁹ Xie's remarks have been supported by the physical features of the Maldives, as considerable differences exist between the northern and the southern atolls.⁶⁰ R. Michael Feener points out that the southern atolls are different, in terms of

dialect, and in political relations with Malé during the Islamic period; nevertheless, they were obviously involved in transregional exchanges.⁶¹ On the Fuamulah Atoll, a southernmost one of the Maldives, there exist remains of extensive Buddhist ritual complex, and in early 2018, Dr. Feener's team "unearthed a large statue base, underneath which a coral stone casket contained a devotional deposit of cowrie shells."⁶² Roderich Ptak, however, argues that *liu* is a transliteration of *diu* (island), "derived from Sanskrit *dvīpa* (other forms: *diva*, *dive*, *diba* etc.)," and that "most likely it has nothing to do with the meaning of 'current.'"⁶³

Nevertheless, *liu* referring to the atolls can be supported by other Chinese names for atolls in the Maldives and in the Indian Ocean. Ma Huan indeed called the Maldives *liushan* (溜山), literally meaning "atoll mountains," a vivid name for the numerous atolls and islets. He further described the atolls as being like stone gates for a city, and eight groups of atolls (*liu*) were formed; each and every name for the eight groups consisted of the character *liu*, such as *Sha liu* (沙溜; Sand Atoll), *Renbuzhi liu* (人不知溜; People-Know-Nothing Atoll), *Qilai liu* (起来溜; "*qilai*" probably being the transliteration of "Kalai" derived from Kalai Island), *Maliqi liu* (麻里奇溜; perhaps Maamigili Island), *Jiabannian liu* (加半年溜), *Jiajia liu* (加加溜), *Anduli liu* (安都里溜) and *Guanyu liu* (官屿溜; literally meaning Official Islet Atoll, referring to Malé).⁶⁴ Later Ming texts also mentioned the nine *liu* of the Maldives.

An intriguing note made by Wang Dayuan was the so-called *liubu* (溜布; *liu* cloth) in *Xiali* (下里), probably Alwaye, Cochin, where people tied *liu* cloth into clothing (*ji liubu*; 系溜布).⁶⁵ Rockhill explains that it "is a cotton fabric made in the *Liu* (Maldivian) islands."⁶⁶ That is why Wang Dayuan called it *liu* cloth, as he understood its origin. The *liu* cloth was exported to India and probably also Southeast Asia, as Wang Dayuan noted the same form of clothing custom in *Luowei* (罗卫), probably Rājapurī (Ratburi) in the Gulf of Siam, located within the previous Dvarapati Kingdom.⁶⁷ The *liu* cloth was noticed by Europeans such as Duarte Barbosa, a Portuguese soldier in the Indian Ocean between 1501 and 1517, who observed that "men of these island wear very fine kerchiefs on their heads, so close-woven and beautiful that our workwomen could not produce the like except with a wrong and a right side."⁶⁸ In addition to the *liu* cloth, dried fish in Ma Huan's book was directly called *liuyu* (溜鱼; *liu* fish), popularly purchased by merchants from various countries.⁶⁹

It is expected that the maritime archaeology of the Maldives might give us a glimpse of the Chinese commercial involvement in the islands.⁷⁰ Indeed, Chinese ceramics of almost all kinds, such as Longquan celadon and blue-white porcelain, dated in the first and second millennium CE, have been discovered in the Maldives.⁷¹ In the Kuruhinna Tharaagadu Ceramic Assemblage, the Chinese ceramic ware "were all serving vessels," and "formed the largest portion of the sample," dating from the twelfth to seventeenth centuries.⁷² In addition to chinaware, a Chinese bronze coin, dated to the beginning of the Northern Song period (the end of the tenth century) was also discovered.⁷³ It is highly likely that this coin was brought by a Southeast Asian merchant, although we cannot exclude a Chinese or an Indian one too.



Map 2.2 The Maldives and Its World

In conclusion, both Ibn Battuta and his Chinese counterparts found that the Maldives was a prosperous trading centre that supplied cowrie shells to Bengal, Pegu and Siam, where these shells functioned as money (Map 2.2). Such a textual impression has been also supported by preliminary archaeological findings.

“A great emporium for all parts”

When the Europeans led by the Portuguese arrived in the Indian Ocean, they quickly understood that the Maldives had long served as an important trading centre in the Asian world. On 8 July 1497, Vasco da Gama led a fleet of four ships with a crew of 170 men from Lisbon, and on 20 May 1498, the fleet arrived in Kappadu near Calicut. In the following years, with much effort and considerable trouble, the Portuguese began to make their presence felt along the coasts of India and the Indian Ocean.

In 1503, near Calicut, the Portuguese captured four *gundras* from the Maldives that were carrying local products such as cowries and dried fish and foreign goods such as “silks, both coloured and white, of diverse fabrics and quantities, and many brilliant tissues of gold.”

Gundras are built of palm-timber, joined and fastened with pegs of wood without any bolts. The sails also are made of mats of the dry leaves of the palm. These vessels were laden with *cairo* and *caury*, which are small white shells found among the islands in such quantity that ships make their cargoes of them. In these a great trade is carried on with Bengal, where they are current as money.⁷⁴

The Portuguese also noticed that the Maldives was “a great emporium for all parts, and the Moors of India frequent them, bartering their salt and earthenware, which are not made at the islands, and also rice and silver.”⁷⁵ Numerous ships “pass among the islands on their way from the coast of Bengal to the Straits of Mecca,” the Portuguese travellers claimed, and the Maldivians obtained silk, gold and cotton thread, much of which was processed and then sold.⁷⁶ In 1515, a Portuguese who had just completed his trip to India wrote in Goa that the Maldives produced small shells “which are much sought after in the Kingdom of Cambaia and in Bengal, where they pass current as small change for they hold it to be cleaner and better than copper.”⁷⁷ Cambaia (Khambhat), also known as Cambay, was once an important trading centre in Gujarat.

Duarte Barbosa, the Portuguese soldier mentioned above, was impressed by the technology and skill of the ship construction in the Maldives:

In these islands of Maldio, they build many large ships of palm-wood, held together with matting, because they have no other timber there. In these they voyage to the mainland. These ships have keels and are of very considerable capacity. The islanders build also small rowing-crafts, like brigantines or fustas: these are of great strength, admirably built and extremely light;

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they serve chiefly for going from one island to another, though they are also used for crossing over to Malabar.⁷⁸

He continued to describe the Maldives as a maritime commercial centre, connecting east and west:

To these islands come many ships of the Moors from China, Maluco, Peegu, Malaca, Camatra, Benguala and Ceilam, in their passage to the Red Sea. Here they take in water, provisions and other necessities for the voyage. Sometimes they arrive in such battered condition that they have to be discharged and abandoned.⁷⁹

He also observed the role of cowrie money in Bengal, claiming that cowrie shells exported from the Maldives were “great traffic with Cambay and Bengal, where they are used for petty cash, being considered better than copper.”⁸⁰

In the mid-sixteenth century, J. de Barros, a clerk in Lisbon, having never himself visited the east, but based on reports sent from India, provided vivid information on cowrie shells in the Maldives:

There is also a kind of shellfish, as small as a snail, but differently shaped, with a hard, white, lustrous shell, some of them, however, being so highly coloured and lustrous that, when made into buttons and set in gold, they look like enamel. With these shells for ballast many ships are laden for Bengal and Siam, where they are used for money, just as we use small copper money for buying things of little value.⁸¹

He also recorded that the Portuguese had begun to participate in the cowrie trade:

And even to this kingdom of Portugal, in some years as much as two or three thousand quintals are brought by way of ballast; they are then exported to Guinea, and the kingdoms of Benin and Congo, where also they are used for money, the Gentiles of the interior in those parts making their treasure of it.⁸²

This is one of the earliest texts that distinctly stated that Europeans shipped cowries from the Indian Ocean to West Africa.

J. de Barros’s description of cowrie fishing is also revealing:

Now the manner in which the islanders gather these shells is this: –they make large bushes of palm leaves tied together so as not to break, which they cast into the sea. To these the shellfish attach themselves in quest of food and when the bushes are all covered with them, they are hauled ashore and the creatures collected. All are then buried in the earth till the fish within have rotted away. The shells (*buzios* as we, and *Igoros* as the negroes, call

them) are then washed in the sea, becoming quite white, and so dirtying the hands less than copper money. In this kingdom (Portugal) a quintal of them is worth from three to ten cruzados, according as the supply from India is large or small.⁸³

His last few words illustrate how the supply of cowries from India caused their price in Portugal to fluctuate.

Local woven cloth, mentioned by the Chinese, was noticed by de Barros in Lisbon:

The fabrics made by these islanders are silk and cotton, and no finer stuffs are made in all these parts. The principal manufactory is at the island *Cendú* and *Cudú*, where they are said to be better weavers than in Bengal or Coromandel.

J. de Barros understood that both silk and cotton for the textile industry in the Maldives were imported, “the islands lacking both these commodities, and also rice, whereof their whole supply is imported.”⁸⁴

It is interesting that while the Maldives sultan was pleased with the expansion of the cowrie trade promoted by the European participation, he preferred not to have any direct trade with either the Portuguese, the Dutch or the English. In the 1660s, the king of the islands even wrote a letter to the local ruler of Balasore, a centre of the cowrie trade in Orissa, asking the latter to request the emperor of the Mughal to prohibit the visits of both Dutch and English vessels to the Maldives.⁸⁵ Evidently, the king of the Maldives preferred to monopolise the cowrie trade by continuing trade with the old partners such as the Bengali and the Ceylonese. European interventions into his water territory would jeopardise his power and rights, and his worry was justified.

The cowrie trade in the eyes of François Pyrard

When François Pyrard arrived in Malé after his shipwreck, he found the Portuguese there already involved in the cowrie trade and demonstrating hostility to him and his fellow Frenchmen:

At first, when our people came there, a Portuguese ship of 400 tons was at anchor in the roads, having come from Cochin with a full cargo of rice, to take away *bolys*, or shells, to Bengal, where they are in great demand.⁸⁶

It seems that the Portuguese, attracted by the evident profits, had quickly joined the cowrie trade.

Pyrard wrote copiously about the cowrie trade in the Maldives with some fresh details not seen in earlier records. For example, he mentioned that cowries were “fished twice a month, three days before and three days after the new moon, as well as at the full and none would be got at any other season.”⁸⁷ He noted that

the gathering was done by women who “gather them on the sands and in the water up to their waists”; that the export quantity was of “an infinite quantity” and that “in one year, I have seen thirty or forty whole ships loaded with them without other cargo.”⁸⁸ He also noticed that Bengal was the primary market for these shells, and concluded that the cowrie trade helped the Maldivians to “make a marvelous profit all over India.”⁸⁹

François Pyrard’s account of cowries in the Maldives did not differ much from the earlier accounts, except for his mention of cowrie shells being used for tax. The king “imposes on his subjects an ordinary tax, according to their means, consisting of coco-cordage, of shells called *Boly*,” and of dried fish.⁹⁰ This meant that the king required local people to pay tax-in-kind using local products, which he then went on to sell to traders. Such a practice, understandably, might have begun much earlier.

Pyrard went on to describe the prosperity of maritime trade in the Maldives, at which almost all Asian peoples stopped:

There is a great trade at the Maldives, and they are much frequented for their commodities. You see merchants from all quarters, as Malabar men from Barcelor, Onor, Bacalor, Cananor, Calecut, Tananor, Cochin, Coilam, Cael; Guzeratis from Cambaye, Surat and Chaul; Arabs, Persians, men of Bengal, St. Thomas and Masulipatam, Ceylon and Sumatra, who bring goods that are in demand there, and take away what the Maldives produce in abundance.⁹¹

In addition to being exported, and probably due to their trading value, cowrie shells were utilised in many cultural and religious ceremonies in the Maldives. Ibn Battuta documented that the wedding house was hung with cloths, “and cowries are placed thereon.”⁹² During festivals, “The master of each house was stationed at his gate, and when the Vizier passed, he threw before his feet a piece of silk or cotton. The slaves of the minister appropriated these, as well as cowries placed by the way.”⁹³ It seems that cowries as well as other precious goods such as silk and cotton were used to show respect to the Vizier. Pyrard observed the use of cowries in burials. “From the house to the place of burial they scatter over the road *bolys* (which are little shells, of which I shall speak in their place), to the end that the poor may collect them and make a profit.”⁹⁴ Obviously, cowrie shells had been part of local culture for a long time.

It is fairly clear that by the time of the arrival of the Europeans, the Maldives had established its strategic status in the international maritime trade. Its significance resulted not only from its natural location, but also from its rich resources and products such as coir rope, dried fish and cowrie shells, in addition to re-exported goods such as silk and cotton cloth. It would be no exaggeration to say that in this period, most Asian people involved in maritime trade would have visited or heard about this kingdom of over 10,000 islands. When the Europeans arrived, they quickly joined the cowrie trade sourced by the Maldives, shipping these shells to as far as India and West Africa.

Notes

- 1 Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325–1354*, trans. and selected by H.A.R. Gibb, with an Introduction and Notes (Abingdon and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul LTD, paperback, 2011), 241.
- 2 Susmita Basu Majumdar and Sharmistha Chatterjee, “Cowries in Eastern India: Understanding Their Role as Ritual Objects and Money,” *Journal of Bengal Art*, vol. 19 (2014): 44.
- 3 Paul Kench, “Maldives,” in David Hopley (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Modern Coral Reefs* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer Science + Business Media B.V., 2011), 648.
- 4 “Discover Maldives.” www.themaldives.com/maldives/. Accessed on 17 February 2017.
- 5 “Maldives Weather and Climate.” www.mymaldives.com/maldives/weather/. Accessed on 17 February 2017. For a geological history of the Maldives, see Litster, 2016, 58–61. Litster’s thesis examines the Maldivian archaeological record to address the role of the islands in past globalisation.
- 6 Kench, 2011, 649.
- 7 Ibid., 650–651.
- 8 For a holistic picture of the early period of the Maldives, see Naseema Mohamed, “Notes on the Early History of the Maldives,” *Archipel*, vol. 70 (2005): 7–14. Currently, The Maldives Heritage Survey, based at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, funded by Arcadia, and led by Dr R. Michael Feener, my former colleague at National University of Singapore and now Sultan of Oman Fellow of Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, University of Oxford, “aims to systematically inventory and document endangered cultural heritage in the Maldives.” maldivesheritage.oxcis.ac.uk/.
- 9 Clarence Maloney, “The Maldives: New Stresses in an Old Nation,” *Asian Survey*, vol. 16, no. 7 (Jul. 1976): 655.
- 10 For the Maldivian language, see Sonja Fritz, *The Dhivehi Language: Descriptive and Historical Grammar of Maldivian and Its Dialects*, Beiträge zur Südasiensforschung, Südasiens-Institut, Universität Heidelberg, Band 191, 2 vols (Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 2003); for the cultural interactions, see Litster, 2016, 61–65.
- 11 Maloney, 1976, 655.
- 12 Ibid., 656.
- 13 Thanks to R. Michael Feener for highlighting this point. Comments on my draft by R. Michael Feener, 1 June 2018.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Battuta, 2011, 241.
- 16 Ibid., 242.
- 17 For the economic and religious roles of the Maldives in the Indian Ocean world, see Litster, 2016, 72–77.
- 18 Albert Gray and H.C.P. Bell, eds., *The Voyage of François Pyrard of Laval to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas and Brazil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), vol. 3, 485.
- 19 Ibid., 439.
- 20 Gray and Bell, 2010, “Introduction,” *The Voyage of François Pyrard*, vol. 1, xxii.
- 21 Ibid., xxv.
- 22 Ibid., 236.
- 23 Ibid., 240.
- 24 Ibid., 190–191.
- 25 For early accounts of the Maldives, see Gray and Bell, 2010, “Early Notices of the Maldives,” in *The Voyage of François Pyrard*, vol. 3, Appendix A, 423–492.
- 26 Gray and Bell, 2010, “Early Notices of the Maldives,” 427.
- 27 Ibid., 428–429.
- 28 Ibid., 429.

- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Ibid., 430.
- 31 Ibid., 431.
- 32 Ibid., 432.
- 33 For Ibn Battuta's stay in the Maldives, see Gray and Bell, 2010, "Early Notices of the Maldives," 434–468.
- 34 Gray and Bell, 2010, "Early Notices of the Maldives," 435.
- 35 Battuta, 2011, 242.
- 36 Ibid., 248.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid., 248–249.
- 39 Ibid., 267.
- 40 Ibid., 243.
- 41 Ibid., 114.
- 42 Ibid., 243.
- 43 Ibid., 242.
- 44 Ibid., 114.
- 45 Ibid., 114–115.
- 46 Ibid., 115.
- 47 Ibid., 243.
- 48 Ibid., 243–244.
- 49 Ibid., 244.
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 For the Maldives recorded in the Chinese historical texts, see Xie Fang, "Zhong-guo Shiji zhi Maerdaifu Kao (A Study of the Maldives in the Chinese Historical Texts)," *Nanya Yanjiu* (South Asia Studies), vol. 2 (1982): 1–8; Roderich Ptak, "The Maldives and Laccadive Islands (liu-shan 溜山) in Ming Records," *Journal of American Oriental Society*, vol. 107, no. 4 (1987): 675–694.
- 52 Wang Dayuan, *Daoyi Zhilue* (A Sketchy Records of Island Barbarians), annotated by Su Jiqing (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2000), 264. It should be noticed that both *Wudie* (Pegu) and *Da Wudie* (lit. Big *Wudie*, referring to Orissa) were recorded by Wang Dayuan in this book, mentioning that both the places used cowrie shells as money. However, in the entry for the Maldives, Wang only mentioned that cowrie shells were shipped to *Wudie* (and Bengal) for rice. Whether or not ships from Pegu in lower Burma sail directly to the Maldives for cowrie shells cannot be determined, due to the lack of evidence. Probably Wang Dayuan here referred to *Da Wudie* (Orissa); or was it because the character "da" was missing during the long process of hand copying and reprinting? For the Bengal-Yunnan connection, see Yang, "The Bay of Bengal Connections to Yunnan, 2011, 317–342.
- 53 Ma Huan, *Ming Chaoben Yingya Shenglan Jiaozhu* (An Overall Survey of the Ocean Shores: Annotation of a Ming Manuscript), annotated by Wan Ming (Beijing: Haiyang Chubanshe, 2005); Gong Zhen, *Xiyang Fangguo zhi* (A Record of Barbarian Countries in the Western Ocean), annotated by Xiang Da (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2000).
- 54 Ma, 2005, 71–75, 86–87; Gong, 2000, 32–33.
- 55 Ma, 2005, 75; Gong, 2000, 33.
- 56 Wang, 2000, 265, footnote 1; Ptak, 1987, 676, and footnote 4.
- 57 William Woodville Rockhill, "Notes on the Relations and Trade of China with the Eastern Archipelago and the Coast of the Indian Ocean During the Fourteenth Century," Part II, *T'oung Pao*, Second Series, vol. 16, no. 1 (1915): 67; Part III, *T'oung Pao*, Second Series, vol. 16, no. 3 (1915): 388–389.
- 58 Xie, 1982, 3. I suspect that *liu* might be phonetically associated with "*dvipa*," and if so, the character *liu* matches the term for the Maldives both phonetically and literally.

- 59 Ibid., 3. R. Michael Feener commented that Xie's interpretation might be meaningful here in recognition that the southern atolls are separated from the rest by the equatorial channel; and that in that case, the northern counterpart might actually be the One-and-a-Half Degree Channel, which is also an important route for trans-Indian Ocean crossings. Comments on my draft by R. Michael Feener, 1 June 2018.
- 60 Michael. J. Risk and Robert Sluka, "The Maldives: A Nation of Atolls," in *Coral Reefs of the Indian Ocean*, ed. Tim R. McClanahan, Charles R. C. Sheppard and David O. Obura (London: Oxford University Press, 2000), 328; Litster, 2016, 59.
- 61 Comments on my draft by R. Michael Feener, 1 June 2018.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Patak, 1987, 676, footnote 4.
- 64 Xie, 1982, 4–6; Ma, 2005, 71–73. Gong Zhen, another participant in the Zheng He voyage provided almost the same information on the Maldives and its products. See Gong, 2000, 32–33.
- 65 Wang, 2000, 267–268.
- 66 Rockhill, 1915, II, 109, footnote 2.
- 67 Wang, 2000, 110–113. Rockhill believes that *Luowei* was located in the southern Malay Peninsula, while he also agrees that *liu* cloth was from the Maldives. Rockhill, 1915, II, 109, footnote 2.
- 68 Gray and Bell, 2010, "Early Notices of the Maldives," 478.
- 69 Ma, 2005, 74; Rockhill, 1915, III, 390.
- 70 R. Michael Feener has shared his concerns with maritime archaeological findings. If a ship wrecked on the outside of the reef, it could sink to a very great depth; and if sunk inside the reef, then most of the time it would be picked clean with the order of the king, which was a well-established custom for most of the recorded historical period. Comments on my draft by R. Michael Feener, 1 June 2018.
- 71 Litster, 2016, 140–143, 155. Unfortunately, the sampling is too small.
- 72 Ibid., 150–151.
- 73 Ibid., 212.
- 74 Gray and Bell, 2010, "Early Notices of the Maldives," 473.
- 75 Ibid., 473.
- 76 Ibid., 473–474.
- 77 Duarte Barbosa, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa; an Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and Their Inhabitants* (London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1918), Vol. II, 105.
- 78 Gray and Bell, 2010, "Early Notices of the Maldives," 479.
- 79 Ibid., 479.
- 80 Ibid., 478.
- 81 Ibid., 484–485.
- 82 Ibid., 485.
- 83 Ibid.
- 84 Ibid.
- 85 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 42.
- 86 Gray and Bell, 2010, vol. 1, 78.
- 87 Ibid., 236.
- 88 Ibid., 236–238.
- 89 Ibid., 438.
- 90 Ibid., 228.
- 91 Ibid., 236.
- 92 Gray and Bell, 2010, vol. 3, 441.
- 93 Ibid., 457.
- 94 Gray and Bell, 2010, vol. 1, 157.

3 India

In the beginning

Phelo kari macho tel (lay down your cowries and take what you want).

– An old saying in Bengal¹

This cowrie, or shell, is well known in every part of Bengal, and used in the purchase of the smaller articles of life by the lower ranks of society, and they answer all the purposes of commerce.

– Robert Lindsay (1754–1836)²

The old Bengali saying above and the assertion made by Robert Lindsay, a British East India Company official in Sylhet, Bengal, illustrate the important role of cowries used as money in India. The very word “cowrie” derives from the Hindi or Urdu *kaur*, which in turn comes from the Sanskrit *kaparda*. One of the oldest references to *kaparda* is in the *Rigveda*, in which the word denotes a “coil of hair” and refers to Shiva, the lord of cowries, but it is also used to mean a “cowrie shell used as money.”³

Without any doubt, cowrie shells were used as a medium of exchange at some point in an unknown time in early India; nevertheless, it must be made clear that not all the regions in India adopted cowrie shells as money.⁴ The cowrie money zone in approximately pre-nineteenth India refers to Bengal (which largely spread across today’s state of West Bengal in India and Bangladesh), Odisha (formerly known as Orissa, where the ancient kingdom of Kalinga was located), Assam in northeast India, and Bihar in northern India. The bulk of the cowrie money zone lay on the east coast of India on the Bay of Bengal, and on the Indo-Gangetic plain. Very interestingly, exactly where the cowrie money zone was mainly located in eastern India lay the historical centres of the Maurya Empire (322–185 BCE), the Shunga Empire (187–78 BCE), the Gupta Empire (c. 320–550 CE), the Pala Empire (c. 700–1200 CE), the Sena Empire (c. 1070–1230 CE), the Delhi Sultanate (c. 1200–1530 CE) and the Mughal Empire (c. 1526–1858 CE). From the late eighteenth century, Bengal was also the first major and prime fiscal and military base for the British East India Company that initiated the spread of British influence across Asia.⁵

It is difficult to know when cowrie money emerged in Bengal, but by the middle of the first millennium, a large area of Bengal had adopted cowrie money,

together with various locally issued coinage to form a dual monetary system. To be sure, in India, metal coinage had been local money earlier than the cowrie shell. Probably due to the increasing demand of local markets and commercialisation, coinage was unable to meet the needs of local society, which consequently made cowrie shells another form of money. At the lowest levels of exchange, metallic currencies were seldom involved, and cowrie shells as a form of non-metallic currency circulated extensively and intensively across Bengal and Orissa. The shortage of coinage in the following centuries up until the thirteenth century facilitated the role that cowrie shells gradually took on as the main form of money in Bengal, assuming all monetary purposes in daily life. With the reissuance of silver coinage in Bengal in the thirteenth century, cowrie shells again worked together with gold, but more often silver and copper coins, constituting a dual monetary system. From Bengal, cowrie money spread to Bihar in north India. During the colonial period, the British initially accepted cowrie money, including collecting revenue in cowries, but eventually, the British decided to abolish this “indigenous” money. Cowrie shells continued to be used as money in various local societies until the early twentieth century.

This chapter provides a brief review of the history of cowrie shells in India, particularly their function as money, from ancient times up until the nineteenth century. Various stages and localities of cowrie money will be viewed through travellers’ accounts (Arab, Chinese and European) to illustrate the scope, transportation, role and changes in the usage of cowrie money over time in Bengal and beyond. Studies of epigraphic inscriptions will also be brought in to illustrate the role of cowrie money in various local monetary systems. Lastly, colonial records of cowrie money in Bengal will be analysed to reveal the colonial policies concerning this indigenous money, which was essentially a process moving from acceptance and manipulation to the abolition of cowries as currency.

Non-monetary use of cowrie shells

Four species of cowrie shells have been excavated from various sites in India, *Cypraea moneta* and *Cypraea annulus* being the most popular, while black and purple cowries have been reported.⁶ Cowries were found in prehistoric Indus Valley sites such as Mohenjo-daro in northwestern India. An examination of archaeological discoveries has found marine shells from the Indian Ocean all the way to the sites of Shahr-i Sokhta, which are 500 km inland, as early as the third millennium, during the Bronze Age era.⁷ In the Kashmir region of the late Neolithic period (c. 2550–1720 BCE), cowrie shells were found in two archaeological sites in Gufkral and Burzahom, in the Karakoram Mountains.⁸ Another piece of early evidence of cowrie use in the second millennium BCE came from Lothal, one of the southernmost cities of the ancient Indus valley civilisation.⁹ These cowries were probably highly valued due to their being rare and exotic, and it is highly likely that they would have possessed some religious and ritual significance.

Due to the perceived resemblance of the underside of the cowrie shell to the female genital organs, its mythical reproductive capacity and the countless number of this species, cowries were first associated with fertility and were seen as a symbol of fertility. Indeed, the Latin term “*Cypraea*” is derived from the island of Cyprus, where Aphrodite (Venus) was worshipped as the goddess of fertility.¹⁰ Thus, a necklace of cowrie shells worn by an Indian woman was believed to promote conception and easy child birth.¹¹

Cowrie shells were also placed in an urn in post-ceremonial burials dating back to the fifth to the eighth century CE.¹² Such burial rituals were common in eastern India. In this context, it may be concluded that cowrie shells might well have also been regarded as a form of wealth. Probably because of their perceived value, cowries, along with coins, gold leaf and ashes were placed in many relic caskets and were commonly present in Buddhist rituals when Buddhism was at its height in India. An early example was found in the Vaishali relic, which is said to have contained the ashes of Buddha.¹³

In some other cases, cowrie-shaped seals were discovered. At Panr in Samasipur district, Bihar, where a black cowrie shell (*Cypraea onyx*) was discovered, dating somewhere from the first century BCE to the first century CE, all the seals and sealing items unearthed were of a cowrie-shaped incuse impressed with an inscription.¹⁴ These cowrie-shaped seals and sealing items may have enhanced the symbolic significance of cowrie shells amongst the (commercial) elite and in economic life, since key functions of seals and sealing were to identify property rights and guarantee trading deals.

Cowrie shells were also used as decoration in India, as extensively as elsewhere. For instance, “in Cambaye and elsewhere in India they set the prettiest of these shells in articles of furniture, as if they were marbles or precious stones.”¹⁵

While these roles of cowrie shells in Indian societies continued until modern times, the most striking function of cowrie shells in India was their monetary use, and it was from India that cowrie money spread to other areas, such as Southeast Asia and West Africa.

Cowrie money: early records

The major importer of cowries in the Indian Ocean was Bengal, but it is as yet unclear when Bengal began to use cowrie as money. Early scholars believed this practice had started at least by Mauryan times,¹⁶ this statement, however, seems to conflate money with value. A hoard of cowrie shells was discovered in Masaon, district Ghazipur, dating to around the second century BCE or earlier, and these shells are believed to have functioned as “a medium of exchange thereby indicating the possibility of the cowries being used as regular currency.”¹⁷ This, however, is mere speculation until some other direct evidence is found to substantiate it.

Evidence of the origins of cowrie money in India relies heavily on travel accounts, unfortunately. Most scholars cite Faxian (c. 342–423 CE), the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, and refer to his age as the beginning of cowrie money in India. Faxian left China for India in 399 CE, and spent the following thirteen years

travelling to and around India during the reign of Chandragupta II of the Gupta Dynasty, until his return in 412 CE.¹⁸ In his *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms*, Faxian mentioned that in Mathurā (*Motouluo*; 摩头罗), transactions used cowries (*huoyi ze yong beichi*; 货易则用贝齿).¹⁹ Faxian's concise sentence of six Chinese characters seems clearly to refer to the use of cowrie money in northern India, and if so, it can be reckoned that people in Bengal would have been using cowrie money earlier than the beginning of the fifth century. However, while Faxian stayed in Bengal for around two years, he only left a few sentences about this region, without mentioning anything about trade or money, let alone cowrie money. As the only source of evidence cowrie money from this time and place, Faxian's remark is invaluable, and the author hopes that further archaeological findings may confirm it. In fact, a current distribution map of cowrie excavation corroborates Faxian's statement.²⁰

Xuanzang, probably the most famous of all Chinese Buddhist pilgrims, visited India in the mid-seventh century, and noted the use of gold and silver coins, cowrie shells and pearls as local money in India.²¹ A few decades later, Yijing, another Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, remarked on the donation of cowries (*beichi*; 贝齿), gold and silver in India, and on another occasion, he specifically mentioned cowrie shells and other monies (*chibei zhuqian*; 齿贝诸钱).²² This is probably the first categorical reference to cowrie shells being used as money, and confirms the use of cowrie money until as late as the late seventh century.

Huiyuan, another Tang monk (prior to the ninth century), made some reference to cowries being considered as property in Magadha, but he did not mention whether or not cowries were used as a medium of exchange.²³ Even so, it is reasonable to speculate that cowries functioned as money, considering the circumstantial historical context. *Jin Tangshu* (Old History of the Tang Dynasty), compiled in the mid-tenth century, stated that people used cowrie shells in trade (*yi chibei wei huo*; 以齿贝为货) in India (*Tianzhu*; 天竺), and this was followed about one century later by *Xin Tangshu* (New History of the Tang Dynasty).²⁴ From these texts, it is obvious that by the tenth century, the use of cowrie money in India was well known in China.

Whereas the Chinese accounts were continuous and somewhat unspecific, Arab accounts from the ninth century not only provided a general profile of cowrie trade across the Maldives, Bengal and Southeast Asia, but also made definitive statements that cowrie shells were used as money in all kinds of business transactions in Bengal and beyond (Map 3.1). Suleiman in the ninth century was the first known Arab witness of the cowrie trade and cowrie money, followed by Al Mas'udi from Baghdad, who visited Ceylon in the early tenth century and confirmed what Suleiman had described.²⁵

In Bengal, the earliest local reference to cowries was found in the *Harsacarita* (The Deeds of Harsha), which mentioned that in the seventh century, Bhaskaravarman of Kamarupa (Assam) sent Harsha "heaps of black and white cowries."²⁶ By the ninth century, cowries from the Maldives had circulated as money in Bengal and Orissa. From Bengal, cowries and the cowrie money system extended to some coastal areas of mainland Southeast Asia, and penetrated into upper



Map 3.1 India and the Maldives

mainland Southeast Asia, including the present-day regions of Chiang Mai and Yunnan.

It is a pity that although numerous hoards of cowrie shells have been discovered in India, many have not been reported, let alone studied, probably due to their being considered “small” and ordinary money; the discovery of large quantities of them reinforced such an opinion.²⁷ This prejudice has posed a challenge to creating a comprehensive and accurate profile of the use of cowrie money in India.

Early India was subdivided into local market economies based on cowries and various metal currencies. An “ordered system of ratios between specific numbers of cowries and between cowries and other forms of metallic currency” from the post-Gupta period (280–550 CE) continued until the nineteenth century, with local and periodic variations. Such stability resulted not only from marketplaces, but also from the state taxation system where cowries were accepted as payment for revenue and taxes, especially in Bengal.²⁸ Cowries were also used to pay penalties for the infringement of state regulations,²⁹ and for other economic and ritualistic or religious functions such as donations, hoarding and religious ceremonies. For instance, in some tribes in Bengal, a slave boy might be named after the number of cowries paid for him.³⁰

In India, cowrie money was used in combination with gold, but especially silver. Gold was only employed for large transactions, while silver was popularly used for medium-scale and daily transactions. Due to its small value, cowrie money was used for small daily transactions; however, the dearth of coins during the Pala-Sena period left a monetary vacuum for cowrie money to fulfil the previous roles assumed by silver coinage.

Pala and Sena: from coins to cowrie money

The Pala and the Sena were the two major powers in eastern India (mainly Bengal) that played a crucial role in local and international politics, economy and religion (such as Buddhist interactions across Bengal, Southeast Asia and Tibet) from the eighth to twelfth centuries. The Pala never held effective control in areas outside the northern part of the Bengal Delta and was thus more interested in North India (i.e. Bihar) than Bengal, while the Sena was the first power to control almost all areas of Bengal, except its southeastern part. Surprisingly, neither of these two dynamic kingdoms issued any coinage as money. As a result, cowrie money dominated in governmental and private economic activities in the two kingdoms.

To be precise, monetary systems in India were very complicated, and in the mediaeval period when a paucity and debasement of precious metals occurred there existed a few metal money zones. Some scholars argue that the decline of coinage indeed facilitated the popular adoption of cowrie money in Bengal.³¹ A comparison of the early epigraphic inscriptions (third century BCE to eighth century CE) with the post-eighth century ones shows a striking contrast. The early ones “regularly refer to transactions in coins,” while the later inscriptions indicate the practice of cowries counted in the value of coins such as *purāṇa*.³²

Epigraphs of the Pala-Sena period were full of information concerning the use of cowrie money and illustrate the dynamics of cowrie money in these two kingdoms.³³ For reasons unknown, both kingdoms stopped issuing coins and favoured cowrie shells. Therefore, cowrie money not only functioned as small value money, but also served as the regular form of money for trade, taxation, governmental payment, donations and various other uses.³⁴ Although coinage was

no longer issued, the names of coins were still found in epigraphic inscriptions, such as *dramma*, *purāṇa* and *kārṣāpaṇa*, each of these being equal to 1,280 cowries.³⁵ One must bear in mind the difference between the medium of exchange (money being used) and the money of account (denominations of money not actually issued as coins or other forms).³⁶ While names of coins (minted money or metallic money) were kept in records, these coins were not being physically used, nor were they official money.³⁷ Metallic monetary units recorded in the epigraphs mentioned, as well as *pana*, *gaṇḍaka* and *kākanika*, essentially were money of account, and were calculated and paid in the form of cowries.³⁸ These metallic coins, with their textual existence being recorded in epigraphs, were not in fact used and indeed were rarely seen by most people at that time. More importantly, because these metallic coins usually represented a large sum of value, they had to be divided into smaller denominations that were counted in shells. Hence, terms such as *cūrni*, *cūrma* and *cūrikā*, which meant “broken,”³⁹ indicate that money of account was divided into small units and paid in the current money of use, namely, cowrie shells. The increasing and varied uses of cowrie money in society created a new business, the cowrie exchange business. The term “*kāpadika*,” a cowrie shell dealer, thus emerged in eastern India,⁴⁰ a result of the increasing volume and frequency of cowrie use in daily life.

Studies of Pala inscriptions reveal the process in which cowries became the most common media of exchange in the Pala and Sena. In the early period, a transaction could be made by the payment of *dramma* or *kārṣāpaṇa* in Bihar, but cowrie money gradually replaced these in the twelfth century.⁴¹ Discoveries of the Paharpur hoard of cowries, along with many other such findings, indicate the heavy dependence on cowrie money during the Pala period.⁴² Minhaj-us-Siraj, an Indian historian of the early thirteenth century, reported that, “as in that country [Bengal] the *kauri* [shell] is current in place of silver, the least gift he [Rae Lakamaniyah or King Lakshmanasena] used to bestow was a *lakh* of kouries.”⁴³

Sena inscriptions concerning land reveal that cowrie money served as a measure of value for land and that land revenue was collected either using cowries or through *cūrṇis* consisting of *purāṇas* that were counted in *kapardakas*.⁴⁴ A copper plate charter of Pradyumnabandhu (c. 550–650 CE) records the sale of a village in north Bengal for 1,000 *cūrṇikās*; this charter indicates that at that time, *kārṣāpaṇa* and *cūrṇikā* had replaced *dināra* coins issued by the Gupta authority and taxes were then being paid in *kārṣāpaṇas*. *Kārṣāpaṇas*, almost 700 years old, most likely remained only as money of account, and thus had to be paid in cowries or rice paddies or some other means.⁴⁵

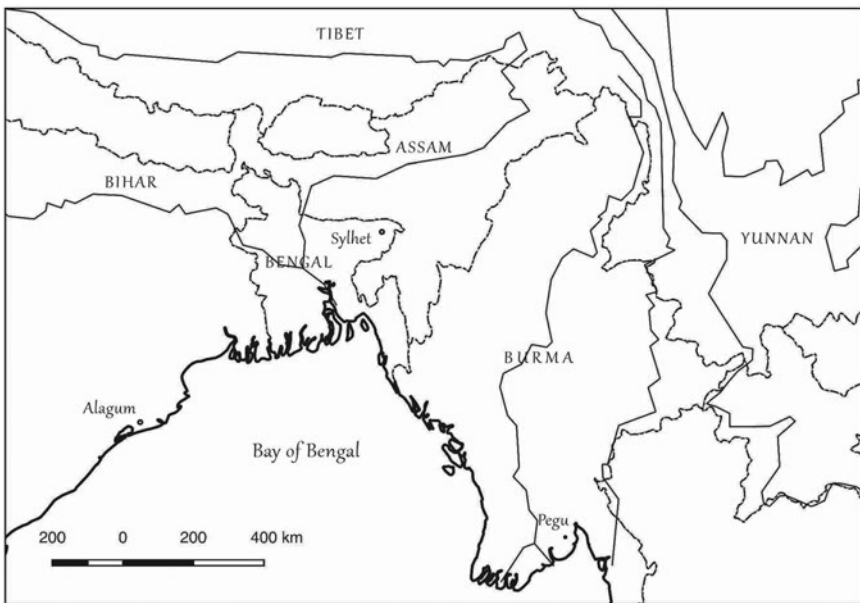
Therefore, from the eighth century to the twelfth century, with few metallic coins being minted or issued, cowrie money was immediately upgraded to fill the vacuum left by metal coins, and thus played a dominant role in trade, economy and taxation.⁴⁶ This period witnessed the use of metal coins being replaced by cowries. Before this period, silver currency had been adopted; during the period, the silver coinage-dominant system was gradually replaced by the preeminence of cowrie shells that were counted in the notional unit of the former and eventually, by the Sena period, the cowrie money system, in which

cowrie shells were used to pay money of account (silver coinage), had been formed and had stabilised.⁴⁷ Only during the rule of the Bengal Sultans, who imported silver bullion and minted silver coins, did the region resume its use of metallic money; meanwhile, cowrie money had penetrated local societies so deeply that it maintained its role in the official revenue system. This was the monetary landscape that the British faced and had to follow when they took control of Bengal in the late eighteenth century. The British learnt that cowrie money was by no means primitive, nor insignificant in any way, in this region.

From coast to inland: the village of Alagum

Observed by many foreigners, cowries were shipped as ballast from the Maldives to coastal ports in Bengal (Map 3.2). To cite François Pyrard at the beginning of the seventeenth century:

All go to Bengal, for there only is there a demand for a large quantity at high prices. The people of Bengal use them for ordinary money, although they have gold and silver and plenty of other metals; and, what is more strange, kings and great lords have houses built expressly to store these shells, and treat them as part of their treasures. All the merchants from other places in India take a large quantity to carry to Bengal, where they are always in demand; for they are produced nowhere but at the Maldives, on which account they serve as petty cash.⁴⁸



Map 3.2 The Bay of Bengal

The importing of cowries was profitable for Indians as well as Europeans for many centuries to come. Merchants in Bengal prospered from the business, but little is known about how cowries were carried from coastal to inland regions.

A case study of the Gartteśvara Śiva Temple in the village of Alagum, Orissa, may shed some light on the cowrie trade and the spread of cowrie money further into the hinterland,⁴⁹ of which our understanding seems very limited. Odisha (Orissa) is a coastal state located in eastern India, lying on the Bay of Bengal to its east. The area has a rich culture and history, as the ancient kingdom of Kalinga was located there, but this kingdom was destroyed by King Asoka in 261 BCE. The village of Alagum, in addition to being an important religious centre for centuries, was a significant networking centre for the importing and storing of cowrie shells.

The village Alagum with the Gartteśvara Śiva Temple is about 30 km to the Bengal Bay and 500 km to Calcutta. At first glance, the temple architecture looks as if it was built during the fifteenth to sixteenth century; nevertheless, a closer examination suggests that the temple was previously renovated and rebuilt several times over the centuries. There are two stone inscriptions on the two sides of the temple entrance, one in a form of Sanskrit influenced by the local dialect, and the other in the Telugu language. Both inscriptions were composed during the reign of Anantavarman Codagaṅga (1078–1150 CE), king of the Eastern Ganga Dynasty, who ruled Odisha as well as parts of West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. In Andhra Pradesh, Telugu was the principal language, which explains why an inscription in Odisha was written in Telugu. The Eastern Ganga, as a rival to the powerful Chola (Cola) Empire in the south, was also connected with its southern neighbour: Anantavarman Codagaṅga's mother was a Chola princess.

The Sanskrit inscription informs that in early 1141, a person called Kāmāndi, a devout worshipper of both Shiva and Vishnu from Chola, purchased a *hala* of land and donated it to the *matha* (temple) of the god Gartteśvara, with his own money *Sva-dhanena krīvā*. In addition, he presented three *pravarttas* of paddy to provide *naivedya* (offerings) to the deity. Furthermore, to please Gartteśvara, he made another donation of five *purānas* added to the 100 *curnis*, in total 105 *purānas*. In the text following this extract, the word *kāparyaka* is found. This term derives from the Sanskrit *kāpardaka*, meaning “cowrie” or “cowrie dealer.” Here the word *kāparyaka* “may be taken as a cowrie shell dealer or else here it may be considered as these in cowrie shells i.e. 100 *purānas* in *kāparyaka* or cowrie shells and [the] rest in coins.”⁵⁰ The term *curnni*, meaning change or small denominations of money, was found in this Sanskrit inscription too. Thus, amongst the total 105 *purānas*, five were given in the form of coins, while the rest was in small value money, namely, cowrie shells.⁵¹ The inscription also mentions a ritual known as *kula tārana* that ensured the easy “crossing over the sea of life and passage to the heaven,” and in this ritual even up until the present day, cowrie shells “are used as payment for the smooth journey across . . . the final departure from this world and a secure journey to the other.”⁵²

This description, fragmentary as it is, could indeed help to sketch a case for the use of cowries in this period in India. A navigator from Chola might have shipped cowrie shells from the Maldives to the Bay of Bengal and probably stored shells in the village of Alagum and some other villages along the route to Bengal. Indeed, very interestingly, in Erga, in southwestern Bengal, there was a village recorded in the early seventh century called *Kaparddipadrika*, of which the first part *kaparddi* must be associated with *kapardda/kaparddaka*, meaning cowrie shells.⁵³ Clearly, it must have been the cowrie trade and cowrie money that caused this village to be so named. Also, Shiva, the god worshipped in the Alagum Temple, was associated with cowries, as, according to Chola records, it is called *Kaparddisvara*.⁵⁴ Considering these inscriptions, deities, rituals and some other information, it seems that the coastal village of Alagum was an important religious centre of maritime trade as well as a transit centre for the cowrie trade. This is by no means a surprise, as Odisha had been a crucial part of the cowrie trade and had used cowrie money for ages before the period in question.

Tanka and cowries

Cowrie money in mediaeval Bengal was heard of, observed and even used by foreigners.⁵⁵ Ibn Battuta travelled in both the Maldives and Bengal and was very familiar with the monetary system in Bengal.

During his stay in the Maldives, Ibn Battuta noticed that local Maldivians sold cowrie shells “in exchange for rice to the people of Bengal, who also use them as money, as well as to the Yemenites who used them instead of sand [as ballast] in their ships.”⁵⁶ Staying in Bengal, Ibn Battuta witnessed the abundance in Bengal, as the region was called “A Hell full of good things.”⁵⁷ He was very impressed by the production of rice in Bengal, remarking, “This is a vast country, abounding in rice, and nowhere in the world have I seen any land where prices are lower than here.”⁵⁸ He saw

fat fowls sold there at the rate of eight for a single dirham, young pigeons at fifteen to the dirham, and fat ram sold for two dirhams. I saw too a piece of fine cotton cloth, of excellent quality, thirty cubits long, sold for two dinars, and a beautiful slave girl for a single gold dinar, that is, two and a half gold dinars in Moroccan money.⁵⁹

It is rather surprising and a bit disappointing that he did not give any details about how cowrie money was used in the local market or in trade transactions, especially since Ibn Battuta was himself even involved in the cowrie trade. Perhaps he felt that cowrie money was too common to be mentioned!

Wang Dayuan, a Chinese merchant who travelled to the Indian Ocean twice in the 1330s, pointed out that maritime merchants shipped cowrie shells (*bazi/pazi*; 八子) from the Maldives (*Beiliu*; 北溜) to Orissa (*Da Wudie*; 大乌爹) and Bengal (*Pengjiala*; 朋家拉) in exchange for rice, and one ship of cowries could be exchanged for more than one ship of rice. He added that such a trade between

cowries and rice had long been in existence, and that in Orissa and Bengal, cowrie shells were used as money.⁶⁰ Wang Dayuan provided some lively descriptions of Bengal, somewhat similar to those of Ibn Battuta. He mentioned the fertile land, cheap prices of commodities and honest traditions and customs. He also noted that in Bengal, a silver coin called a *tanka* (*Tangjia*; 唐加) was minted, each of which could be exchanged for more than 11,520 cowrie shells, the latter being a form of low-value money, hence convenient to the common people.⁶¹ In Orissa (*Da Wudie*; 大乌爹), gold, silver and cowrie shells were all in circulation.⁶²

Wang Dayuan also noticed the use of cowrie shells in Bombay (*Fangbai*; 放拜), as he said that traders there used gold, cowrie shells and beads of red and white.⁶³ This brief note deserves some attention, as very few mentioned cowrie shells being used along the western coast of India. It was true that cowrie shells were shipped from the Maldives to the western ports of India, but Wang might have been mistaken in the use of these shells as money. He might have assumed these shells possessed the same function as in Bengal and Orissa, or he might have conflated money with wealth that shells represented or accumulated through their regular use in trade.

Nearly one century later, Ma Huan, an interpreter in Zheng He's Treasure Fleet, several times referred to the cowrie trade and cowrie money. In the Maldives (*Liushan*; 溜山), cowrie shells were collected into heaps, and after the decay of their flesh, were sold to Siam (*Xianluo*; 暹罗) and Bengal (*Banggela*; 榜葛刺), where there were used as money.⁶⁴ In Bengal, the king minted silver into coins called *tanka* (*Tangjia*; 倘伽), while in street markets, cowrie shells (*Haipa*; 海叭) were used for small transactions (counted in numbers), with the foreign name (*fanming*; 番名) of cowrie (*kaoli*; 考嚙).⁶⁵ Gong Zhen, a secretary and Fei Xin, a military officer aboard the Treasure Fleet, largely repeated what Ma Huan recorded.⁶⁶

Nearly another century later, in the 1620s, Huang Xingceng recorded that the Maldives were famous for their fish and cowries, and he specifically highlighted that merchants from Siam and Bengal came here to trade.⁶⁷ Also, in Bengal both silver *tanka* and cowrie shells (*kaoli*; 考嚙) were used as money.⁶⁸ He might have corrected Wang Dayuan's error by simply not mentioning the use of cowrie money in Calicut.⁶⁹

What Wang Dayuan and Ma Huan both observed in Bengal was in fact what John Deyell calls a dual monetary system, in which cowrie shells and silver *tanka* coins coexisted.⁷⁰ When discussing the monetary systems in early mediaeval north India, John Deyell summarises that

the lowest niche was occupied by the cowrie shell; next in value was the copper coin; above this a silver mass ranging from a fraction of a gram to a few grams; and for this highest level of transactions, a gold mass of a fraction of a gram to a few grams.⁷¹

In mediaeval Kashmir, the "currency system consisted of a copper coinage with cowrie shells serving for small transactions."⁷²

Such a monetary system was seen to be more widespread in the second half of the thirteenth century when the Delhi Sultanate established an empire that stretched from Sind to Bengal.⁷³ The same was probably true of the Upper Ganga basin, where hoards such as the one found at Khajausa (3.75 kg of cowries) or at Bhondri (9,384 cowries) demonstrate the use of shells as a fractional form of money alongside metallic coinage.⁷⁴ During the following period of the Bengal Sultanate (1205–1576), this dual monetary system was more evident.⁷⁵

By the thirteenth century, cross-regional trade in Bengal had been very active, and both shells and silver were imported to facilitate the Bengal monetary system. At the same time, the agricultural economy, with its large rural population producing plentiful and cheap goods for local and international consumption, had been noticed by both Muslim and Chinese travellers. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Bengal Sultan issued the *tanka*, a silver coin used as the normative money, supplemented with shells. As a result, a dual monetary system of shells and *tanka* began to replace the cowrie shell monetary system established in the Pala-Sena period. There were no copper coins and very few gold coins either.⁷⁶ Silver *tanka*, heavy and pure, were used extensively in governmental revenue collections and for the expenditure of the royalty, nobility, government and for religious activities, as well as for large values of trade.⁷⁷ At the same time, cowries continued to meet all purposes, including being used in the collection of governmental revenue, but they were gradually replaced with by *tanka* for this function when the latter became relatively sufficient.⁷⁸ Money middlemen thrived by profiting in exchanging these two monies and shells retained their dominance in areas outside the sultanate.⁷⁹

After the end of the Zheng He voyages in the 1430s, the Chinese were no longer so frequently visible in the Bay of Bengal. Fortunately for the story of cowries, about eight decades later, there appeared accounts on cowrie money by Europeans, led by the Portuguese, who arrived in India in the early sixteenth century.

Cowrie money: European accounts

Many European records appeared from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries on the cowrie trade and cowrie money in Bengal and beyond. Such a phenomenon resulted from the fact that it was the first time that Europeans had seen, touched and utilised something so foreign and thus exotic as both a commodity and a form of money.

Tomè Pires, the first Portuguese Ambassador to China, arrived in India in 1511 and saw cowries in Bengal and some ports in Southeast Asia. He provided details of the monetary system in Bengal:

Gold is worth a sixth part more in Bengal than in Malacca and silver is a fifth part cheaper than in Malacca, and sometimes a quarter cheaper. The silver coinage is called *tanqat*. It weighs half a *tael*, which is nearly six *drams*.

This coin is worth twenty *calains* in Malacca and seven *cahon* in Bengal. Each *cahon* is worth sixteen *pon*; each *pon* is worth eighty cowries (*buzeos*); so that a *cahon* is worth one thousand two hundred and eighty cowries, and a *tancat* is worth eight thousand nine hundred and sixty cowries [at the rate of cowries], four hundred and forty eight to the *calaim*, which is the price for which they give a good chicken, and from this you can tell what you could buy for them. In Bengal the cowries are called *cury*.⁸⁰

By the time of Pires at the beginning of the sixteenth century, cowrie money had long been used in Orissa and other places:

Cowries are current coinage in Orissa and in all the kingdom of Bengal, and Arakan (*Raqā*), and in Martaban (*Martamane*), a port of the kingdom of Pegu. The Bengal cowries are larger, with a yellow stripe in the middle; they are valid throughout Bengal and they accept them for a larger number of commodities as they would gold; and in Orissa. They are not valid anywhere else and they are highly prized in these two places.⁸¹

Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, a seventeenth century French gem merchant and traveller, made six voyages to Persia and India between the years 1630 and 1668. He once discussed the coinage of India, saying:

their other small Money are the little Shells which they call *Cori*; the sides whereof turn circularly inward: Nor are they to be found in any part of the World but in the *Maldives* Islands. They are the greatest part of the Revenue of the King of that Island. For they are transported into all the territories of the Great *Mogull*; into the Kingdoms of *Visapour* and *Golconda*: and into the islands of *America* to serve instead of Money. Near the Sea they give 80 for a Pecha, but the further you go from the Sea, the less you have; so that at *Agra* they will not give you above 50 or 55 for a Pecha.⁸²

In Orissa, cowrie money was not only used in small transactions, but also for large deals. During the Mughal empire period, while revenue was assessed in drams, it was originally calculated in cowries and mostly collected in cowrie form.⁸³ When Thomas Bowrey, a sailing master and an independent merchant in the late seventeenth century who travelled frequently between Indian and Southeast Asia and as far as Taiwan, visited a village in eastern Orissa, he saw cowries as the only money known to the village:

I have often been in their Villages, and where there have been more than 20 families of them, they could not all change one Rupee into Cowries, whereby to be paid for a little milke or fish (or what else wee had of them) in the currant moneys of this Kingdome and Orixa and Arackan, and withall soe ignorant that they know not Silver from Tootanagga. . . . Cowries (all the moneys knowne to the ignorant Ourias) are Small Shells, brought from

the Islands of Malldiva. A great quantitie passe for one Rupee, not less than 3200, as shall be shewed more largely in the moneys of this Kingdome.⁸⁴

The same monetary system continued in the Maratha rule of Orissa (1791–1803), and the Maratha troops were paid in cowries.⁸⁵ When the East India Company occupied Orissa in 1803, the revenue paid to the Company from several rajas were fixed in cowrie money, and the East India Company in turn used cowries to buy spices.⁸⁶

The accounts of the European travellers mentioned here are nothing compared with those of François Pyrard, a French sailor who stayed in the Maldives for five years. He observed, “a Portuguese ship of 400 tons was at anchor in the roads, having come from Cochin with a full cargo of rice, to take away *bolys*, or shells, to Bengal, where they are in great demand.”⁸⁷ He continued to elaborate on the Portuguese trade:

When I came to Malé for the first time, there was a vessel at anchor from Cochin, a town of the Portuguese, of 400 tons burthen; the captain and merchants were Mestifs, the others Christianised Indians, all habited in the Portuguese fashion, and they had come solely to load with these shells for the Bengal market. They give 20 *conquetees* [possibly meaning kegs] of rice for a parcel of shells: for all these *Bolys* are put in parcels of 12,000, in little baskets of coco leaves of open work, lined inside with cloth of the same coco tree, to prevent the shells falling out. These parcels or baskets of 12,000 are negotiated there as bags of silver are here, which between merchants are taken as counted, but not by others: for they are so clever at counting, that in less than no time they will take tally of a whole parcel.⁸⁸

In February 1607, François Pyrard witnessed the Bengali armada of sixteen galleys or galleons attacking the Maldives.⁸⁹ “For all day and night the men were ransacking the king’s palace and carrying off everything that was of value.”⁹⁰ Cowries were surely some of the valuable items that the Bengalis loaded and shipped back home, if not the major motive for the Bengal invasion.

François Pyrard understood cowrie money in India very well. He mentioned that all cowries came from the Maldives. “All go to Bengal, for there only is there a demand for a large quantity at high prices. The people of Bengal use them for ordinary money, although they have gold and silver and plenty of other metals”; kings and great lords built houses to store cowries.⁹¹

After François Pyrard, European accounts were no longer so detailed. During the 1670s, Thomas Bowrey occasionally mentioned cowrie money. He recorded that annually, six or seven ships to the Maldives for cowries made very profitable voyages,⁹² and that in Bengal and Orissa, no fewer than 3,200 cowrie shells were exchanged for one rupee.⁹³ In the 1780s, Fra Paolino da San Bartolomeo, a barefooted Carmelite who resided in India for thirteen years, noticed that small shells brought from the Maldives, were used as money in Bengal where they were called *cori* or *cauri*, and 350 shells made a rupee.⁹⁴ By the eighteenth

century, Europeans were probably so familiar with the cowrie trade and cowrie money that few of them thought to spare a few words about the usage of these shells.

Assam

Assam is located in northeastern India, situated south of the eastern Himalayas along the Brahmaputra and Barak River valleys. Xuanzang certainly visited this ancient kingdom known as Kamarupa (*jiamolübo*; 迦摩縵波) in Chinese texts. Influenced by Bengal, Assam adopted cowrie money in the mediaeval period and facilitated the spread of cowrie money from India to its neighbours: Burma, Siam and Yunnan. A case study of cowrie money in Assam made by N.G. Rhodes and S.K. Bose supplies many details and gives a holistic view of cowrie money in the region.⁹⁵

As early as c. 600 CE, Bhāskara-varman, the king of the Verman Dynasty in Assam, probably the most powerful ruler in eastern India,⁹⁶ presented “heaps of black and white cowries” as gifts⁹⁷ to Harsha (c. 590–647 CE), also known as Harshavardhana, king of the Pushyabhuti Dynasty in north India. This is perhaps one of the earliest accounts of cowrie shells in Assam and north India.

In pre-830 Assam, coins were not used. As a result, cowrie shells were imported from Bengal in exchange for goods exported from Assam. Gradually, cowrie shells became the medium of local exchange, and the form of fines and taxation collected by kings. Cowrie shells were also hoarded by kings and wealthy people as a store of value, the same practice as in Bengal; cowrie shells were probably exported to Yunnan as well.⁹⁸

During the following decades of the ninth century, with this period ending in the Mlechchha Dynasty (c. 655–900 CE), it seems that the supply of cowrie shells became insufficient. Its rulers issued copper coins that fulfilled the same purposes as cowrie shells for local markets.⁹⁹ The insufficiency of cowrie money might have derived from various reasons such as the supply chain, the increase of local economy and trade and the outflow of cowrie shells to other places such as the Nanzhao Kingdom, a powerful Southeast Asian kingdom based in present-day Yunnan that began to develop its own cowrie money system, precisely around the time of the tenth century transition. The factor of supply could be excluded from the list of possible reasons, as there were no unusual occurrences in cowrie transportation; thus, it is more likely to have been the local economic demand and the foreign attraction that brought about this change, especially the additional demand from Nanzhao.¹⁰⁰

After 900 CE, something must have happened to the issue of copper coins, as Assam returned to a “purely cowrie based currency system,” in quite a similar way to most of Bengal and Bihar.¹⁰¹ It was only when silver coinage was reintroduced in Bengal in the thirteenth century that metallic currency reappeared in Assam, to some extent, while cowrie money continued well into the nineteenth century.¹⁰² Up to 1991, at least four hoards containing cowrie shells had been found in Assam, but unfortunately, the dates of these hoards are difficult to

ascertain. However, it is widely known that during the Ahom Period (1228–1826),¹⁰³ cowrie shells were extensively used as money,¹⁰⁴ alongside bronze and copper coins.

While some British colonial officers in Assam complained of the administrative burden of the cowrie money system and despised this low-value money used by the poorer sections of society, other contemporary observers found the role of cowrie money to be dynamic in trading, markets and the economy. To lubricate the process, *potdars*, special agents for money exchanges between gold, silver coins and cowries emerged in the rural markets of *haats* (periodic markets held once or twice a week) and bazaars.¹⁰⁵ An Indian tale set before the late sixteenth century gives us an insight into the role of a *potdar*: a poor village hunter obtained a gold ring from the goddess Chandike and a *potdar* offered 660 cowries for it.¹⁰⁶ Cowrie exchange seems to have been driven by the markets and was also recorded in some Indian epigraphs. Water Hamilton, writing in the early nineteenth century, observed the cowrie exchange in Assam:

Potdars, or money-changers, are a very numerous class, but many of them, having no shop, sit in the open air with heaps of cowries placed before them. In the more rural tracts the money-changer goes to market with a bag of cowries on his head; if a rich man, with a loaded ox, which, if strong, may carry to the value of 150 rupees. All the early time of the market he sells cowries for silver to the people, and in the evening the various hucksters bring back their cowries and exchange them for silver, paying a *batta* in exchange each way to the *potdar*.¹⁰⁷

This anecdote illustrates something of the daily activities of *potdars*, who during the daytime sold cowries for silver to common people who needed small amounts of money to buy goods on the market; in the evening *potdars* bought cowries from common people who needed silver to take back home. For the common people, the rupee was too large a denomination to buy daily items such as vegetables, and that was why villagers stored their wealth between market days in the more compact rupees.¹⁰⁸ Such a side system provided the dynamics for the existence of both cowrie money and money changers, the latter by no means being confined only to Assam, but also was popular in other parts of Bengal and Orissa.

Northern India

During the Mughal period (1526–1757), three geographical zones with different monetary systems existed: a multi-metallic system in northern and western India, a bimetallic one of gold and silver, supplied with cowrie shells, in eastern India and a bimetallic one of gold and copper in southern India.¹⁰⁹ As mentioned earlier, in eastern India, gold and silver coins were seldom employed for small transactions, and it was cowrie money that served daily transactional needs, both for private and official purposes and notably in Bengal and Orissa.

In the early sixteenth century, cowrie money might still have been confined to eastern India, but it soon expanded westwards to Bihar and northern India.¹¹⁰ In 1571, the construction workers of a bridge in the village of Bishanpur (Jaunpur), which was far from Bengal, paid the superintendent four cowries out of each copper coin earned in their wages.¹¹¹ In the late sixteenth century, a child called Banarasidas in Jaunpur sold cowries and earned profit for his grandmother,¹¹² a vivid case illustrating the popularity and prosperity of the cowrie exchange business. Cowrie shells were also used to pay for the discount levied on the use of old or underweight copper coins (three to four cowries on each *paisa*).¹¹³ These cases suggest that the use of cowrie money had reached northern India. Tavernier, writing in the seventeenth century, provides a detailed description of cowrie money in the heartland of Mughal India, in places such as Agra:

The other small money consists of shells called cowries, which have the edges inverted; they are not found in any other part of the world save only in the Maldives Islands. They are the principal source of revenue of the king of these islands, for they are exported to all the states of the Great Mogul, to the kingdoms of Bijapur and Golkonda [Dakhin] and even to the islands of America to serve as money. Close to the sea up to 80 are given for the *paisa*, but the number diminishes as you leave the sea, on account of the cost of carriage; so that at Agra you receive but 50 or 55 for the *paisa*.¹¹⁴

Tavernier not only found that cowrie money was used in the Moghul Empire, but also observed that the further cowries travelled inland, the higher their price went. In northern India, cowrie shells as the lowest form of money were coexistent with copper. In Patna, one of the oldest cities and a centre for international trade in Bihar, the *damri*, the smallest copper fraction, was equal to ten cowries.¹¹⁵

Interestingly, on the western coast of India, almonds imported from Iran via Hurmuz were adopted as another type of non-metallic money. These non-metallic currencies illustrate not only the styles of the local market and local customs in the monetary system,¹¹⁶ but also demonstrate the very transregional trade and economic network that had grown up.

In summary, in north India, where gold and silver constituted the most important monetary metals, cowrie shells served as a form of small money. The spread of cowrie money from Bengal to Bihar and the Ganges Basin in the sixteenth century had a lot to do with local development in northern India, while transregional and international trade also played a decisive role. The dynamics of cowrie money in India before British colonisation are encapsulated in an Indian legal text, the Gentoo Code.

Cowrie money in the Gentoo Code

The Gentoo Code is a legal code translated from Sanskrit into Persian by Brahmin scholars. For the sake of greater understanding of Indian laws, Warren Hastings (1732–1818), the first governor of the presidency of Fort William (Bengal), the

head of the supreme council of Bengal and thereby the first de facto Governor-General of India from 1772 to 1785, paid for it to be translated from Persian into English. The work was done by Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, a British grammarian working for the East India Company. The English version was printed privately by the East India Company in London in 1776 under the title *A Code of Gentoo Laws, or Ordinations of the Pundits*.

Many articles in the Gentoo Code illustrate the penetration of cowrie money in Bengali affairs.¹¹⁷ There are dozens of entries for the term “cowrie” in the Code. In its glossary, Halhed included three money units associated with cowries, namely, *cahawun* (worth sixteen *puns*), *gundæ* (worth four cowries), and *pun* (worth twenty *gundæ* of cowries).¹¹⁸

The Code comprises 21 chapters, with categories such as lending and borrowing, inheritance, “trust of deposit,” “selling a stranger’s property,” “gift,” “servitude,” “wages,” “rent and hire,” “purchase and sale,” “share in the cultivation of lands,” “fines of damaging a crop,” “scandalous and bitter expression,” “assault,” “theft,” “violence” and “adultery,” amongst others. Most chapters are concerned with the settlement of economic disputes, while some others are about community order. It is no wonder that economic compensation and associated punishments for breaches constituted the dominant means for solving disputes and crimes. While rupees, silver and gold coins were listed as the principal forms of payment for various fines, cowrie money was the most often mentioned, as is illustrated in the following examples extracted from the Code.

For cases relating to a slave girl, “If a person, in time of calamity, sells his slave girl to another person, without her consent, the Magistrate shall fine the vender two hundred *puns* of cowries.”¹¹⁹ The sum of two hundred *puns* was equivalent to 16,000 cowries, or about 60 rupees in 1703 (2,560 cowries were worth one rupee).

For cases of rape or seduction, “If a woman, impelled by any calamity, should come to any person, and remain with him, if he commits fornication with that woman, the Magistrate shall fine him two hundred and fifty *puns* of cowries.”¹²⁰

For the termination of employment, “If a person, without any fault committed by his servant, discharges the servant, the Magistrate shall take from that person one hundred *puns* of cowries, and cause him to pay the servant his wages.”¹²¹

For cases of littering, “If a person throws any filth into a garden, or near the steps of a pool, the Magistrate shall fine him one hundred *puns* of cowries, and oblige him to throw away the filth with his own hands.”¹²²

For cases where there has been false accusation, “If a man of a superior cast, and of superior abilities to another, falsely accuse him of any of the lesser crimes of the *Opoo Pātuk*, the Magistrate shall fine him twenty-five *puns* of cowries.”¹²³

For cases of verbal abuse,

If a man be deficient in a hand, or a foot, or an ear, or an eye, or a nose, or any other member, and a person of an equal cast, and of equal abilities with him, should say to him, in a reproachful manner, “You are deficient in a hand,” or a foot, or an ear, or an eye, or a nose, or any other member, or

should say to him, "Such limb of yours is very beautiful," the Magistrate shall fine him twelve *puns* of cowries.¹²⁴

This is one of the most humanitarian legal articles I have come across in any set of ethical codes.

For cases of assault, "If a man of an inferior cast, and of inferior abilities to another, should strike him with a weapon, the Magistrate shall fine him three thousand *puns* of cowries."¹²⁵

For cases of aiding a murderer, "Whoever murders a man, if another person gives much murderer an asylum or food, or hath furnished him with any weapon for the commission of such murder, the Magistrate shall fine that person one thousand *puns* of cowries."¹²⁶

For cases where animals have been killed, "If a man kills an insect, the Magistrate shall fine him one *pun* of cowries."¹²⁷

For cases of theft, "If a man steals jewels of a considerable value, the magistrate shall deprive him of life; if they are of small value, he shall fine him one thousand *puns* of cowries, and give back the jewels to the owner."¹²⁸

For cases involving the damage of public facilities, "If a man breaks a bridge, or tears a flag, the Magistrate shall fine him five hundred *puns* of cowries and cause him to repair the bridge or the flag."¹²⁹

For cases of adultery, "If a man, having at first begun a trifling conversation with a woman, afterwards increases and prolongs such conversation, the Magistrate shall fine him two hundred and fifty *puns* of cowries."¹³⁰

The range of these fines is from a few hundred to hundreds of thousands of cowries. The fine of 3,000 *puns* mentioned above, that is 240,000 cowrie shells, is one of the highest amounts calculated in shells in the Code; this was equivalent to about 96 rupees in 1703. The majority of fines ranged from a few to a few dozen rupees, which must have been quite a considerable sum for common people. Most of the crimes mentioned above belong to the category of misdemeanours; that is why fines (paid in cowries) became a main punishment and payment solution, being an appropriate warning to others. As for more serious felonies, corporal punishment, such as the cutting off of the head, hand, foot, nose or penis, was imposed.

These cited examples constitute just a small portion associated with cowrie money in the Code, but they serve to illustrate that cowrie money was legally and thus officially acknowledged in Bengal and that cowrie money had penetrated daily life in Bengal.

Unfortunately, the Gentoo Code only focuses on domestic issues, while international trade from the sixteenth century onwards pushed the cowrie trade and cowrie money into a new level. These shells played very active and dynamic roles in the Indian Ocean trade that connected South Asia, West Asia, Europe, Africa and the New World. With the growth of local economies (a booming textile industry and cash crop production, for example) in the seventeenth century, cowries were widely utilised in the Indian subcontinent, partially because of the poor performance of copper coinage mints.¹³¹ Frank Perlin points out that "in

the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there is plentiful evidence that these [cowries and copper coinage] became media of payments for large numbers of urban and country people caught up in relationships transcending the merely local sphere.”¹³² This is exactly the situation that pioneers of the British East India Company witnessed when they entered India and what they inherited when they came to administrate the Bengal Presidency.

British India: acknowledgement and replacement

In its first century, the British East India Company focused on trade, but from the beginning of the second half of the eighteenth century, the company drastically expanded, especially in terms of its military might. With its victory at the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the company began to control Bengal. In 1765, the Bengal Presidency was established, with Calcutta as its seat. Primarily centred in the Bengal region, principally the cowrie money zone, the Bengal Presidency paid a lot of attention to the dealings in the cowrie trade and cowrie money.

Numerous records of the East India Company confirmed that cowrie money was acknowledged and accepted in British India. As early as the building of Fort St George (or historically White Town), the first English (later British) fortress in India founded in 1644 at the coastal city of Madras (now Chennai), its administrators had their eye on the cowrie shell trade. Fort St George was asked in a letter dated 22 February 1660 to provide cowries, probably for Bengal. The letter reads, “Bowgees or Cowries, being here in some request, wee desire you to lade on board the *Smirna merchant*, to the quantity of about 20” tonnes.¹³³ The letter expressed a kind of urgency, and twenty tonnes of cowrie shells indicate both the purchasing power and the reliance of the Company on the local tradition. Indeed, it was around the mid-seventeenth century that the British and the French, preceded by the Portuguese, began to purchase cowrie shells, counted in tonnes from Bengal, Ceylon and the west coast of India, and ship them back to Europe. Once auctioned, these shells went to West Africa, first to buy slaves for plantations in the New World and then to buy palm oil to be used in the industrialising of Europe.

Sanjay Garg’s studies of British historical archives have illustrated that the British authorities and the East India Company played an active role in the cowrie trade and cowrie money in the eighteenth century.¹³⁴ The transportation of cowries to Bengal was mainly carried on by Bengali merchants. In 1700, the Board of Directors of the British East India Company asked their factors at Hughli to encourage the Bengali merchants to send more ships to the Maldives so that a sufficient amount of good quality cowries would be obtained.¹³⁵ By the eighteenth century, the cowrie trade to India had gradually come under the control of the Company.¹³⁶

While some British officials disliked cowrie money, the British authorities appreciated the popularity of shell money in the local economy and continued to use it in public finance. In 1753, when John Holwell proposed to use the *sicca* (a silver coin of the Moghul Empire) instead of shells to pay land tax, the

board at Fort William turned it down, as they thought it was not proper “to alter an indulgence which has subsisted from the original of the settlement, for as trifling an advantage.”¹³⁷ In the same year, a document drawn by the company’s committee of accounts recommended that

a stock of 6 or 7000 rupees of cowries be constantly kept in hand, and that when they are to be bought from 48 to 50 *pund* per Arcot rupee, that a much large purchase be made such as the Board shall think proper for the greater regularity.¹³⁸

The constant storage of cowries and the term “greater regularity” indicate the influential role of cowrie money even amongst the commercial and economic transactions of the East India Company.

To manage the large stock of cowries in Calcutta, the East India Company hired in 1755 a local *bania* called Kali Charan Podar.¹³⁹ He was offered a free *godown* (warehouse), a monthly salary of eight rupees for his assistant and a commission of two *pun* for every rupee or fifty pounds of cowries; he was also asked to deliver cowries to the various offices of the company to meet their daily demands. Meanwhile, he was responsible for any breakage, pilferage or loss of cowries under his supervision, as a cowrie became worthless if broken or perforated.¹⁴⁰ Another document concerning a ferry charge across the Hughli in Calcutta reads, “a *gundee* for each passage; 10 *gundees* for each basket of vegetable or fish; and 1 *pun* for each cow, calf or horse.”¹⁴¹ Obviously, the British at this time levied in cowries for daily charges.

The use of cowrie money in both official and private transactions extended to northeastern Bengal and Assam. Sylhet, known as Jalalabad, currently an economic centre in northeastern Bangladesh, came under British administration in 1765. Sylhet was strategically important for the British to gain power in northeast India and Upper Burma, and initially, the British collected cowries there as revenue.

In his letter to the Select Committee on 26 August 1769, Richard Becher explained why the revenue in Sylhet was collected in cowries. He wrote, the reason

is that this district being a boundary to the kingdom [Bengal] and contiguous to the hills and an enemy’s country, it is only inhabited by the poorest people who without effects or property merely for their subsistence and procuring the necessities of life cultivate their grounds and produce rice and other grain which as they sell for cowries so they are obliged to pay their rents in them. Nothing of considerable value is produced in this country, nor do any merchants or people or property reside here or hold any commerce with the inhabitants so as to cause a circulation of either gold or silver. From the time of its first being inhabited to the present, the transactions of trade amongst the natives themselves have been carried out in cowries, and notwithstanding measures [that] were formerly tried to annul this custom, and to establish a currency of gold and silver, they were of no effect.¹⁴²

This letter provides some interesting information about cowrie money in Sylhet. First and foremost, Richard Becher tried his best to defend the revenue in Sylhet being collected in the form of cowrie money. He emphasised that there were no gold or silver coins, and that only cowrie money had persisted from the earliest times up to the present; he also pointed out (or thought) that all precious efforts to ban cowrie money had failed. To support his point, Richard Becher described a society in Sylhet, a traditional commercial centre linking mountainous areas with river plains, with agricultural-based poverty and without commerce or merchants. Such a profile is filled with contemporary colonial biases, notably that he ignored, consciously or not, the dynamics of cowrie money, which met local demands, both official and private, for both small and large transactions.

Throughout the eighteenth century, the British witnessed the price fluctuation of the value of cowrie shells. Around 1727, one rupee was exchanged for 2,500–3,000 cowries; in 1740, one rupee was worth 2,400; in 1756, it was worth 2,560. The value of cowrie shells drastically dropped to 5,120 for one *sicca* rupee in the 1780s; in the 1790s, the price of cowrie shells increased, due to the shortage of silver coinage, as the British East Indian Company complained about the problem caused this to the manufacturers and farmers.¹⁴³ To be precise, the figures quoted above and the fluctuation of cowrie prices must be understood in an international context, as European shipments of shells to Africa had been a key factor for the strong value of cowrie shells for a long time.

Up until the first years of the nineteenth century, the British East Company continued to accept cowrie shells as revenue, but collecting and shipping cowrie shells from local areas to colonial centres had proven to be a formidable task. The initial acknowledgement, acceptance and utilisation of cowrie money was followed by the containment and replacement policy as soon as the East India Company had consolidated its presence in Bengal. A series of efforts and regulations were made to replace and ban the use of cowrie money. From the British point of view, first of all, unlike gold, silver or copper coinage, the cowrie did not in itself have any intrinsic value; secondly, the British found that it was difficult to manipulate and control this money, which largely relied on its import from outside Bengal.¹⁴⁴ These two reasons must be understood within the context of the abolition of the slave trade back in Europe. The illegitimatising and then the end of the slave trade brought about the sharp decline of the cowrie business. It no longer made any economic sense to purchase and ship cowries from India to Europe. Finally, the collecting, counting, shipping, storage and use of cowrie shells in India added a lot of administrative and economic burdens to the British, who had already discussed the minting of coins to replace cowrie shells.

The ultimate demonetisation of cowrie shells still had a great deal to do with the British. While cowrie shells were accepted as “part of the local revenue and probably for local payments,” what was essential for the British was its long-distance trade and the remittance of tribute back home to England.¹⁴⁵ Before 1781–1782, there had been no copper coins in Bengal, but in 1781, the British introduced copper coins.¹⁴⁶ In Orrisa, the suspension of cowrie circulation was first made in 1803,¹⁴⁷ although it proved not to be so immediately effective. In

the following years, it seems that the British allowed the payment of revenue in cowries, at least in part. In 1807, the British declared that “revenue would be received in the public treasuries only in Calcutta *sicca* rupees, and the rate of exchange was fixed at” four *kahans* of cowries (5,120 pieces) to the rupee; soon after, the rate decreased to seven *kahans*, due to many reasons including the great drainage of silver from Orissa.¹⁴⁸ Another very important context for the decline of the cowrie trade and cowrie money, as mentioned above, was the abolition of the slave trade from the end of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century. The end of cowrie exports to West Africa not only caused the sharp decline in this trade, but also hastened the devaluation of cowrie money.

Although the real disappearance of cowrie money did not take place until one century later, the British policy stimulated the continuous depreciation of cowrie shells throughout the nineteenth century. In 1833, one rupee was exchanged for as many as 6,500 shells, for example.¹⁴⁹ Soon after, cowrie shells were so devalued that about 9,000 to 10,000 were purchased for one rupee. This depreciation created considerable distress amongst the populace in Bengal, Odisha and northern India, and became a key factor of the 1817 Paik Rebellion against the British East India Company’s rule in Odisha.¹⁵⁰

Nevertheless, cowrie money died out slowly. The replacement of cowries by copper coins was a slow process. Indeed, as late as the second decade of the nineteenth century, copper coins were not sufficiently plentiful in circulation while the transition was still taking place.¹⁵¹ “Thereafter the cowrie was in retreat. The millions of cowries slowly gave way to the millions of copper *pice* cut out by the machines.”¹⁵²

While the collection of revenue entirely in cowries posed a challenge to the British in terms of storage and transfer to the presidency headquarters, the British squeezed enormous profits from India, which in turn helped the British Empire in its reproduction and expansion. Robert Lindsay, the collector of Sylhet in 1778–1779, for example, not only provided a detailed description of his duties in collecting and shipping cowrie shells, but also made his fortune through cowrie shells, a metaphor of British economic exploitation.¹⁵³

Collecting and counting cowries in Sylhet

The experience of Robert Lindsay in the British East India Company serves as a lively illustration of how cowrie money operated for the company and for its individual agents in British India.

In the spring of 1772, Robert Lindsay (1754–1836), a young gentleman from a British noble family, embarked for India. In 1776, he was very happy to serve as an assistant to Mr Broughton Rous, the Revenue Chief of Dacca, in the Province of Bengal.¹⁵⁴ He was soon appointed to Sylhet, located in northeastern Bengal and a place that at that time attracted a lot of attention from the British East India Company for its strategic importance for advancing into Burma. The British gradually brought Sylhet under their control and governed it as a part of

Bengal. It was while he was based in Sylhet that Lindsay provided his most interesting descriptions of how cowrie shells were collected and shipped as revenue for the British. His recollection is as follows:

I will now endeavour to give an account of the revenues of the country over which I presided, and which essentially differed from [those of] every other part of India. There was little silver or copper in circulation, and the circulating medium was carried on entirely in cowries, or small shells, such as are used in the African trade as ornaments for the women. This cowrie, or shell, is well known in every part of Bengal, and used in the purchase of the smaller articles of life by the lower ranks of society, and they answer all the purposes of commerce. How they became the only circulating medium of a country three hundred miles distant from the sea, is a question neither I nor any other person had been able fully to explain.¹⁵⁵

While Lindsay acknowledged that he did not know the reason for cowries being used as money in Bengal, he noticed that cowries were not “found either on the opposite coast of Malabar or Coromandel,” and he understood that these shells came from the Maldives.¹⁵⁶ He even sketched the transportation route of cowrie shells. From the Maldives, shells

are brought over to Chittagong, in the southeast corner of the bay of Bengal, from whence they are dispersed all over the country and eventually find their way to Sylhet, as being the poorer country and more suitable for the purchase of the smaller article of traffic in lieu of copper currency.¹⁵⁷

Lindsay then turned to explain how rents in Sylhet were collected and remitted to Dacca (Dhaka). The actual collection amounted to 250,000 rupees; however, it was paid in cowries. Naturally, one would want to know the exchange rate between the cowrie and the rupee. Lindsay explained the local exchange system, reckoning 5,120 cowries for one rupee (see Table 3.1). This reckoning system of 4–20–1280 is essential to understanding the spread of cowrie money across Afro-Eurasia, as Pelliot and many other scholars have appreciated.¹⁵⁸ Hans Ulrich Vogel points out that

the basic pattern of Bengal denominations was something like $4 \times 5 \times 4 \times 4 \times 4$. However, in every case described, at least one calculation step was saved by multiplying beforehand two neighbouring values. Thus, in general, we detect the following combinations: $4 \times 5 \times 4 \times 16$; $4 \times 20 \times 4 \times 4$; or $4 \times 20 \times 16$.¹⁵⁹

Therefore, the unit of 80 was fundamental in the system, as was 20. This pattern was shared in Siam, Yunnan and probably to a lesser degree, in West Africa.

Lindsay hence found that the sum of 250,000 rupees, about 1,300 million shells, posed an onerous challenge in terms of collecting, storage and shipping

Table 3.1 Denomination of Cowrie Shells in India

<i>Cowrie</i>	<i>Gunda</i>	<i>Pun</i>	<i>Cawn</i>	<i>Rupee</i>	<i>Pound</i>
4	1				
80	20	1			
1,280	320	16	1		
5,120	1,280	64	4	1	
40,960	10,240	512	32	8	1

to Dacca. "It required, in fact, many large cellars or warehouses to contain them, and when finally collected for the year, a large fleet of boats to transport to Dacca."¹⁶⁰ The whole process would "cost a loss of no less than ten per cent."¹⁶¹

Collecting land tax in Sylhet seemed not easy at all, although Lindsay "found that the country [was] fully able to pay the amount with which it was taxed."¹⁶² In his first nine months in Sylhet, collecting land revenues had drawn his whole attention. The experience with local *Zemindars* (landholders), Lindsay complained, was "both difficult and intricate." "In many instances, I was compelled to use military force, and it had nearly been the cause of a partial revolt under the hill."¹⁶³ The colonial mindset and tone are evident here.

Counting those shells collected was no easier a task than collecting. The young, ambitious Lindsay decided to make some reforms to shorten the process. Instead of attempting to count shells, the conventional way to calculate the tax, he ordered the treasurer to "receive the shells by weight"; "the black treasurer," "a sagacious man," in the beginning resisted the idea, by assuring "me it was impossible"; only with "the high tone of authority" was his order carried out, and the "measure was filled." Lindsay "felt proud at [his] wisdom," but he was puzzled when he "was absent from a few minutes" and "found the cowries just weighed had become one-third heavier without apparent reason." The treasurer told him that "a little sand" was added to cowrie shells, so Lindsay ordered to "receive them by a given measure – to this there cannot possibly be an objection." The treasurer finally realised the seriousness and "again bowed his head." As a result, the "standard measure was accordingly made and filled with much judgement, neither too high nor too low; an order was now directed by the great man to pass into a law, fixing the diameter of the measure."¹⁶⁴ Lindsay's reform was eventually put into practice. Cowrie shells "should in future be received in baskets, made to contain a certain given quantity, and five baskets in each hundred to be counted so as to form an average."¹⁶⁵ In so doing, cheating and tricks could be avoided, and the counting task became much easier. Lindsay now found that "it was wonderful with what ease and nicety the business was conducted afterwards."¹⁶⁶

Cowries collected in Sylhet were shipped to Dacca annually, another onerous project for Lindsay, and in Dacca these shells were "exposed to public sale,"¹⁶⁷ so that the British could change them into silver, a hard cash. This practice, however, was soon redundant, as the British abolished the use of cowrie money.

The experience of Lindsay in Sylhet illustrates the ambiguity of the British towards cowrie money. The local root and scope of cowrie money in Bengal and Orissa were deep and thus reluctantly acknowledged by the British. The traditions of using cowrie money for trade, rent payment, revenue collection and so on were adopted by the British in the beginning; however, the counting and the shipment of these numerous shells posed a challenge to the British bureaucracy. The reform of cowrie calculating in Sylhet made by Lindsay indicates the colonial impatience with local practices, which seemed not to be in line with the rationality and efficiency of the bureaucratic administration. More importantly, the value and medium of exchange in the form of cowrie shells could not be easily translated into hard cash such as gold and silver, which the British desired for their use in other areas and at home, where cowrie shells were not recognised as money. This was the same problem the Mongol officials had faced in Yunnan nearly five centuries earlier.

A fortune made through cowries

The job of collecting, counting and shipping cowries was exhausting, but Lindsay seemed to have been pleased with these challenges. His appointment in Sylhet proved to be profitable, but within only nine months, somebody “of needy fortune” was appointed to replace Lindsay. With “tears into my eye,” Lindsay was unhappy and indeed very worried, as he “had borrowed [a] large sum of money” to secure his Sylhet position.¹⁶⁸ He then followed the cowrie transportation route to reach Dacca.

I now ordered a couple of canoes to be well manned and armed, ostensibly for Dacca; in the course of two hours I set off, and pushed forward directly to Calcutta, nearly three hundred miles by the windings of the river, travelling night and day.¹⁶⁹

With his appeal, especially “the able influence of a fair lady, wife of Justice Hyde,” Lindsay won a “signal victory” as he was reappointed “resident and collector of Sylhet,” and “moreover, independent of Dacca, with instructions to correspond with the presidency direct,” so he immediately returned to Sylhet and began “in recovering my balances.”¹⁷⁰

Lindsay, saddled with a large debt, was paid no more than “500*l.* per annum, so that fortune could only be acquired by my own industry.”¹⁷¹ Like Ibn Battuta, Lindsay himself was involved in the cowrie trade, and indeed made a fortune. While the abundant local resources such as rice, wood, iron, copper, silk and lime provided many commercial opportunities, at that moment, for Lindsay, “one thing was wanting – ready money,” but soon “the fickle goddess” “furnished me with the means of accomplishing my wishes, in a manner the most satisfactory and the most unexpected.”¹⁷² Lindsay’s “fickle goddess,” as a matter of fact, turned out to be none other than the lord of cowrie shells. *Kaparda*, a word of Sanskrit origin denoting the cowrie, had the compound meaning of a “coil of

hair” in the *Rigveda*, and there referred to the Hindu god Shiva. And it was Shiva, an Indian god associated with cowries, that bestowed wealth through and in the form of cowrie shells, a real and ready money desired by Lindsay, upon Lindsay.

The collecting and public sale of cowrie shells created a niche for making a profit. A “black writer,” provided by Mr Croftes, the Accountant-General, shared his brilliant commercial plan that “a considerable profit might be made from the cowries under good management, provided a favourable contract could be made with government.”¹⁷³ Mr Croftes, on behalf of his friend, Mr Lopez, made “an offer to purchase all of the cowries collected at Sylhet in the shape of revenue, at a certain given price, the money being payable two years after delivery.”¹⁷⁴ Lindsay was consulted on this offer, and he immediately realised the potential wealth that such a deal promised. He quickly made a decision in this delicate situation by reporting to the board that

having compared the offer made by Mr Lopez with the actual sales made at Dacca for the last five years, I could not help reporting the price offered not unfavourable; at the same time, I considered it my duty to say that the proposed term of payment, suspended for two years, was quite unreasonable.¹⁷⁵

Lindsay made his own offer with the same price, but the term of payment was reduced to six months. He believed that this offer was irresistible, even though it gave the chance to his friend the Accountant-General who tried to prevent Lindsay by revising the contract “to be made by public sale at Calcutta at a distant day.”¹⁷⁶ Mr Lopez did not win the sale, as “a black man,” in fact Lindsay’s servant, was present. Lindsay now made the second report to the board when he had won the contract and the board had no objection. Lindsay acknowledged that from “this signal piece of good luck, and from the conspicuous advantage I derived from the great command of money to carry on my commercial pursuits, I have to date the origin of the fortune I acquired in the Company’s service.”¹⁷⁷ How could Lindsay have otherwise begun to amass his fortune? Obviously, the six-month possession of the revenue in the form of cowrie money provided him with the perfect opportunity to invest in many commercial businesses. It was the cowrie trade and cowrie money in British Bengal that made Lindsay a fortune, and he surely was not the only beneficiary.

By the mid-eighteenth century, however, copper coinage had either displaced the shells from most of their old regions of use, or subordinated shells to an even more humble, but nevertheless still monetary role. The major exception was eastern India, where Bengal, part of its Bihar hinterland and Orissa absorbed ever greater quantities, well into the early nineteenth century.¹⁷⁸ As late as 1913, when D.A. Baker wrote his book *The Theory of Money*, he used cowrie shells in British India to illustrate the evolution of money. In British India, “cowrie shells, though no longer used as ornaments, are still current in the bazaars for very small payments, about two hundred being given for a penny.”¹⁷⁹

The case of cowrie money cited by Baker in elaborating his theory of money is symbolic. India was the first place where cowrie shells were made into money, and this ingenious invention (together with the idea of coinage), soon spread from India to areas in mainland Southeast Asia, such as lower Burma and the Tai world and all the way north up to the land later known as Yunnan. Fragmentary records also refer to the use of cowrie money in Kashmir and other areas in northern India and Central Asia, but the paucity of sources does not allow a discussion on these. The concept of cowrie shells as goods and as wealth was surely spread from the Maldives and the Indian Ocean to the Arabic Peninsula, the Mediterranean World and thence to West Africa. It is assumed that West African societies learnt this practice from India too, although it is important to note that large territories and various peoples lay between the Bay of Bengal and West Africa that did not adopt this practice. The first and earliest Indian extension was in fact eastwards, towards Southeast Asia.

Notes

- 1 Anirban Biswas, *Money and Markets from Pre-Colonial to Colonial India* (New Delhi: Aakar Books, 2007), 143.
- 2 Robert Lindsay, "Anecdotes of an Indian Life," in *Lives of the Lindsays, or, A Memoir of the Houses of Crawford and Balcarres*, ed. Lord Lindsay (London: John Murray, 1849), vol. III, 169.
- 3 Nicholas G. Rhodes and S.K. Bose, *The Coinage of Assam: Volume 1, Pre-Ahom Period* (Kolkata: Gywahati, 2003), 57.
- 4 For a sketch of the cowrie money in India, see Anirban Biswas, *The Cowrie Money and Monetary History of India* (Kolkata: CAMP, 2006).
- 5 John E. Wills, Jr., "Maritime Asia, 1500–1800: The Interactive Emergence of European Domination," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 98, no. 1 (1993): 86.
- 6 Majumdar and Chatterjee, 2014, 39.
- 7 Monica L. Smith, "The Substance and Symbolism of Long-distance Exchange: Textiles as Desired Trade Goods in the Bronze Age Middle Asian Interaction Sphere," in *Connections and Complexity: New Approaches to the Archaeology of South Asia*, ed. Shinu Anna Abraham, et al. (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 149–150.
- 8 Heidi J. Miller, "Spiraling Interconnectedness: A Fresh Look at Double-spiral-headed Pins in the Indian Subcontinent," in *Connections and Complexity: New Approaches to the Archaeology of South Asia*, 228.
- 9 Majumdar and Chatterjee, 2014, 39.
- 10 Ibid., 40.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid., 48.
- 13 Ibid., 47.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Gray and Bell, 2010, vol. 1, 240.
- 16 Deena Bandhu Pandey, "Cowries as a Monetary Token in Ancient India," *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India*, vol. xxviii, Part II (1966): 133; James Heimann, "Small Changes and Ballast: Cowries Money in India," *South Asia*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1980): 48.
- 17 Majumdar and Chatterjee, 2014, 48.

- 18 Zhang Xun, "Xu (Preface)," in *Faxian Zhuan Jiaozhu* (Biography of Faxian), authored by Faxian, annot. Zhang Xun (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2008), 1–2; James Legge, *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms: Being an Account by the Chinese Monk Fa-Hien of His Travels in India and Ceylon (A.D. 399–414) in Search of the Buddhist Books of Discipline*, translated and annotated with a Korean recession of the Chinese text (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886), 43 and 43, fn. 2.; Hans Ulrich Vogel, "Cowrie Trade and Its Role in the Economy of Yunnan: From the Ninth to the Mid-Seventeenth Century (Part I)," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 36, no. 3 (1993): 230. *Biography of Faxian* is known as *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms* (*Foguo Ji*; 佛国记) in the west.
- 19 Faxian (*Faxian Zhuan Jiaozhu*), 2008, 46.
- 20 Majumdar and Chatterjee, 2014, 43.
- 21 Xuanzang and Bianji, *Datang Xiyuji* (Buddhist Records of the Western World), annotated by Ji Xianlin (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985), 217.
- 22 Yijing, *Nanhai Jigui Neifa zhuan Jiaozhu* (The Record of Buddhist Practices Sent Home from the Southern Sea), annotated by Wang Bangwei (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1995), 46; 167, footnote 22; 219.
- 23 Huilin, *Yiqie Jing Yin Yi* (Pronunciation and Meanings of All Sutras), in *Cishu Jicheng* (Collections of Dictionaries), vol. 2, ed. Gu Feng (Beijing: Tuanjie Chubanshe, 1993), 660.
- 24 *Jiu Tangshu*, juan 198; *Xin Yangshu*, juan 221 a. The sentence was repeated by Zhao Rukuo in the early thirteenth century. Zhao Ruokuo, *Zhufanzhi Jiaoshi* (A Record of Various Barbarians: An Annotation), annotated by Yang Bowen (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2000), 86. Some Buddhist pilgrims pointed out that cowries were used as a medium of exchange in the West Region, a vast area stretching from northwest China into modern central Asia. Many Chinese Buddhist sutras translated from Sanskrit or central Asian languages contain passages that mention cowries being donated to Buddhist monasteries. Kashmir, for example, saw the disappearance of cowrie money as late as the early nineteenth century. This, however, needs further studies.
- 25 Majumdar and Chatterjee, 2014, 43.
- 26 Wicks, 1992, 75.
- 27 Majumdar and Chatterjee, 2014, 52.
- 28 Heimann, 1980, 56–57.
- 29 Pandey, 1966, 132.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 128.
- 31 Susmita Basu Majumdar, "Monetary History of Bengal: Issues and Non-Issues," in *The Complex Heritage of Early India, Essays in Memory of R.S. Sharma*, ed. D.N. Jha (New Delhi: Manohar, 2014), 599.
- 32 Sayantani Pal, "Media of Exchange Under the Pālas and the Senas as Reflected in Their Inscriptions," in *From Mountain Fastness to Coastal Kingdoms: Hard Money and "Cashless" Economies in the Medieval Bay of Bengal World*, ed. John Deyell and Rila Mukherjee (New Delhi: Manohar, in press), 4.
- 33 Majumdar and Chatterjee, 2014, 39–56; Pal, in press.
- 34 Majumdar and Chatterjee, 2014, 48–49.
- 35 Pal, in press, 2.
- 36 Majumdar and Chatterjee, 2014, 49.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 49.
- 38 Majumdar and Chatterjee, 2014, 49–50; Pal, in press, 2.
- 39 Majumdar and Chatterjee, 2014, 50.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 50.
- 41 Pal, in press, 10.
- 42 Sanjay Garg, "Non-Metallic Currencies on Indian in Indian Ocean Trade and Economies," in *Cross Currencies and Community Networks*, ed. Himanshu Prabha Ray and Edward A. Alpers (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 249.

- 43 Cite from Garg, 2007, 249.
- 44 Pal, in press, 17.
- 45 Ibid., 5, 17.
- 46 Ibid., 19.
- 47 Ibid., 20–21.
- 48 Gray and Bell, 2010, vol. 1, 237–239.
- 49 Susmita Basu Majumdar and Sharmistha Chatterjee, “The Alagum (Odisha) Gartteśvara Śiva Temple and the Two Temple Inscription,” *Pratna Samiksha*, New Series, vol. 5 (2014): 97–107; “From Unimpressive to Impressive: Understanding the Alagum Temple Complex, District Puri, Orissa,” *Research Journal*, vol. XVII (2013–14): 155–164.
- 50 Majumdar and Chatterjee, 2014, 101.
- 51 Ibid., 102; 2013–14, 161–162.
- 52 Majumdar and Chatterjee, 2014, 101.
- 53 Ibid., 101–102; 2013–14, 162.
- 54 Majumdar and Chatterjee, 2013–14, 162.
- 55 For the cowrie trade and cowrie money in the Bengal Bay world, see Yang, 2011, 317–342; 2012, 125–146.
- 56 Battuta, 2011, 243.
- 57 Ibid., 267.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 Wang, 2000, 264. The character 𠂔 was only created and used by Wang Dayuan, by combining the radical 貝 (*bei*, lit. shell) and the radical 八 (*ba*) together, the former referring to the meaning associated with the new character, while the latter was the pronunciation of the new character, which this present author cannot tell whether it was pronounced as “ba” or “pa.”
- 61 Wang, 2000, 330.
- 62 Ibid., 339.
- 63 Ibid., 2000, 337.
- 64 Ma, 2005, 74.
- 65 Ibid., 2005, 87. 𠂔 is the simplified version of 𠂔.
- 66 Gong, 2000, 38; Fei Xin, *Hsing-Ch’a Sheng-Lan, The Overall Survey of the Star Raft by Fei Xin*, trans. J.V.G. Mills, rev., annotated and ed. Roderich Ptak (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1996), 43.
- 67 Huang Xinceng, *Xiyang Chaogong Dianlu Jiaozhu* (Records of Western Tributaries), annotated by Xie Fang (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2000), 76–77.
- 68 Ibid., 87.
- 69 Ibid., 97–103.
- 70 John Deyell, *Living Without Silver, the Monetary History of Early Medieval North India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); “Cowries and Coins: The Dual Monetary System of the Bengal Sultanate,” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 47, no. 1 (2010): 63–106.
- 71 Deyell, 1999, 237.
- 72 Ibid., 62.
- 73 Ibid., 221.
- 74 Ibid., 33–34.
- 75 Deyell, 2010, 63–106.
- 76 Ibid., 71–72.
- 77 Ibid., 70.
- 78 Ibid., 68.
- 79 Ibid.
- 80 Tomè Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires and the Book of Francisco Rodrigues*, ed. Armando Cortesao (New Delhi and Chennai: Asian Educational Services, 2005), 93–94.

- 81 Ibid., 94–95.
- 82 Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, “The Second Part: Describing India and Isles Adjacent,” *The Six Voyages of John Baptista Tavernier* (London: Printed for R.L. and M.P., 1678), e-page no. 330 (original page 23), www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/123215#page/330/mode/1up.
- 83 Garg, 2007, 251.
- 84 Thomas Bowrey, *A Geographical Account of Countries Round the Bay of Bengal, 1669–1679*, ed. Richard Carnac Temple (Cambridge: Hakluyt Society, 1905), 199–200.
- 85 Garg, 2007, 251.
- 86 Ibid., 251.
- 87 Gray and Bell, 2010, vol. 1, 78.
- 88 Ibid., 239–240.
- 89 Ibid., 309–320.
- 90 Ibid., 315.
- 91 Ibid., 239.
- 92 Bowrey, 1905, 179.
- 93 Ibid., 200.
- 94 Johann Reinhold Forster, *A Voyage to the East Indies* (London: Printed by J. Davis for Vernor & Hood, & J. Cuthell, 1800), 86, <https://archive.org/details/b22037202>. Given the context, 3,500 instead of 350 shells must have been exchanged for one rupee.
- 95 Rhodes and Bose, 2003.
- 96 Ibid., 10. Bhāskaravarman probably ascended the throne in 594 CE and ruled until about 650 CE.
- 97 Rhodes and Bose, 2003, 58.
- 98 Ibid., 63.
- 99 Ibid., 33.
- 100 Ibid.
- 101 Ibid., 64.
- 102 Ibid.
- 103 The Ahom Kingdom (1228–1826, also called Kingdom of Assam) was a kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley in Assam, India. It famously maintained its sovereignty for nearly 600 years and successfully resisted the Mughal expansion in Northeast India.
- 104 Rhodes and Bose, 2003, 59.
- 105 Biswas, 2007, 130.
- 106 Ibid., 130.
- 107 Water Hamilton, *The East-India Gazetteer*, 2nd ed. (London: Printed for Parbury, Allen and Co., 1828), vol. I, 188.
- 108 Rhodes and Bose, 2003, 62.
- 109 Najaf Haider, “Fractional Pieces and Non-Metallic Monies in Medieval India (1200–1750),” in *Money in Asia (1200–1900): Small Currencies in Social and Political Contexts*, ed. Jane Kate Leonard and Ulrich Theobald (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2015), 88–89.
- 110 Ibid., 101. Chinese pilgrims mentioned the use of cowrie money in Bihar earlier than this time, but its scope and frequency remain unclear.
- 111 Ibid., 101.
- 112 Ibid., 101–102.
- 113 Ibid., 102. The *paisa* was a monetary sub-unit.
- 114 Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, *Travel in India*, trans. V. Ball, ed. W. Crooke (London: Oxford University, 1925), vol. I, 23–24.
- 115 John Marshall, *John Marshall in India Notes and Observations in Bengal 1668–1672*, ed. Shafaat Ahmad Khan (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), 23–24.

- 116 Haider, 2015, 103.
- 117 Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, *A Code of Gentoo Laws, or, Ordinations of the Pundits: From a Persian Translation, Made from the Original, Written in the Shanscrit Language* (London: East Indian Company, 1776), <https://archive.org/details/codeofgentoolaws00halh>.
- 118 Ibid., 105, 109, 114.
- 119 Ibid., 335.
- 120 Ibid., 336.
- 121 Ibid., 339.
- 122 Ibid.
- 123 Ibid., 381.
- 124 Ibid., 385.
- 125 Ibid., 400.
- 126 Ibid., 409.
- 127 Ibid., 411.
- 128 Ibid., 425.
- 129 Ibid., 437.
- 130 Ibid., 442.
- 131 Frank Perlin, "Money-Use in Late Pre-colonial Indian and the International Trade in Currency Media," in *The Imperial Monetary System of Mughal India*, ed. John F. Richards (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 241.
- 132 Ibid., 237.
- 133 Cite from Bowrey, 1905, 200, ft. 1.
- 134 Garg, 2007, 250–251.
- 135 Om Prakash, "On Coinage in Mughal India," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 24, no. 4 (1988): 475–491; Garg, 2007, 250.
- 136 Garg, 2007, 250.
- 137 Cite from *ibid.*, 250.
- 138 Ibid. The *pund* (*pan* or *pun*) was a Bengali measure of value, once equal to 80 shells.
- 139 Garg, 2007, 251. The bania were an occupational community of merchants, bankers, money lenders and dealers in Bengal.
- 140 Ibid., 251.
- 141 Cite from Garg, 2007, 251.
- 142 Ibid., 252.
- 143 Debendra Bijoy Mitra, *Monetary System in the Bengal Presidency, 1757–1835* (Calcutta and New Delhi: K.P. Bagchi & Company, 1991), 9–10; Sushil Chandra De, "The Cowry Currency in India," *The Orissa Historical Research Journal*, vol. 1, no. 1 (1952): 8.
- 144 Garg, 2007, 251.
- 145 Amiya Kumar Bagchi, "Transition from Indian to British Indian Systems of Money and Banking 1800–1850," *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3, Special Issue: Papers Presented at the Conference on Indian Economic and Social History, Cambridge University (1985): 505.
- 146 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 65.
- 147 Deena Bandhu Paney, "Cowrie as Monetary Token in Ancient India," *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India*, vol. XXVIII (1966): 129.
- 148 Bagchi, 1985, 504.
- 149 Chandra De, 1952, 8.
- 150 Ibid., 9.
- 151 For a discussion of the decline of cowrie money, see Biswas, 2006, 56–73; 2007, 143–159.
- 152 Holden Furber, *John Company at Work: A Study of European Expansion in India in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), 289. The *pice* was a monetary unit, equal to one hundredth of a rupee.

- 153 For discussion on Lindsay's activity, also see Mitra, 1991, 89–90; Garg, 2007, 253–254.
- 154 Lindsay, 1849, 159.
- 155 Ibid., 169.
- 156 Ibid.
- 157 Ibid.
- 158 Pelliot, 1959, vol. 1, 557–563; Heimann, 1980, 57–58; Vogel, 1993, Part I, 246–250.
- 159 Vogel, 1993, Part I, 249.
- 160 Lindsay, 1849, 170.
- 161 Ibid., 170.
- 162 Ibid., 171.
- 163 Ibid.
- 164 Ibid., 170–171.
- 165 Ibid., 171.
- 166 Ibid.
- 167 Ibid.
- 168 Ibid., 171–172.
- 169 Ibid., 172.
- 170 Ibid., 172–173.
- 171 Ibid., 174. “L” is the stylised representation of pound, standing for libra (Latin: “pound”).
- 172 Ibid., 174–175.
- 173 Ibid., 175.
- 174 Ibid.
- 175 Ibid.
- 176 Ibid., 175–176.
- 177 Ibid., 176.
- 178 Perlin, 1987, 241.
- 179 DalgairnsArundel Baker, *The Theory of Money* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, first published in 1913, 2011, first paperback edition), 13.

4 Southeast Asia

Intra-Asian interactions

In the *kot cai* year, s. 842 (1480–81), Chiang Mai flourished in every way. King Tilokarat had Mün Dam Phra Khot reform the tax collections of the Phing [River Basin] domains and the other domains, to collect the various taxes in gold, silver, and cowries, which accrued to the royal treasure in great amounts.
– *The Chiang Mai Chronicle*¹

Southeast Asia is comparatively complicated in terms of the history of its money and monetisation, partially because of its internal heterogeneous economic landscape, and partially because of its external influence and connections with different economic and monetary systems, namely, the Chinese and Indian. From the third century BCE to the early fifteenth century CE, a number of Southeast Asian polities including kingdoms and port cities began using money.² Forms of money and the process of monetisation in this region, however, varied tremendously. Gold, silver, copper, tin, paper, cowrie shells, rice, salt and cloth were adopted by various polities and societies. Areas such as Arakan, Pagan, Dvaravati, Ayudhya, Lan Na, post-Angkorian Cambodia, Vietnam, Aceh, Samudra-Pase and central and eastern Java possessed a large number of strong “national” currencies during the pre-modern period and these local currencies were based on gold and silver that had been issued into coins by various kingdoms;³ in many other hill societies, barter trade continued until the twentieth century. While Southeast Asia has a rich numismatic legacy, the process of monetisation from the third century BCE to the early fifteenth century was “neither uniform nor continuous.”⁴ Throughout the region over a long span of time, no general money emerged, let alone a single universal currency system. The complexity of money and the monetisation process in Southeast Asia deserves attention, as it may not only reveal the region’s dynamic interactions, but also challenge the retrospective view of Southeast Asia as a single economic body.

Having said that, in early mainland Southeast Asia, cowrie money paralleled gold and silver coinage (and probably copper too), and these constituted the cornerstones for the monetary systems over a fairly large area. Cowrie shells had already reached mainland Southeast Asia during its Bronze Age. The Khorat Plateau in the northeastern Isan region of Thailand is named after the short form

of Nakhon Ratchasima, a historical barrier controlling access to and from the area. In the valleys fed by the Mun, Chi and Songkhram rivers, villagers exchanged in value for exotic goods such as copper, tin and stone from the surrounding hills and for cowrie shell ornaments from the coast during the period of 2000–500 BCE.⁵ In upland Laos, “the burial offerings found at Ban Ang, and indeed in other sites, included glass beads and carnelian beads, cowrie shells of a coastal origin, bronze helices, bells and bracelets, as well as iron knives, arrowheads and spearheads.”⁶ In the upper part of mainland Southeast Asia, in the area later called Yunnan, cowrie shells were discovered in many sites dating to the first millennium BCE (to be examined in Chapter 5).

This chapter introduces the use of cowrie money in some Southeast Asian societies. It firstly discusses the major cowrie money zone in pre-modern Thailand, which then contained two polities, Siam and Lan Na, based on textual sources from Thai inscriptions, traditional chronicles and legal codes; it then moves on to provide a holistic view of the cowrie money in Southeast Asia by paralleling both western and Chinese observations. While Pegu in lower Burma was often mentioned as having used cowrie money, it is a pity that no existing local findings, whether archaeological or textual, can be utilised to explore this issue. The existence of cowrie money in mainland Southeast Asia nearly two millennia ago illustrates the far-flung influence of the Indian Ocean and thus sheds new light on Southeast Asian history, the Indian Ocean world and Asian interactions.

Cowrie money in Thai inscriptions

According to Robert S. Wicks, major areas known to have adopted cowries as a medium of exchange and measure of value were along the Ganges and Brahmaputra valleys of northeast India and the Chao Phraya basin of Thailand. One result of this influx was that cowrie shell became a form of subsidiary money in many neighbouring societies.⁷ According to Anthony Reid, textual sources lead to the conclusion that during the period of 1400–1800, in Siam and lower Burma, cowrie shells were used as “a convenient low-denomination substitute.”⁸ However, the use of cowrie money in the Nanzhao Kingdom from the ninth and tenth centuries onwards implies that cowrie money must have been in operation in mainland Southeast Asia earlier than the tenth century.

It is a pity that so very few archaeological findings of cowrie shells in Southeast Asia exist to have been utilised in the discussion of cowrie money; fortunately, the use of cowrie money in Thailand until the late nineteenth century has been confirmed by many inscriptions.⁹ In the late thirteenth century, three Thai polities emerged in today’s northern Thailand, namely, Sukhothai under King Ramkhamhaeng, Phayao under King Ngan Müang and Lan Na where King Mangrai (Mengrai) ruled for nearly sixty years (Figure 4.1). Various inscriptions reveal that cowrie shells had been used as money in this vast region.

Sukhothai under Ramkhamhaeng expanded quickly, but the kingdom soon disintegrated after his death in 1298. Short-lived as it was, covering the period of 1292–1400, Sukhothai left many inscriptions that highlight the central role



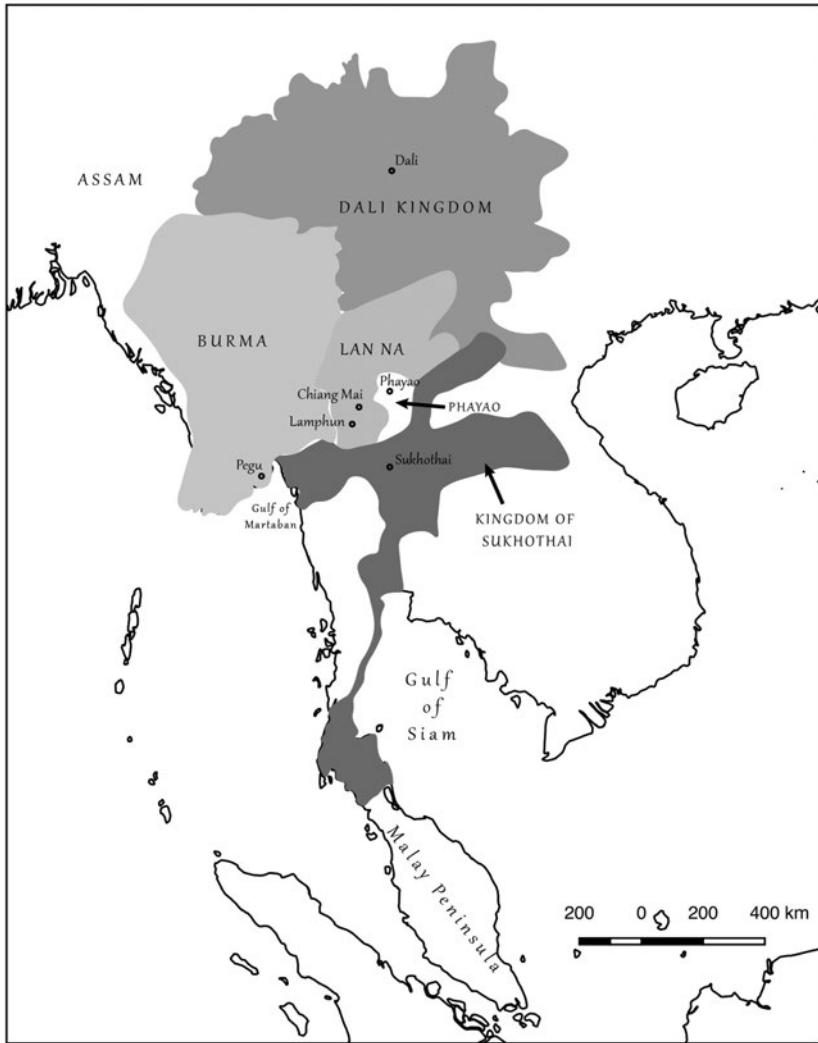
Figure 4.1 The Three Kings Monument¹⁰

of cowries in the Tai monetary system (Map 4.1).¹¹ A 1292 inscription by Ramkhamhaeng reads:

At the close of the rainy season they celebrate the Kathina ceremonies, which last a month, with heaps of cowries, with heaps of areca nuts, with heaps of flowers, with cushions and pillows: the gifts they present [to the monks] as accessories to the Kathina [amount to] two million each year¹²

The figure of two million refers to the number of cowrie shells, representing the total value of the accessory donations. Obviously, cowrie shells were not only regarded as precious items to be offered, but also functioned as a measure of value.

A 1399 inscription provides a similar description. It records that a lady gave land worth 200 million cowrie shells as an endowment, “bought garden land of all sorts for five million” cowrie shells and made gifts amounting to 200 million cowrie shells.¹³ In this inscription, cowrie shells functioned not only as measure of value, but also were used directly to buy garden land. Nevertheless, the large number in all three transactions probably indicates the devaluation of cowrie money,¹⁴ as 200 million, for example, is a number beyond people’s counting and is far larger than any other transaction where cowries are mentioned. Or perhaps



Map 4.1 The Tai World (c. Fourteenth Century)

this number recorded in cowries only served as account money, as occurred in some areas of nineteenth-century West Africa.

A third inscription of the period 1398–1419 was discovered near the old walled city of Sukhodaya; it commemorated acts of merit conducted by a widow at the turn of the fifteenth century:¹⁵

We and our relatives, being filled with zeal, presented bricks (to build) a pedestal for a statue of the Buddha, and we did homage by covering the

pedestal (with a cloth worth) 60,000 (cowries). After this, a dedication ceremony was held, with five silver and gold flowers; then there was a ceremony inside our house and a ceremony for our children too. Then we listened to the Mahājāti.

After the death of her husband,

Then I did homage by presenting a lamp (costing) 80,000 (cowries), and in my zeal I bought gold to gild the lectern. . . . I supported His Lordship of the Mahāthera, my son, in his austerities constantly in every way, at a cost of 60,000 cowries, from the time he became an ascetic until he became a monk. . . . When Mahādharmarājā entered the city, I bought ricefields for 84,120,000 (cowries) to make into an orchard, planted areca trees and then presented (the land) to the Lord.¹⁶

The devotion of the widow illustrated by her donations to the monastery is very touching, even though we know it was very common then in the Tai societies. Another case was recorded in an inscription in the year 1339 and “the second oldest known epigraph in Sukhodayan script” which “commemorates a group of benefactions” made by local rulers to the abbot of a monastery. Amongst the various gifts were “eight hundred and sixty thousand” cowries.¹⁷ Donations to Sangha and a monastery further support the key role of cowries both as offerings, as a measure of value and as a medium of exchange.

Cowries were used to pay for fines too. One inscription from Sukhothai from the same period reads, “if anyone commits the transgression of withholding of a slave for more than three days, he shall be fined eleven thousand [cowries] for each [additional] day up to five, making just fifty-five thousand for the [eight] days.”¹⁸ These cases above each mention a large quantity of cowries used in daily transactions and thus we may reckon the large number of cowrie shells in circulation and the even larger number of cowrie shells that must have been shipped into the Tai world from the Indian Ocean. The role of cowrie money is also illustrated by contemporary Tai texts such as *The Chiang Mai Chronicle* and the legal codes by King Mangrai in the Lan Na Kingdom, with its capital at Chiang Mai.

The Chiang Mai Chronicle

The Chiang Mai Chronicle records that Ru ang (Ramkhamhaeng) of Sukhothai had an affair with one of Ngan Müang’s wives and King Mangrai persuaded Ramkhamhaeng to apologise and pay Ngan Müang 990,000 cowrie shells as compensation: “King Mangrai had King Ruang ask Ngam Müang’s forgiveness and agree to pay King Ngam Müang an indemnity in cowrie shells of 9 *rung* 9 *ruang* – in Thai words, 990,000 cowries.”¹⁹ After a meeting of the three kings, a retainer of King Ruang’s “came with 9 *lung* 9 *luang* of cowries, that is, 990,000 cowries, to pay the indemnity to King Ngam Müang,” and the two kings “were friendlier than before.”²⁰

Mangrai was the greatest king of the Lan Na kingdom and a generous sponsor of Buddhism. He once “arranged for all sorts of things” for Wat Kan Thom by delimiting

an area in which the rice land tax (*kha na*) at the New Year of 620,000 cowry shells were funds for alms, an area in Mæ Cæm of 500,000 cowries for foods, and an area of Chæ Chang of 500,000 cowries for betal for the monks.²¹

In October 1296, when King Mangrai prepared for an attack, he “had the assembly drum sounded to call up all the troops and distributed rewards of cowries and silver to /them, for them to be his strength.”²² It is interesting that the word “cowries” was put ahead of “silver,” which might indicate that cowrie shells were general money or more popular than silver. At least, the cowrie-silver bi-monetary system seemingly was well established.

Sæn Müang Ma became King of Lan Na in 1400 and continued to perform works of merit. He “cast the Cao Sikkhi Buddha image, enshrined at Wat Kan Thom and donated land as rice for the image, 100,000 cowries [worth], and 100,000 [worth] as alms for the votaries of the image.”²³

Around 1480–81, King Tilokarat “had Mün Dam Phra Khot reform the tax collections of the Phing [River Basin] domains and the other domains, to collect the various taxes in gold, silver, and cowries,/which accrued to the royal treasure in great amounts.”²⁴

During the Burmese occupation of Chiang Mai in the mid-eighteenth century, a rebellion broke out that not only defeated the Burmese in Chiang Mai, but also “sent warriors to oppress Lakhòn, extorting cowries and silver.”²⁵ Obviously, cowrie shells were still regarded as treasure as was silver, or functioned in the role of money, as did silver.

In *The Chiang Mai Chronicle*, cowries were used to buy, to donate, to reward and to pay revenue and indemnity. They were always paralleled with gold but particularly silver, when taking monetary roles such as standards of value or media of exchange. Such a practice had been common in various Tai societies for many centuries. In the Tai world, cowrie shells or *bia* had been used as small denomination money and silver bars such as the so-called Pod Duang Money as big-denomination money, for example, in the Sukhothai Kingdom, which prospered from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century.²⁶ Pod Duang was a bar of silver bent or folded and hammered into shape steaming with the mark of the ruler. For the foreigners, the round form of Pod Duang money looked like the old-fashioned bullet, as thus it won a nickname of “bullet money” or “bullet coin.” Cowrie shells or *bia* in the Tai world were brought from the Maldives and the Philippines, and that is why there were eight different types of *bia*: Bia Plong, Bia Kaa, Bia Chan, Bia Nang, Bia Moo, Bia Pong Lom, Bia Bua and Bia Tum.²⁷ With different size and shape the eight *bia* shared the same value; and Bia Chan was the money cowrie that was used in India and West Africa.²⁸ The exchange rate between *bia* and Pod Duang were up to change, depending on the quantity of shells circulated

and imported. The Tai people became very familiar with *bia* in everyday use as it was a small value money; therefore, numerous Thai idiomatic expressions contained the word “bia” and also connected with cowrie money in a general sense.²⁹

The role of cowrie shells as money in Tai society is certain in this *Chronicle*, and this is confirmed by the laws of King Mengrai (Figure 4.2), which provide another invaluable non-Chinese textual source on cowrie money in the Lan Na Kingdom.



Figure 4.2 King Mengrai, “The Great Genesis King Who Built the Chiang Mai City”³⁰

The laws of King Mengrai

The Kingdom of Lan Na was located in today's northern Thailand. King Mengrai (r. 1259–1317), was the ruler of Nan, conqueror of the Mon-dominated Kingdom of Hariphunchai (modern Lamphun) and founder of the Lan Na Kingdom and its capital Chiang Mai (Figure 4.3). He promulgated a code of law, which was preoccupied with restitution rather than repressive sanction.³¹ In this law code, cowrie shells were frequently mentioned.

In Article four “Sexual offences,” “If he grasps the breasts of a woman who is willing, he will be fined 22,000 cowrie shells, equivalent to 21 pieces of silver. If he grasps her breasts inside her blouse he will be fined 11,000 cowrie shells;”

In Article five “The value of persons and offences against persons,” “Consider the wound whether there is large or small. If there is blood, 522” piece of silver, “if there is bruising, 332” piece of silver, “If there is only pain, 1,000 cowrie shells;”

In Article six “Abuse,” “If one was abused and abuses in return, if there was no cause, the [first] abuser is fined 33,000 cowries; 11,000 for the upper lip, 11,000 for the lower, and 11,000 for the tongue. This concerns abuse;”

In Article seven “Theft,” concerning the stealing of animals,

A chicken 1,100 cowries, a duck 150, a goose 300 cowries. If the value of the animals [stolen] is less than 10,000 cowries, the fine is seven times the value. If the value is over 10,000, the fine is four times the value;



Figure 4.3 City Wall of Old Chiang Mai³²

For stealing a fishing net without a handle, the fine is either 10,000 [cowries?] or four times the value. For a fish trap with a handle, 10,000 or nine times the value. For a fish container and a casting net, the value being 330, the fine is nine times;

For stealing a plough and a harrow, without the metal parts, the value being 3,000, the fine is three times that;

A horse worth 330, the fine is four times, that is, 1,300 cowries [sic]. A cow or a buffalo of good condition, the same price. A cat worth 110 cowries, the fine is nine times that. An ordinary dog two pieces of silver. The fine for dogs is according to their value up to 110 pieces of silver;

In Article eight “Damage to ritual objects,”

For breaking the container for offering liquor to the spirits, the fine, 33,000 cowries. Even if the vessel is not broken, if any villagers dies the offender must pay the cost of funeral, or he must pay wergild. He must pay for the corpse to be taken away from the village;

For cutting the inthakhin pillar, 330 cowries;

In Article nine “Theft,”

Stealing bird-nets or animal traps of all kinds the cost must be paid, and in addition a fine of 33,000 cowries;

Stealing the yoke of an ox, the cost must be paid, and a fine of 13,000 cowries. For stealing firewood, or a spade or a hoe with the handle, the fine is 13,000 cowries, or nine times [the value];

In Article ten “Damage,” “Cutting down the fence of a house, or of the city [?], 33,000 cowries;”

In Article thirteen “Offences involving trespass,”

If a pool or other stretch of water has been reserved, anyone steals fish from there will be fined 11,000 and fined fourfold[?]. If bees or other honey-producing insects which have been reserved are stolen, for each hive the fine is pieces of silver. If ground-bearing creepers of all kinds are cut down, for each creeper the fine is 1,000 [amounts presumably refer to cowries];

In Article fourteen “Theft of clothes,” “Stealing clothes, cloth, white cloth of value, the cost of the cloth must be paid and [the culprit] fined 11,000 cowries;”

In Article sixteen “Theft,”

If cowries or betel nut are stolen, the former by the thousand, the latter by ‘head’, the fine is ninefold. If a thousand strings [a string has a thousand cowries] or a hundred strings [are stolen] the fine is double;

If water is stolen from someone else's field and put on one's own, offerings of chickens and pigs must be made on behalf of the owner of the field. If the culprit doesn't pay, the fine is 33,000;

In Article seventeen "Damages,"

If buffaloes or cattle eat the newly-sprouting rice in swidden or field, the fine is 11,000 cowries for each rice plant. If they agree that no fine be paid, let a ceremony be done to call the *klwan* of the rice;

If an ox or a buffalo eats the young rice plants after they have been transplanted, let the owner [of the animal] get new plants and replace those destroyed. If he cannot find shoots of planting, let him be fined 51 cowries for each stalk. If the buffalo had a keeper, let him be fined 110 cowries for each stalk. This refers to newly-planted rice. If the rice was eaten when grown, the fine is 100 cowries for each stalk. If the animal had a keeper, the fine is 200 cowries per stalk. If the grain is ripe and there was no one looking after the buffalo, the fine is 300 cowries. If there was a keeper, the fine is nine times that for each;

In Article twenty-two "Marriage,"

If a man courts a girl and her parents do not agree, he cannot be betrothed. If the parents agree and the daughter also agrees, he may be betrothed. If the parents agree but the daughter does not and runs away to someone else's house, let the parents return the value of the betrothal gifts, 11,000 cowries. If the daughter agrees and the parents give her [to her husband], and she later runs away to someone else's house, let the betrothal gifts be returned twofold. If the girl is betrothed but does not agree and runs away, the goods may not be returned. If money has been given let it be returned;

In Article twenty-seven "Theft,"

For stealing a cock, the cost is 400 cowries; for stealing a hen 1,000 cowries and the fine is nine times the value;

For stealing knives, the fine is 3,300 cowries for each. For stealing a mortar and pestle the fine is 200 cowries, for stealing only the mortar, 660 cowries;

In Article thirty-three "Theft," when a buffalo is stolen, "If there is a calf in womb, 11, 000 cowries; the fine is ninefold;" and if a dog is stolen, "The value of an ordinary dog is 3,000 cowries; the fine is nine times;"

In Article thirty-five "Theft," "For stealing an elephant or a horse, 33,000 cowries [presumably the fine on return, rather than compensation];"

In Article forty-nine “Wife beating,”

If a villager beats his wife, and the wife runs to the headman’s house, if the villager pursues her there and continues beating her, let him be fined 22,000 cowries;

If the headman beats his wife, and she runs to a villager’s house, if the headman follows her there and continues beating her, let the headman be fined 33,000 cowries;

In Article fifty-one “Precedence and liability,”

Whether journeying or sitting, lying down, standing, walking, the cavalry officer must give way to the officer of elephants, the infantry officers must give way to the cavalry officer, the ordinary person must give way to the officers;

Let the ordinary bearer give way to the bearer who is servant to a lord. Let the ordinary infantryman give way to the merchant, the slave of a lord, and men carrying grass. [?];

If he does not give way and there is a collision, and the infantryman beats the man carrying goods, let him be fined 11,000 cowries, because the bearer had a load and the other was just walking. The latter is at fault for hitting the former. He should be fined. If he holds him by the arm and hits him one, two, three times, if blood does not flow but he is bruised, the skin not broken, if he is unwell for only a single day, let the fine be 11,000 cowries.³³

The legal articles above indicate that both cowrie shells as well as silver were used to pay fines and compensation of crimes, the same as would be regulated in the Gentoo Code in India. Various things including production, hunting, fishing tools, domestic and forest animals, wild products, ritual objects and people’s property such as water, money, clothes and slaves were given with their value measured in cowries. The ratio between cowries and silver was 1,100 cowries equal to one piece of silver. In the Lan Na Kingdom, 110 cowrie shells were “valued at one silver price which by weight was 1.2 grams.”³⁴ Supplied with other circumstantial evidence, obviously, cowries functioned as money in the Kingdom of Lan Na. Archaeological excavations have further confirmed this statement, as large numbers of cowrie shells from the Maldives were found in the old city of Sukhothai, whereas no coins have yet been discovered.³⁵ In conclusion, cowrie money was of key significance to Tai economy and society.

The laws of King Mengrai provide a great parallel and connection with the Chinese text on cowrie money in Yunnan during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). King Mengrai reigned earlier than the Ming period and even once attacked the Mongols between 1301 and 1312, about half a century after the Mongols’ takeover of the Dali Kingdom in 1254. As such, this Tai record precedes the Chinese textual details of the Ming period and fills in the Chinese vacuum for the Yuan period in terms of the existence of cowrie money in upper mainland Southeast Asia.

The Siamese-Yunnan connection

There are various texts that in fact mention connections between Siam and Yunnan, which indicates the existence of trading routes and cultural intimacies between these societies. In general, almost all Chinese textual sources concerning cowrie shells in India and Southeast Asia matched non-Chinese sources. Zhao Rukuo, Wang Dayuan, Ma Huan, Gong Zhen, Fei Xin and Huang Xingceng from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries recorded the usage of cowrie money in Southeast Asia in an increasingly detailed fashion, which can be confirmed by their accounts of the Yunnanese connection with Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. In the fourteenth century, Wang Dayuan, for example, wrote about Mecca (*Tiantang*; 天堂), “Yunnan has a road to connect and within one year (people) can reach it. For the Western Ocean, (there also exists) a road.”³⁶ Ma Huan, an interpreter of the Treasure Fleet in the early fifteenth century, left us with further details. He noted the inland connections between Siam and Yunnan:

When you travel something over two hundred *li* (里) to the northwest from the capital, there is a market town called Upper Water (*Shangshui*; 上水), whence you can go through into Yunnan by a back entrance. In this place, there are five or six hundred families of foreigners; all kinds of foreign goods are for sale; red *ma-ssu-k'en-ti* stones are sold in great numbers here; this stone is inferior to the red *ya-ku*, [and] its brightness resembles that of a pomegranate seed. When the treasurer ships of the Central Country come to Xianluo [暹罗], [our] men also take small boats and go to trade [at Upper Water].³⁷

Ma Huan's impression was reiterated by Huang Xingceng in the sixteenth century.³⁸ Not surprisingly, Shangshui adopted gold, silver, copper cash and cowrie shells as money.³⁹ It seems that the routes connecting Yunnan and Siam were crucial for the transportation of these shells, and Paul Pelliot points out that the cowrie shells in Yunnan were probably sourced from Siam.⁴⁰

In terms of the location of Shangshui, there has been a good deal of speculation which city it might have been, including Phitsanulok (*Pengshiluo*; 彭世洛), Chiang Mai, Sri Satchanalai (*Shisaichanalai*; 室塞察那莱) and Sukhothai (*Suketai*; 素可泰; or *Sugudi*; 速孤底).⁴¹ Li Daogang, a Chinese Thai scholar, has carefully examined both Chinese and Thai sources, investigated local geography and pointed out that Shangshui must have been outside the territory of both the Siam and Sukhothai kingdoms. He argues that Shangshui was an ancient city located in Sankhaburi (*Shanwuli*; 汕武里), in the southern part of Chai Nat (*Caina*; 猜纳) Province, central Thailand.⁴² Chai Nat was on the plain of the Chao Phraya River.

According to Ma Huan, when the Chinese treasure fleets anchored, small shipped were dispatched to Shangshui for trading.⁴³ Two points can be reckoned from this detail. First, Shangshui was not far from Ayutthaya and secondly, there must have been a river in Shangshui that was navigable. Considering this information, Li's analysis is convincing, as Chai Nat was not far from Ayutthaya, about

120 km away, and water transportation could be utilised. Other places listed are simply too far away from Ayutthaya or are not accessible by river.

Located between Yunnan and Siam, the Lan Na Kingdom served as a bridge for the two. Indeed, it had built intimate relationships with various Tai political entities in modern Xishuangbanna and southern Yunnan. Trade, ethnic connections, political interactions and marriage alliances have been identified both in textual and archaeological studies as well as in local folklore. King Mengrai, for instance, was the son of Lao Meng of Hiram Ngern Yong and a princess of Chiang Rung (now known as Jinghong in Yunnan). He once attacked the Mongols between 1301 and 1312. The long tradition of cross-cultural interactions within and outside of Southeast Asia indeed had created a cowrie money world that was recognised by both Chinese and western travellers.

Cowrie money in Southeast Asia: Tomè Pires

In pre-fifteenth-century Southeast Asia, barter trade dominated. Precious metals such as silver and gold, “frequently became measures of value. In some instances, rice, lengths of cloths or imported cowrie shells performed the same function.”⁴⁴ The use of cowrie money in Southeast Asia was spread from its western neighbours, namely, Bengal and Assam. When Arabic and European travellers moved from India to Southeast Asia, they immediately realised the monetary link between these two regions.

Lower Burma was probably the first stop when cowrie money spread from Bengal and Assam. In Lower Burma, Arab travellers such as Sulayman from the Persian Gulf in the year 851 noticed the use of cowrie money. “For barter the people use cowries, which form their currency”; he recorded that there was also “the rhinoceros, an animal which has on his forehead a single horn, and in this horn is a human figure”; he added that although rhinoceros horn could be found elsewhere,

here the horn is more beautiful, often containing the image of a man, peacock, fish or anything else. The Chinese make girdles of this horn and pay high prices among themselves, up to three or four thousand *dinar* and even more according to the figure’s beauty. These horns are bought with cowries.⁴⁵

This mention of cowrie money in Lower Burma by the middle of the ninth century is in fact not surprising, considering that cowrie money had been in use for nearly five centuries in Bengal. Although the buyer of these horns was not mentioned in this case, it is highly likely that given the context they were Chinese. Consequently, the question would be, who were these Chinese? Were they from southern China travelling via the maritime Silk Road to reach Lower Burma? Or might these possible Chinese have been merchants from Nanzhao, a mediaeval kingdom located in present-day southwest China with strong connections with various kingdoms in mainland Southeast Asia and one that even once made the

Pyu its tributary subject? Unfortunately, the lack of sources, both textual and archaeological, makes it difficult to confirm this.

Pegu, an area with urban clusters built by the Mon people, was located in Lower Burma, facing the Gulf of Martaban, an inlet of the Bay of Bengal. It was often mentioned that cowries from the Maldives were shipped to Pegu (and Siam), where shells functioned as money. Unfortunately, up until now, little is known about the use of cowrie money in Pegu (and Lower Burma in general), due to the shortage of sources. Marco Polo, when he travelled in Yunnan and Burma, mentioned the use of cowrie money in “Bangala.”⁴⁶ The word “Bangala” phonetically would lead readers to assume that it refers to Bengal; however, Henry Yule has carefully examined this case and cautiously reminded us that Marco Polo did not reach Bengal, and that the area of Bangala Marco Polo mentioned in fact referred to Pegu.⁴⁷ Obviously, Yule is correct.

Two centuries later than Marco Polo, Tomè Pires, the first Portuguese ambassador to China, arrived in India in 1511, and saw cowries and the use of cowrie money in Bengal and some ports in Southeast Asia.⁴⁸ He mentioned that in Arakan and Pegu, white cowries were used as coinage, and this detail provides invaluable information.⁴⁹ In Pegu,

The small currency of Pegu is small white cowries. In Martaban fifteen thousand are usually worth one *vica*, which is ten *calains*; when they are cheap sixteen thousand; when they are very dear fourteen thousand, and generally fifteen thousand. A *calaim* is worth one thousand five hundred. For four hundred or five hundred they will give a chicken, and things of that sort for the same price. If [you are] in Pegu, the said cowries are not valid except in Martaban, and they are valid the same way in Arakan.⁵⁰

He specified that “The cowries come from the Maldives (*Diva*) Islands, where they make large quantities of towels, and they also come from the islands of *Bagangā* and of Borneo (*Burney*) and they bring them to Malacca and from there they go to Pegu.”⁵¹ It is very interesting that while cowries in Pegu were shipped from the Indian Ocean, “A great deal of silver is taken from Pegu to Bengal, where it is worth somewhat more.”⁵² Indeed, the Yunnan-Burma borderland was a traditional centre of silver mining with exports across Eurasia.

In Siam, cowries, “like those current in Pegu, are current throughout the country for small money, and gold and silver for the larger coins. This money is worth the same as we have said for Pegu.”⁵³

There are three ports in the kingdom of Siam on the Pegu side, and on the Pahang and *Champa* side there are many. They all belong to the said kingdom and are subject to the king of Siam. The land of Siam is large and very plenteous, with many people and cities, with many lords and many foreign merchants, and most of these foreigners are Chinese, because Siam does a great deal of trade with China.⁵⁴

Trade between Siam and the Indian Ocean was noticed. "On the Tenaaserim side of Siam also trades with Pase, Pedir, with Kedah, with Pedu, with Bengal; and the Gujaratees come to its port every year. They trade richly outside and liberally inside the country."⁵⁵ While the Maldives were the main source for cowries in Siam, Pires stated that white cowries also came from Malacca.⁵⁶

Pires' observations of cowrie money in Tai societies support *The Chiang Mai Chronicle*, the laws promulgated by King Mengrai and the Siamese inscriptions mentioned earlier. They all demonstrate the dynamic roles of cowrie money in Tai societies: as a measure of value, as forms of religious dedication, as payment for fines and as a medium with which to purchase goods and services. Cowrie money was not only used to buy cheap goods such as cloth and lamps, but also in expensive transactions involving land. The use of cowries as money in Thailand did not end until the latter part of the nineteenth century. La Loubère found the use of cowrie money in Siam in 1687–1688, with an exchange rate of 6,400 for one silver *tical* (confirmed by Gervaise in 1688); this rate was said to continue until 1822.⁵⁷ But cowrie money experienced a sharp devaluation in the following decades, as one silver *tical* was exchanged with cowries from 8,000 to 9,600 in one case, and for 17,700 in another.⁵⁸ As late as 1872, Martens noticed the use of *Cypraea annulus* in the markets of Siam.⁵⁹ In terms of their source, according to Chinese texts, cowrie shells in Siam came from the Maldives; meanwhile, La Loubère and other westerners mentioned the Philippine Islands and the Moluccas as small sources of supply.⁶⁰ Pelliot pointed out that cowries from the Philippines were in fact *Cypraea annulus*.⁶¹

The situation east of Siam seems very different, as cowrie money was found neither in Cambodia nor in Cochin China. Chinese copper coins dominated local markets in these regions. In Cambodia, "cashes from China are used for the small money, and in trade, gold and silver."⁶² In Cochin China, "The money they use for buying food is the cash from China, and for merchandise gold and silver."⁶³ Similarly, in Java, local people "used cash from China" for small money.⁶⁴

As for the Malay peninsula, its monetary practices were influenced both by Burma and Thailand, and in the first few centuries CE, "silver (and possibly cowries) was used at Kalāh during the seventh century, following the trend observed for the mainland."⁶⁵ This trend however, was replaced with an insular model after the eleventh century, a legacy of the influence of the Srivijaya kingdom.⁶⁶

While upper mainland Southeast Asia was generally not mentioned in any historical accounts, the Pyu kingdom might have imported cowries, as cowries were found at Beikthano.⁶⁷ Laos, a landlocked country, was found to have used cowries as money during the seventeenth century.⁶⁸ This is understandable, since cowries had long been used in the Lan Na Kingdom that neighbored Laos.

Therefore, Pires's observations provide a map of cowrie money around the Bay of Bengal. Cowries that originated in the Maldives were shipped to Bengal, where they began functioning as small monetary denominations. Because of their intimate commercial relations, some coastal mainland Southeast Asian societies

including Arakan, Pegu and Siam joined this cowrie monetary system. East of Siam, there seemed to be no cowrie money and copper coins from China were favoured. As for maritime Southeast Asia, while Pires mentioned that Malacca (re)exported white cowries to Siam, cowries did not function as money in Malacca or elsewhere. It is a pity that we are unable to trace these cowries, but assumedly some of them might have reached parts of maritime Southeast Asia, the Ryukyu Islands and China.

Not surprisingly, the western records mentioned above were in accord with what Marco Polo had observed about cowries. The legendary traveller spoke of cowrie money in Pegu, Lochac (Siam) and Caugigu (Tongking, modern Hanoi area).⁶⁹ While there are no other sources supporting the use of cowrie money in Tongking, the area might have been a stopping-off point for cowrie shells to China. More importantly, Polo was the first to report seeing cowrie money in Siam, according to Pelliot,⁷⁰ and this would have been confirmed by many Chinese observers during the Yuan-Ming period.

The Chinese accounts

The Chinese accounts corroborated non-Chinese sources to confirm the cowrie money system centred in the Bengal world from early times and up to the seventeenth century. In *Notes on Marco Polo*, Paul Pelliot analysed the use of cowries and gave many insights about their use based on his incomparable knowledge of diverse (including Chinese) sources.⁷¹ Han Ulrich Vogel in his masterpiece on the cowrie monetary system in Yunnan (from the ninth to the seventeenth centuries) has also explored Chinese sources that trace the circulation of cowries in South and Southeast Asian countries and ports.⁷² As a matter of fact, imperial Chinese travellers visited the cowrie money zones, witnessing and probably utilising cowrie money themselves.

With the maritime Silk Road being a main thoroughfare around the Tang period (618–907), Chinese travellers began to notice cowries in Southeast Asia and South Asia, in addition to the Western Region. Historical documentation from the Tang Dynasty clearly stated that the Middle Tianzhu (Central India) used cowrie shells as a medium of exchange.⁷³ Zhao Rukuo in the early thirteenth century added that Tianzhu (India) traded with Daqin (大秦; West Asia) and Funan (mainland Southeast Asia) annually and used cowrie shells for their transactions.⁷⁴ The most comprehensive record of cowrie money in Southeast Asia, however, was made by Wang Dayuan, a fourteenth-century traveller.⁷⁵

Wang Dayuan navigated Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean twice, during which voyages he recorded notes on various countries, port cities and people in Southeast and South Asia that used cowries, many of which he visited himself. In Luohu (罗斛; Lvo, Lavo, or Lohot), Wang Dayuan states that cowries were used as money and that the exchange rate with *zhongtong chao* (中统钞), a paper money of the Yuan Dynasty: 10,000 cowries = 24 taels of *zhongtong chao*.⁷⁶

Scholars agree that Luohu was located in modern Lophuri on the lower Menam River.⁷⁷ Indeed, Marco Polo observed that all cowries moved from Lochac and were “spent in all the other provinces of the world.”⁷⁸

In terms of the exchange rate recorded by Wang Dayuan, Pelliot discussed this information at length. He pointed out that the actual rate of *zhongtong chao* in silver was only one tenth of its nominal value, so 10,000 cowries could be exchanged for 2.4 silver *tael* (4,000 cowries for one silver *tael*).⁷⁹ One source recorded the market exchange rate between cowrie and silver in Yunnan around 1368 to be 8,000:1.⁸⁰ Here, Wang Dayuan might have been mistaken, because it seems that the price of cowries in Siam was twice that in Yunnan. Cowries “ought to have been cheaper in Siam,” considering the cost of transportation and money flow. Pelliot provided a possible explanation, speculating that this was because silver in Siam was relatively scarce.⁸¹

Moving westwards, Wang observed that in Siam, people “still use cowries as money (*Reng yi bazi quan qian shiyong*; 仍以貳子权钱使用).”⁸² The inclusion of the word “still” leads to the conclusion that Wang Dayuan knew that cowries had been used as money in Siam prior to his arrival, which accords with Marco Polo’s account. In Zhenlu (针路; Mergui, northern region of the Malay Peninsula located in present-day Myanmar), cowries were traded with Siam as money.⁸³ In Beiliu (北溜; the Maldives), whenever overseas merchants moved one shipload of cowries to Wudie (乌爹; Pegu) and Bengal, more than one shipload of rice was exchanged. Wang commented that since those places (Bengal and Pegu) employed cowries as money, these shells had been a long-lasting way for the local people of the Maldives to make a living.⁸⁴ In Wudie, each silver coin weighed two mace and eight candreens, equivalent to ten *tael* of *zhongtong chao* paper money and each could be exchanged for about 11,520 cowries. Because 250 cowries could buy one pointed basket of rice that was equivalent to 1.6 *dou* (the Chinese official peck), each silver coin could buy 46 baskets of rice, that is, 73.2 pecks, more than enough to feed two men for a year.⁸⁵ Wang Dayuan’s account of cowrie money in Pegu bears a remarkable similarity to other travellers’ descriptions of Bengal and Pegu, which reveals the regulation and consistency of such a monetary system across all these regions.

The Zheng He expeditions passed through Southeast Asia, the Bay of Bengal and beyond, and left us with some valuable records. Ma Huan, Fei Xin and Gong Zhen were three members of the Zheng He’s fleets, serving as interpreter, military officer and secretary, respectively.⁸⁶ Each of them later wrote and compiled their own books. Ma Huan’s *The Overall Survey of the Ocean’s Shores* has been regarded as the most original and invaluable.⁸⁷ He recorded that in Siam (*Xianluo guo*; 暹罗国), “sea shells (*haiba*; 海貳) are used as money and they do not use gold, silver or copper coins.”⁸⁸ So it was in Bengal (*Banggela guo*; 榜葛刺国). “In streets and markets, cowrie shells were used in small transactions (*lingyong*; 零用), with a foreign name of *kaoli* (考黎).”⁸⁹ Both cowries in Siam and in Bengal were from the Maldives

(*Liushan guo*; 溜山国) as Ma observed. In the Maldives, “As to sea shells (*haiba*), the people there collect them and pile them into heaps like mountains; and let the flesh rot; [then] they transport and sell them to Siam and Bengal where they are used as money.”⁹⁰ Gong Zhen, another recorder of the treasure fleet, left a similar account. Gong noted that trade transactions involved cowries as money.⁹¹ He pointed out that *kaoli* was the foreign name of *haiba* (sea shells), and that they were counted one by one in the trade.⁹²

Huang Xingceng, in his work *Xiyang Chaogong Dianlu* written in the 1520s, recorded that in Siam, trade was carried out through gold and silver (copper) cash and cowries.⁹³ In Bengal, trading involved silver known as *tangjia* and cowries called *kaoli*, the latter which were counted by *jin* (斤; Chinese measure of weight).⁹⁴ His notes could as well have been a copy of Ma Huan’s work. Huang’s observations about Liushan (溜山; the Maldives) are of great significance. He pointed out that local traders used silver coins and that the country benefited from its abundant supply of fish and cowries.⁹⁵ Unlike some scholars, who mistakenly thought that cowries were used as money in the Maldives, Huang clearly confirmed that silver did not serve as money there, while cowries were exported to bring in wealth to the country. Huang even detailed the procurement of cowries, detailing where people caught the cowries, and how they piled them into large heaps, left them to decay and finally stored them. He added that it was the Siamese and Bengali merchants who came to purchase cowries.⁹⁶ Zhang Xie (1574–1640) in the 1610s continued to provide the use of cowrie money in Siam (*Xianluo*). The use of cowrie money was also mystified as a part of local superstition, as Zhang mentioned that if in certain year cowrie shells (*ba*; 貝) were not used, a plague would take place in the country.⁹⁷

The discussion above leads us to the tentative conclusion concerning the source and route of cowrie money in Southeast Asia. These shells originated in the Maldives, were shipped to Bengal, travelled along coastal Burma to Siam and were taken from Siam to Chiang Mai (and to Yunnan). This route constituted a major source in the following centuries for the cowrie monetary system in Nanzhao, Dali and Yunnan of the Yuan-Ming period. Questions remain about Burma, which was supposed to be another important source of cowrie shells in Yunnan. Archaeological and textual discoveries in Myanmar, hopefully in the near future, are much expected.

In summary, cowrie money spread from Bengal and Assam to Lower Burma, the Chao Phraya River basin, up to Chiang Mai and reached the Nanzhao Kingdom by the ninth to tenth centuries. In these Southeast Asian societies, cowries were used along with silver and gold to form a binary currency system, which lasted as late as the middle of the nineteenth century in some places, for example, Thailand. From Lower Burma and inland Southeast Asia such as the Lan Na Kingdom, cowrie money reached the uppermost region of Southeast Asia, namely, into the land that was later to be called Yunnan by the Chinese.

Notes

- 1 David K. Wyatt and Aroonrut Wichienkeo, trans., *The Chiang Mai Chronicle* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1998, second edition), 105–106.
- 2 Wicks, 1992, 6.
- 3 Ibid., 1.
- 4 Ibid., 1–2.
- 5 Charles Higham, *The Archaeology of Mainland Southeast Asia* (Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne and Sydney: Cambridge University Press, reprint, 1991), 209.
- 6 Ibid., 229.
- 7 Wicks, 1992, 63–64.
- 8 Anthony Reid, “Economic and Social Change, c. 1400–1800,” in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia: Volume 2, From c. 1500 to c. 1800*, ed. Nicholas Taring (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 141.
- 9 Wicks, 1992, 166–173.
- 10 Center: King Mangrai of Lan Na; Left: King Ngam Muang of Phayao; Right: King Ram Nhamhaeng of Sukhothai. Chiang Mai City, Courtesy of Sittitipong and Kunyi Zou.
- 11 Wicks, 1992, 170.
- 12 Alexander Brown Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, “The Inscription of King Rāma Gamhen of Sukhodaya (1292 A. D.) Epigraphic and Historical Studies No. 9,” *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 59, no. 2 (1971): 209; Wicks, 1992, 170–171.
- 13 Alexander Brown Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, “The Asokārāma Inscription of 1399 A.D. Epigraphic and Historical Studies No. 2,” *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 57, no. 1 (1969): 45–46.
- 14 Wicks, 1992, 171.
- 15 Alexander Brown Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, “Epigraphic and Historical Studies No. 22: An Inscription From Vat Hin Tan, Sukhodaya,” *Journal of the Siam Society*, vol. 67, no. 1 (1979): 68–73; Wicks, 1992, 171–174.
- 16 Griswold and Nagara, 1979, 72–73.
- 17 Alexander Brown . Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, “Epigraphic and Historical Studies No. 21: The Second Oldest Known Writing in Siamese,” *The Journal of Siam Society*, vol. 67, no. 1 (1979): 64, 67.
- 18 Alexander Brown Griswold and Prasert na Nagara, “A Law Promulgated By the King of Ayudhyā in 1397. A.D. Epigraphic and Historical Studies No. 4,” *The Journal of Siam Society*, vol. 57, no. 1 (1969): 136–137.
- 19 Wyatt and Wichienkeo, 1998, 27.
- 20 Ibid., 28. “Rung” in page 27 and “lung” in page 28 are thought to be the same word, and this difference might derive from a typographical or translation error.
- 21 Ibid., 41.
- 22 Ibid., 48.
- 23 Ibid., 69.
- 24 Ibid., 105–106.
- 25 Ibid., 148.
- 26 Nawarat Lekhakun and Kusik Manotham, *Tamnān nai ngoentra Thai* (Legends in Thai Money) (Bangkok: Nakhonton Bank, 1993), 46–48.
- 27 Ibid., 46.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid., 48.
- 30 King Mengrai, “The Great Genesis King Who Built the Chiang Mai City.” Chiang Mai City, Courtesy of Sittitipong and Kunyi Zou.
- 31 Aroonrut Wichienkeo and Gehan Wijeyewardene, tr. and ed., *The Laws of King Mengrai (Mangrayathammasart)* (Canberra: The Richard Davis Fund and an

- Occasional Paper of the Department of Anthropology, Research School of Pacific Studies, The Australian National University, 1986).
- 32 Chiang Mai City. Courtesy of Sittitthep Eakstittipong and Kunyi Zou.
 - 33 Ibid., 22–39 “[]” is what the two editors have corrected or revised. Page numbers for specific quotations are omitted, due to the many entries, as the list of articles makes it easy for readers to locate these articles concerned in the book.
 - 34 The Bank of Thailand Museum, Northern Region Office. *Chotana Road, Muang District, Chiang Mai Province*, www2.bot.or.th/museum/eng/money/lannadesc.asp?PoID=81.
 - 35 Wicks, 1992, 172.
 - 36 Wang, 2000, 352.
 - 37 Ma Huan, *Ying-yai sheng-lan (The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores 1433)*, trans. and ed. Feng Cheng-Chun; with introductory notes and appendices by J.V.G. Mills (Cambridge: Published for the Hakluyt Society at the University Press, 1970), 105–106; 2005, 34.
 - 38 Huang, 2000, 59.
 - 39 Ibid.
 - 40 Pelliot, 1959, vol. 1, 552, 554.
 - 41 Li Daogang (Thailand), “Shangshi Kao (A Study of Shangshui),” *Dongnanya* (Journal of Southeast Asia), no. 3 (1997): 49–57.
 - 42 Ibid., 57.
 - 43 Ma, 2005, 34.
 - 44 Wicks, 1992, 7.
 - 45 Cite from Godfrey Eric Harvey, *History of Burma: From the Earliest Times to 10th March, 1824* (London: Frank Cass, 1967), 10.
 - 46 Henry Yule, ed. and trans., *The Book of Ser Marco Polo, The Venetian Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), vol. 2, 85.
 - 47 Ibid., 64, 79, 91.
 - 48 Tomè Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tomè Pires, an Account of the East, From the Red Sea to Japan, Written in Malacca and India in 1512–1515, and The Book of Francisco Rodrigues Rutter of a Voyage in the Red Sea, Nautical Rules, Almanack and Maps, Written and Drawn in the East Before 1515*, translated from the Portuguese ms. in the Bibliotheque de la Chambre des Députés, Paris, and ed. Armando Cortesão (New Delhi & Chennai: Asian Educational Services, 2005).
 - 49 Ibid., 97–100.
 - 50 Ibid.
 - 51 Ibid.
 - 52 Ibid.
 - 53 Ibid., 104.
 - 54 Ibid., 103.
 - 55 Ibid., 109.
 - 56 Ibid., 108.
 - 57 Pelliot, 1959, 555–556.
 - 58 Ibid., 556.
 - 59 Ibid., 557.
 - 60 Ibid., 556–557.
 - 61 Ibid., 557.
 - 62 Pires, 2005, 114.
 - 63 Ibid., 115.
 - 64 Ibid., 170, 181.
 - 65 Wicks, 1992, 241. Kalāh might be located in coastal lower Burma or could have referred to Kedah located in the northwest of the Malay peninsula. Wicks, 1992, 223.

- 66 Wicks, 1992, 241.
- 67 Ibid., 116.
- 68 Vogel, 1993, Part I, 230.
- 69 Pelliot, 1959, 552. Pelliot speculated that cowries might have been used in Tongking's northwestern borders, which is reasonable, as this was a neighbouring area for the cowrie zone amongst Tai societies. Here, Pelliot proposed Bangala to refer to Bengal, and since Polo did not go to Bengal, Pelliot suspected that Polo "speaks only from hearsay." I believe that the interpretation by Henry Yule that Bangala was Pegu to be correct. Pelliot, 552.
- 70 Ibid.
- 71 Ibid., 531–563.
- 72 Pelliot, 1959; Vogel, 1993, Part I, 211–252; Part II, 309–353.
- 73 *Jiu Tangshu* (Old History of the Tang Dynasty), Juan 198, 5307; *Xin Tangshu* (New History of the Tang Dynasty), Juan 221, 6237.
- 74 Zhao Rukuo, *Zhufan Zhi* (A Record of Various Barbarians), annotated by Yang Bowen (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2000), 86.
- 75 Wang, 2000.
- 76 Ibid., 114.
- 77 Ibid., 115.
- 78 Arthur Christopher Moule and Paul Pelliot, trans. and annot., *The Description of the World* (London: Routledge, 1938), vol. 1, 369–370.
- 79 Pelliot, 1959, 553.
- 80 Vogel, 1993, 338–341; also see Chapter 5.
- 81 Pelliot, 1959, 553.
- 82 Wang, 2000, 155.
- 83 Ibid., 126.
- 84 Ibid., 264. The place names Wudie for Pegu and Da Wudie (Big *Wudie*) for Orissa in the Chinese records indicate that the Chinese first reached Pegu and then Orissa, a logical result of navigation, whereas the way of naming reveals that the Chinese understood the geographical, territorial and cultural comparisons of Pegu and Orissa, both being coastal, tropical, thriving in maritime trade and culturally similar, while in terms of territory, Orissa was much larger. Therefore, Da Wudie for Orissa, to the Chinese, meant Orissa was like a big Pegu.
- 85 Ibid., 276.
- 86 Ma, 2005; Fei, 1996; Gong, 2000.
- 87 Ma, 1970; 2005.
- 88 Ma, 2005, 36.
- 89 Ibid., 87.
- 90 Ibid., 74.
- 91 Gong, 2000, 14.
- 92 Ibid., 38.
- 93 Huang, 2000, 69.
- 94 Ibid., 87.
- 95 Ibid., 76.
- 96 Ibid.
- 97 Zhang Xie, *Dongxiyang Kao* (An Examination of the Eastern and Western Oceans) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1981), 40.

5 Yunnan

An Indian influence in the Southeast Asian-Chinese world

Cowries if not of the native land, were regarded the same as forged.
– Emperor Wuzong of the Yuan Dynasty, 1305 CE¹

This chapter introduces cowrie shells and cowrie money in Yunnan from the second half of the first millennium BCE to the late seventeenth century, as an Indian influence in a Southeast Asian-Chinese world. The case of Yunnan has aroused great interest,² because before the large influx of Chinese immigrants during the Ming-Qing period, Yunnan had been more Southeast Asian than Chinese, and since the fifteenth century, Yunnan had been transformed into a frontier of the Chinese empire.³ Indeed, geographically speaking, Yunnan is located in upper mainland Southeast Asia, an extension of the Tibetan Plateau. The spatial location made Yunnan a pivot of ethnic and cultural interaction over a long period.

This chapter first provides a brief historical background of Yunnan, then moves on to examine cowrie shells and cowrie money in Yunnan during various periods. Effort has been made to illustrate various functions of cowrie money, discuss how central and local governments attempted to control the circulation of cowrie money and review the long-term existence of a cowrie money system in Yunnan and its seemingly sudden collapse during the Ming-Qing transition in the mid-seventeenth century. The emergence, long-term existence and collapse of cowrie money in Yunnan, indeed, must be understood in a global-local context.

From Southeast Asia to a Chinese province

Present-day Yunnan is an ethnic province in southwest China. Historical Yunnan was much larger in size, and included Guizhou Province and part of southern Sichuan Province.⁴ The land called “Yunnan,” literally meaning “south of the clouds,” transformed from being a part of Southeast Asian culture into a province of imperial China over the course of more than 2,000 years.⁵ The term “Yunnan” was said to have been an invention of Emperor Wudi (r. 141–87 BCE) of the

Western Han Dynasty, and this poetic name reveals the desire of the Chinese for far-off frontiers and “exotic” ethnic peoples. It was not until his southwestern conquest of the Dian Kingdom somewhere within present-day Yunnan that a county called Yunnan was established. However, Chinese administration over this frontier was loose, difficult and fragile. Local chieftains and polities took advantage of China’s internal chaos and often obtained autonomy. Military campaigns and temporary controls by central Chinese states were followed by rebellions, isolation and independence, but economic and cultural interactions continued.

During the seventh century, a local kingdom called Nanzhao (lit. “Southern Kingdom,” seventh century to 902) defeated its five rivalries, unified western Yunnan and continued to expand eastwards and southwards.⁶ By the second half of the eighth century, Nanzhao had become a major player on the stages of power in East and Southeast Asia. Both the Tufan Empire in Tibet and Tang China were eager to establish an alliance with Nanzhao, which proved to be a key factor for Tufan and Tang China in their competition over East and Central Asia. Nanzhao also expanded into mainland Southeast Asia and was said to have reached the sea. Indeed, the Pyu Kingdom was once plundered by Nanzhao, and kings of Nanzhao took the title of *Biaoxin* (lit. meaning “king of the Pyu”). It seems that Nanzhao put the Pyu under its tributary system. Over-expansion and frequent warfare, together with the exorbitant expenditure for Buddhist devotion, probably exhausted Nanzhao, which was replaced by the Dali Kingdom (937–1254).

Very few Chinese sources concerning the Dali Kingdom were produced in imperial China, as Northern Song China (960–1126) paid primary attention to its northern neighbours, these being the Liao, Jin and Xixia empires. Tributary proposals made by Dali were turned down by Song China, which had ostensibly closed its southwestern doors. The loss of the Yellow River to the Jin, however, forced the Song to retreat to South China, making Hangzhou the capital and starting the so-called Southern Song period (1127–1279). To resist the Jin cavalry, the Southern Song were forced to open their trade to purchase horses from the Dali Kingdom, as the conventional trading source from northwestern China had been blocked. Due to its high altitude, western Yunnan was the only area that produced quality horses south of the Yangzi River, of the kind that would have been highly prized by Marco Polo.

The Southern Song managed to resist the advance of the Mongols along the Yangzi River, so the Mongols adopted a grand strategy to make inroads into the region. In 1253, Kublai Khan led a long march from north China to attack the Dali Kingdom, and in 1254, the Dali Kingdom was taken over by the Mongols to besiege the Southern Song. In 1274, the Yunnan Branch Secretariat (*Yunnan Xingsheng*; 云南行省) was established. In 1381, the Ming army launched an attack against Yunnan, and by 1384, the Ming had occupied Yunnan; in 1413, Guizhou was separated from Yunnan. It was

during the fourteenth century that hundreds of thousands of Chinese migrants (mainly soldiers) entered and remained in Yunnan, followed by another major wave of Han migration after the Qing took over Yunnan in 1684, which drastically changed the local demographic, cultural and economic landscape.

The account above is a very brief history of Yunnan. While the military and administrative trajectory of Yunnan becoming a part of the Chinese empire seems progressive, its economic and cultural process was extremely complicated. Compared with the fact that no centralised state, either in Yunnan or in its neighbouring areas, was powerful enough to resist the advance of the Mongol or Chinese armies, the economic network that combined Yunnan, mainland Southeast Asia and the Bay of Bengal, illustrated by the cowrie monetary system, made Yunnan's incorporation into China a slow process, at least in terms of monetary and economic orientation.

Cowrie shells in early Yunnan: nature and source

Cowrie shells arrived in Yunnan as late as the second millennium BCE. They were discovered in many sites of Yunnan from the middle Shang period (1600–1100 BCE) through the Eastern Zhou period (770–222 BCE) and into the Western Han period (206 BCE–9 AD). From 1955 to 1972, archaeologists unearthed a large number of cowrie shells in tombs from the Dian Kingdom (c. the second half of the first millennium BCE) centred around Lake Dian, Yunnan, and this hoard amounted to more than 260,000 pieces and weighed over 700 kg (Figure 5.1).⁷

The Dian culture endured even after the arrival of Han culture at the end of the second century BCE, and cowrie shells in tombs have been dated to before the late third century BCE, indicating certain cultural clues in a non-Chinese society.⁸ Amongst these, the seventeen tombs of Shizhaishan, dating from the second half of the first millennium BCE, produced nearly 150,000 cowries, an average of about 8,700 cowries for each tomb. The large quantity of cowries in Shizhaishan is not surprising, as these tombs were of the Dian ruling class, including kings. In Lijiashan, some gilt bronze cowries were discovered.⁹ In addition, a bronze plaque from Shizhaishan, with a height of 42 cm, showed a phoenix, human captives, livestock and cowrie shells.¹⁰ An intriguing phenomenon of the Dian culture was that when unearthed most cowries were found to have been placed in bronze drums or containers (Figures 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4). These bronze drums and containers are now called cowrie containers, although it is unclear whether or not their primary function was to hold cowries before they were buried. It is highly likely that both cowries and bronze vessels were precious to the Dian elite, symbolising social status, power and probably wealth, and they were only placed in this way when buried with a diseased corpse.

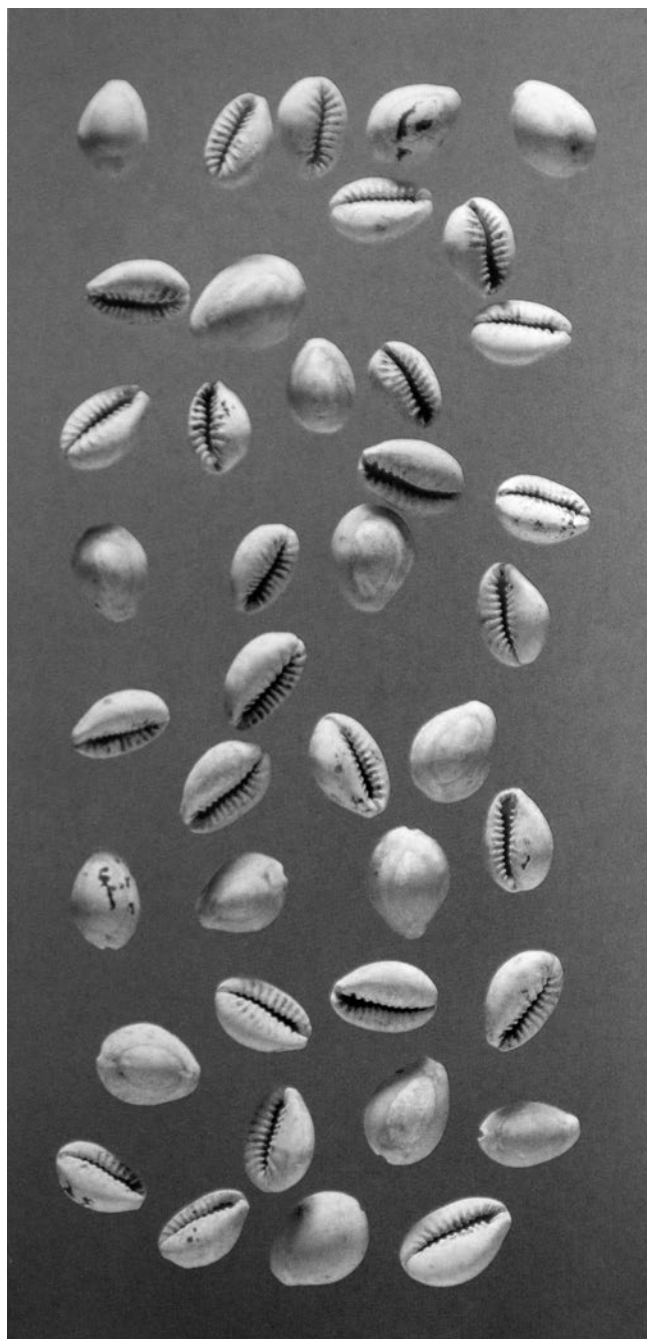


Figure 5.1 Cowrie Shells in the Dian Kingdom¹¹

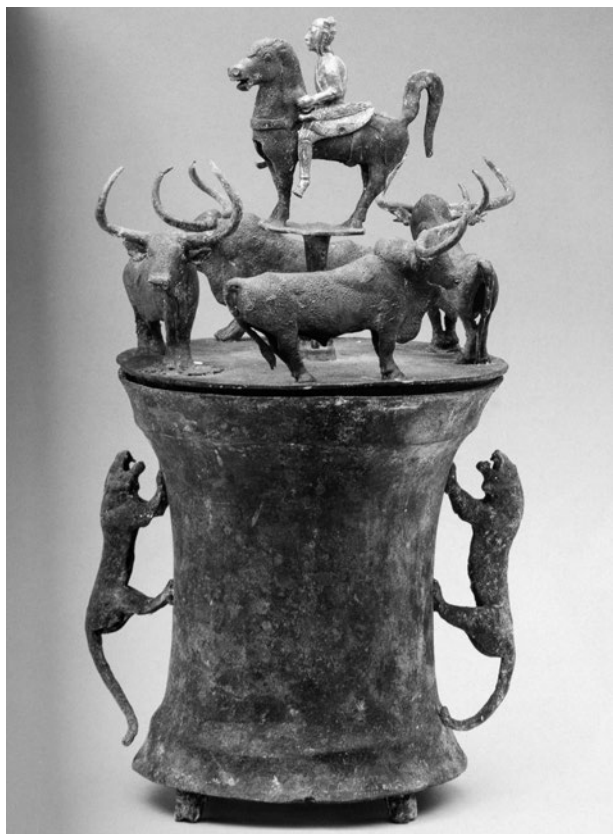


Figure 5.2 Four-Buffalo and One-Horse Gold-Gilt Rider (*Siniu liujin qishi*; 四牛鎏金骑士) Bronze Container¹²



Figure 5.3 Horse-Taming (*Xunma*; 驯马) Bronze Container¹³



Figure 5.4 Weaving (*Fangzhi*; 纺织) Bronze Container¹⁴

Did these cowries come into Yunnan as a form of money or as highly prized and valuable goods? Scholars hold different opinions on this question.¹⁵ Michèle Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens

has demonstrated that the most frequent cowrie species found in Tien tombs are *Cypraea annulus* Lin. This seems to have been a special highly prized form of money, a status marker and a certain form of prestige goods, accumulated as stores of value and used in intersocietal exchanges between elites, exclusively.¹⁶

In a cowrie shell container recovered from Shizhaishan, large quantities of imported cowrie shells as well as a quantity of Chinese cash (*banliang*; 半两; and *wuzhu*; 五铢) were found. These cowrie shells were seen as measures of wealth amongst the Dian elite, as neither cowrie shells nor Chinese cash were found in the more modest Dian tombs.¹⁷ In the Dian Kingdom, there might have been a market economy alongside an economy of barter trade. Chinese cash and cowrie shells were prestigious items and perhaps used in the exchange of local products with the Chinese, while the use of cowries and cash amongst the general Dian population was negligible.¹⁸

The view that cowrie shells in early Yunnan were precious items concurs with the opinion of Fang Guoyu. Fang points out that cowrie shells were not actual money during this period, that cowries in early Yunnan had nothing to do with peoples from the Central Plain (north China) and that the argument that the use of cowrie money in early Yunnan was not a legacy of ancient China.¹⁹ In fact, Fang's wisdom was shared by Pelliot, who many years ago warned that "we are always too prone to attribute to China the various elements of Yunnanese culture," and highlighted that Yunnan had been "long under Indian influence."²⁰ Recently, Jiang Zhilong has stated that cowries in the Dian Kingdom were neither money nor decoration, but a symbol of wealth.²¹ Meanwhile, Fang Guoyu is also mistaken in seeing cowries only as ornaments.²²

Fang's opinion constitutes a minority one amongst Chinese scholars. Some other scholars argue that cowrie shells had a monetary role in Yunnan as early as the Dian Kingdom;²³ Li Jiarui and Fang Hui state that cowrie money in Yunnan began before or during the Western Han Dynasty (202 BCE–9 CE);²⁴ Jiang Yingliang does provide an estimate, but he believes that cowries were used as money in early Yunnan.²⁵ All of these opinions indeed have conflated money with value or wealth, a common mistake shared by many Chinese scholars when discussing cowrie shells.

Scholars have more or less shared agreement that the use of cowries was not native to Yunnan but originated in coastal areas.²⁶ Most agree that the shells came from Southeast Asia and India.²⁷ Peng Xinwei points out that the usage of cowrie shells in Yunnan was an influence from India;²⁸ Jiang Yingliang excludes the possibility of Burma and Vietnam and states that Siam was the main source of cowrie shells;²⁹ Li Jiarui lists both the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea;³⁰ Yang Shouchun, based on scientific analysis, points out that these cowries

originated in the western part of the Pacific Ocean, including India, the Philippines, Taiwan and other such areas, and he refers to the trading routes shared by Yunnan, Southeast Asian countries and India as the way that cowrie shells were spread.³¹ Von Glahn states that the cowrie monetary system in Yunnan “appears to have been more closely tied to Bengal and Siam than to metropolitan China.”³² Hans Ulrich Vogel, with a careful analysis of Chinese sources, believes that trading routes that connected Burma and Siam brought cowries into Yunnan.³³ While overall, most cowries in Yunnan had a Maldivian origin, a small portion might have come from different parts of the world. Vogel has noticed that some cowries of the Ming period in Dali are as long as 24 mm, and hence concluded that “we can and should not exclude the inroad of cowries from other cowry-producing regions during the Yuan and the other periods in Chinese history.”³⁴ Generally speaking, the presence of cowries in early Yunnan serves as strong evidence for the cross-regional trading network.

It is worthwhile to mention that cowries were unearthed in Sanxingdui, in the neighbouring province of Sichuan, dating to over 3,000 years ago. The relationship between cowries in Sanxingdui and those in the Dian culture has been examined in terms of their type, source and function.³⁵ The Sanxingdui pits date to the late Shang period (thirteenth to eleventh century BCE), or even earlier, and thus we can conclude that cowries in Sichuan were earlier than those in Yunnan. Thus, we may wonder where, when and by which means these two cultures came to adopt the use of cowries, and whether or not the two cultures influenced one another. And what was the function and meaning of the Sanxingdui cowries for early Chinese culture? Some further discussions on these points are provided in Chapter 6.

It is surprising that very few cowrie shells have been found in areas that the Eastern Han China (25–220 CE) occupied after their conquest of the Dian Kingdom. It seems that the use of cowries in the Dian culture disappeared and their re-emergence from the mid-Nanzhao period in the ninth century seems to have little if nothing to do with the earlier period.³⁶ The cowrie trade was suddenly disrupted by the military control of Han China over Yunnan in the first century, or else there must have been some changes in Southeast Asia or further afield. Robert S. Wicks is mistaken when he reckons that “cowries remained prevalent in local exchange” in pre-eighth century Yunnan, as “during the earlier centuries,”³⁷ and his statement that the “cowrie was probably fairly common throughout the south” does not bear scrutiny.³⁸ But Wicks cannot be blamed, as his statement was based on Edward H. Schafer’s studies.³⁹ Schafer realised the popular existence of cowries in East Asia and the use of cowries (*beizi*: 贝子) as money in Yunnan, but he relied on a text that had been claimed to be by Lu Guimeng, a Tang scholar of the late ninth century. The text stated that in Nanyue (南越; lit. southern Yue, 204 BCE–112 BCE), a southern kingdom including the Lingnan area and northern Vietnam, “all taxes on treasures must be paid up with purple cowries.”⁴⁰ The purple cowries/shells (*zibei*; 紫贝) mentioned by Lu Guimeng, although similar in shape to money cowries, were two or three inches long, according to another Tang source.⁴¹ Therefore, the purple shells were much

larger in size than cowrie shells, and their use as money in Nanyue was highly likely a flight of the imagination on Lu Guimeng's part. There has been no other evidence suggesting that purple shells were used as money in Yunnan or anywhere else in China during that time. Purple shells might have been on the list of tribute from the south (to be examined in Chapter 6), due to their shiny colour, which was mistaken by Lu and others as taxation and money. Indeed, Zhao Tuo, the king of Nanyue, once sent a tribute to Emperor Wendi of the Western Han Dynasty, and amongst his gifts there were 500 purple shells.⁴² Various shells but no money cowries have been unearthed from the tomb of Zhao Mo (赵昧) the king of Nanyue (r.c. 137 BCE–122 BCE), which supports my interpretation.⁴³

It was during the period when China lost authority over Yunnan that cowries reappeared in Yunnan in substantial amounts and a cowrie money system took shape, but the exact date of this occurrence remains unknown, since the first Chinese text recording cowrie money in Yunnan is *Xin Tang Shu*, compiled in the mid-eleventh century. Fan Chuo's *Man Shu* (Records of Barbarians), compiled around 864, and assumedly a first-hand source, did mention cowries, but as ornaments rather than money. Hence, Pelliot concludes that it is difficult to know about the era before the tenth century.⁴⁴ After carefully reading Chinese sources, Fang Guoyu estimates that it was around the ninth century that cowrie shells re-entered and were used as money in Yunnan when the Nanzhao Kingdom became prosperous.⁴⁵ Cowrie money continued in the Dali Kingdom, as shells were imported in large numbers from India by way of Siam and Burma.⁴⁶ The few Chinese sources concerning Dali are silent on the subject of cowrie money, which Hans Ulrich Vogel attributes to the political independence of the Dali kingdom.⁴⁷ When the Mongols conquered the Dali Kingdom, the local cowrie money was acknowledged and accepted by the state and thus incorporated into imperial monetary and financial systems.

Cowrie money in Mongol Yunnan

During the Mongol rule of Yunnan, more textual sources on cowrie money were produced. While the use of cowrie money from the Nanzhao-Dali period has been acknowledged by scholars from fragmentary and circumstantial sources, it is categorically confirmed by historical records of the Yuan period. The reason for this lies in the fact that the Mongol Yuan made Yunnan its secretariat branch and many documents are thus extant.⁴⁸ Quite a number of Chinese sources, although fragmentary, mention the use of cowrie money in Yunnan during the Yuan Dynasty.⁴⁹ In addition, Marco Polo, the legendary traveller, passed through Yunnan when he was dispatched by Kublai Khan to Burma, and thus provided his own observation of cowrie money.⁵⁰

In his recent study on Marco Polo, Hans Ulrich Vogel has not only provided a detailed but comprehensive profile of the cowrie monetary system in Mongol Yunnan, but has also paid special attention to the difficult issue of the exchange rates between cowries and other types of money.⁵¹ In various mediaeval Marco Polo texts, the words *porcelaine*, *procelane*, *procellane*, *prociellane*, *porzelane* and

so on were used to refer to cowrie shells.⁵² Vogel has noted that both Yule and Pelliot pointed out that the designation of the term “porcelains” for cowrie shells “almost certainly derived from their strong resemblance to the body and back of a pig and thus porcelains could be traced to the Latin *porcus* or ‘pig[shell].’”⁵³ That is why the term “little pig” survived to refer to cowrie shells in the trade.⁵⁴

Marco Polo mentioned cowrie money in Yunnan no fewer than five times.⁵⁵ In Carajan, a country of the Black Southern Barbarians (*wuman*; 乌蛮):

Their money is such as I will tell you. They use for the purpose certain white porcelain shells that are found in the sea, such as are sometimes put on dogs’ collars; and 80 of these porcelain shells pass for a single weight of silver, equivalent to two Venice groats, *i.e.*, 24 piccoli.

He continued, “and for small change they use the porcelain shells as I mentioned before. These are not found in the country, however, but are brought from India.” In Zardandan, southwestern Yunnan, where the Gold Teeth (*Jinchi*; 金齿) people lived, local people used cowrie shells and gold as money, as Polo noted that “Their money is gold and for small change they use pig-shells.” In the Province of Coloman, an area of eastern Yunnan along the border with western Guizhou to as far as north as southern Sichuan, Polo commented, “A good deal of gold is found in the country, and for petty traffic they use porcelain shells such as I have told you.” In the end he concluded, “All these provinces that I have been speaking of, to wit Bangala and Caugigu and Anin, employ for currency porcelain shells and gold.”⁵⁶ As discussed previously, Bangala here refers to Pegu.

In addition to the regions where cowrie money was in use, the Venetian traveller further provided some information on the exchange of cowries with gold and silver. Based on Polo’s account, about 726 cowries were equivalent to one silver *tael* (*liang*; 两), compared with 960 cowries to one silver *tael* reckoned from a Chinese donation to the Yuantong Monastery in Kunming.⁵⁷ The difference between these two rates is reasonable. Some other cases, based on taxation records, indicate the considerably lower value of cowrie shells to silver. The exchange rates of 2,000, 2,667 and 3,200 cowries to one silver *tael* are deduced by Hans Ulrich Vogel,⁵⁸ and are more than double or triple those of the two cases above. Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that the Yuan government preferred silver to cowries for its taxation, and it is no wonder that the official rate was much lower than the market price indicated by Marco Polo and the Chinese donator. Similar cases are evident in the Ming period as well. Vogel has collected all available sources and scrutinised the exchange rates between cowrie and other types of money in Yunnan during the Yuan-Ming-Qing period (Table 5.1).⁵⁹

Whereas temporal and spatial fluctuations are barriers for an accurate analysis, it is safe to conclude that over time, the value of cowrie shells decreased. Having said this, the value of cowries to silver during the Yuan period was still very high, especially considering the devaluation tendency during the Ming-Qing period.⁶⁰

Denomination constitutes another key to illustrating the influence of the Bay of Bengal.⁶¹ A pattern of $4 \times 4 \times 5 = 80$ (Table 5.2) is self-evident in Chinese texts,⁶²

Table 5.1 Standardisation of Exchange Rate Between Cowrie and One Silver *Tael*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Standardisation of Exchange Rate Between Cowrie and One Silver Tael</i>	<i>Location of the Exchange Rate</i>
c. 1280	600	
1282	2,000	Kunming, capital of Yunnan
1282	2,667	Dali, commercial centre in western Yunnan
1282	3,200	Yongchang, southwestern Yunnan (official exchange rate adopted for tax payment)
c. 1368	8,000	Market exchange rate
1524	7,200	Yanglinyi, near Kunming (market exchange rate)
1540	4,405	Tengchong, southwestern Yunnan (conversion of taxes collected in cowries to silver)
1548	7,200	Tonghai, southern Yunnan (market rate)
1591	7,547	Yiliang (conversion based on donation to a monastery)
1610	10,400	
1615	13,600	Guangxifu, eastern Yunnan (market exchange rate)
1623	8,000	
c. 1625	13,339	Market exchange rate
After 1626	28,000	Market exchange rate after the third opening of the Mint in 1626
Toward 1644	24,000–40,000	Market exchange rate
1647	56,000	Market exchange rate

Table 5.2 The Denomination of Cowrie Shells in Yunnan

<i>Cowrie</i>	<i>Name of Unit</i> ⁶³	<i>Name of Unit</i>	<i>Name of Unit</i>	<i>Name of Unit</i>	<i>Name of Unit</i>
1	1 <i>zhuang</i> 庄				
4	4 <i>zhuang</i>	1 <i>shou</i> 手 or 首			
16	16 <i>zhuang</i>	4 <i>shou</i>	1 <i>miao</i> 苗 or <i>min</i> 緡		
80	80 <i>zhuang</i>	20 <i>shou</i>	5 <i>miao</i>	1 <i>suo</i> 索 or <i>bui</i> 弁	
1,600	1,600 <i>zhuang</i>	400 <i>shou</i>	100 <i>miao</i>	20 <i>suo</i>	1 <i>dai</i> 袋

with two variations, the pattern $4 \times 20 = 80$ and the pattern $4 \times 4 \times 5 = 80$, dominating the denominational system in Yunnan. These accorded with the Bengal system, where cowries were accounted and shared with Siam for their silver denomination.⁶⁴ In Siam, Pelliot pointed out that its silver monetary system is on “a basis of 4×20 (4×5 or 5×4) $\times 10$, and of sub-multiples of 4 and 8 (4×2); in India, the denomination of cowrie money was 4 and 80 (4×20).”⁶⁵ The same or a similar pattern certainly was not accidental but illustrates the close economic relationship amongst the regions described here. Indeed Pelliot concluded that “the whole scale of value of the cowries in Yün-nan during the Middle Ages, based on 4, 16 (4×4), and 80 (16×5), connected this cowry currency with the Indian Ocean, more precisely with India, and not with the decimal scale of the usual Chinese practice.”⁶⁶ This is a piece of strong evidence and serves as a solid base for my argument for the existence of the cowrie monetary world.

Cowries from Jiangnan (the Yangzi Delta)

In terms of their source, cowries in Mongol Yunnan were imported largely through Burma and Siam, with uncertain quantities from Jiaozhou (Tonkin) and Jiangnan (the Yangzi Delta) ports.⁶⁷ Both the Yuan and the Ming sources referred to cowries stored in Jiangnan. Roderich Ptak has concluded that the Maldives paid three tributes to the Ming court in the years 1416, 1421 and 1423, but unfortunately, the tribute gifts recorded in the *Mingshilu* (Veritable Records of the Ming Dynasty) only listed horses, rhinoceros horn, ivory and other “local products.”⁶⁸ In this case, cowries might have been used on board as ballast, which would help to explain the enormous number of cowries in the Yuan warehouse in Jiangnan. *Sanbao Taijian Xiyangji*, a Ming novel on the Zheng He Treasure Fleet, mentions “20 *shi* of cowrie shells” as gifts offered by the Maldivian king to the Chinese.⁶⁹ This information might have been a factual note.

As early as 1276, the Central Secretariat of the Yuan Dynasty in one of its regulations noticed the large flow of cowrie shells from Jiangnan.⁷⁰ To cite the translation made by Hans Ulrich Vogel:

In the Yunnan Branch Secretariat, there is a Muslim (*huihui ren*; 回回人) with the personal name Qielai (怯来) who in the last year had memorialised that “some merchants of the Jiangnan region in the interior had transported cowries (*bazi*; 贝子) to Yunnan to exchange them against all kinds of goods. A prohibition against these clandestine shipments by merchants had been issued. Now [as a result of this prohibition] great amounts of cowries are stored up in the Maritime Trade Supervisorate (*shibosi*; 市舶司) of Jiangnan for which there is no use. If these cowries are now released and shipped to Yunnan, they could be exchanged [there] against gold and horses, which is a profitable [official] transaction.”⁷¹

The imperial rescript responding to this suggestion reads:

When in the last year cowries had been ordered to be imported to Yunnan, the officials of Yunnan had then memorialised that in Yunnan the area in

which cowries are used is limited. [The regulations concerning cowries] are the same as the laws for paper money (*chaofa*; 钞法). Once cowries are too many, the prices of goods in the markets will soar and cause deep distress to the population. One should therefore [so the Yunnan authorities said] prohibit the shipment of cowries from the interior to Yunnan.⁷²

This shows that the central authorities realised that the opinions of the Yunnan government and Qielai were controversial:

Hence an order was sent to the officials there [i.e. the Yunnan Branch Secretariat] to discuss this with Qielai. Now these men have discussed this and propose the following: “shipments are not appropriate, as prices for goods would soar and cause distress to the people. Hence we request all official and private shipments of cowries to Yunnan are not ordered to take place or are prohibited respectively.” After we [in the Metropolitan Secretariat] had received this proposal and discussed it, we request now in a memorial that no imports of cowries are ordered.

The emperor then approved it.⁷³

Some interesting implications can be drawn from the texts quoted above. Firstly, the Jiangnan area was another important source for cowries in Yunnan, as Paul Pelliot emphasised.⁷⁴ Cowries stored in Jiangnan were shipped from Southeast Asia or the Bengal Bay world probably as ballast, as they were not used as money in this region. Secondly, local Chinese people realised the use of cowrie money in the far southwestern province, that is, Yunnan, and they shipped cowries to Yunnan for gold and horses.⁷⁵ Gold was relatively cheap in Yunnan, and horses very expensive in Jiangnan, which made the trade highly profitable.⁷⁶ Noticing the inflow of cowries from Jiangnan to Yunnan, local authorities in Yunnan responded with two different approaches. One imagined the disastrous result if enormous quantities of cowries were to pour into Yunnan, while the other expected the outstanding profits to be gained from the export of cowries by the Jiangnan maritime customs to Yunnan. The debate ended by the issue of a prohibition of the import of cowries from Jiangnan to Yunnan, which led to an intriguing phenomenon, namely, the so-called illegal cowrie (*siba*; 私貝).⁷⁷

Cowrie shells continued to reach Jiangnan during the Ming period, and the Kingdom of Liuqiu was one of the suppliers. The Ryukyu (*Lingiu*; 琉球) Kingdom, a tributary maritime kingdom to the Chinese Empire of the Ming and the Qing, once sent five and a half million cowrie shells, together with 8,500 spiral shells, as part of a tribute to the Ming state in 1434.⁷⁸ Geographically speaking, the Ryukyu Islands are located in tropical and subtropical waters where cowrie shells live. Kinoshita Naoko suspects possible connections between early China and the Ryukyu Islands, but her research examines various shells valued in the Shang period, omitting the cowrie shells discussed in this book.⁷⁹ Cowries presented by the Ryukyu Kingdom most likely were imported from

the Maldives, because firstly, little evidence suggests the catch of cowrie shells in these Pacific Islands, or their use and export to neighbouring societies. Secondly, during the two centuries between 1373 and 1570, the Ryukyu Kingdom had developed an intensive trade relationship with East and Southeast Asia, and a few hundred ships were sent to various kingdoms in Southeast Asia, including Annam, Siam, Patani, Malacca, Sumatra, Luzon and Java, in addition to more voyages to China, Japan and Korea.⁸⁰ Furthermore, the maritime ban issued in 1433 by the Ming Dynasty ended the Zheng He Voyages, and thus provided a golden opportunity for the Ryukyu Kingdom, which soon became a pivotal link between northeast Asia and Southeast Asia. During 1430–1442, at least thirty-one Ryukyu trade missions were sent to Ayutthaya, Palembang and Java.⁸¹ These ships usually carried Chinese goods such as porcelains in exchange for goods produced in or imported to Southeast Asia that would be sent to East Asian countries, especially China. Finally, that the year 1434 saw over five million cowries being sent to China was not accidental. The visits of the Zheng He Treasure Fleets to the Maldives, the accounts by both Wang Dayuan and Ma Huan and the records of cowrie shells in the Jiangnan treasure all lead to the conclusion that cowrie shells from the Maldives would have been shipped in these Chinese treasure fleets as ballast to the Jiangnan region (the Yangzi Delta), or indirectly in Southeast Asian ships to China. Thus, my assertion is that cowrie shells which had been shipped from the Maldives to Southeast Asian ports were naturally taken by the Ryukyu ships as ballast. Useless and unvalued in their kingdom themselves, cowrie shells were then shipped by the Ryukyu to the Ming state. Placing cowrie shells in the tributary list was probably deliberate. The Ryukyu Kingdom understood southeastern coastal China very well and must have been aware of the storage of cowrie shells in the Chinese treasury. In sum, we can safely say that the Ryukyu was not the original home of cowrie shells exported to China.

Illegal cowries

The Mongol Yuan government made a concerted effort to regulate the use of cowrie money in Yunnan, which is vividly illustrated by its regulations and issues on the term “illegal” or “forged” cowries (*siba*) vs genuine cowries (*zhenba*: 真贝).

A major economic reform launched by the Yuan was the issue of paper money (*chao*; 钞). Throughout the Yuan period, the inflation of *chao* had been a challenge for the Yuan court. In Yunnan, the challenge was different from other provinces, and even greater. It struck the Yuan officials that it was difficult for the *chao* to be accepted in local society, as cowrie money still dominated Yunnan. When Sayyid’Ajall Shams Al-Din, the governor of Yunnan, found that the local people refused to use *chao*, he appealed to Kublai Khan and proposed that cowrie money be maintained,⁸² and this was approved. As a result, tax was levied in cowries, based on their officially fixed exchange rate with gold, while in all other provinces it was levied in *chao*.⁸³ This showed that cowrie money in Yunnan was

deeply associated with the local society and could not be abolished or replaced with a short-term or unfamiliar solution.

In 1301, the central state issued an order to the Yunnan Branch Secretariat concerning the importation of cowries along overland routes to Yunnan. The order noticed that merchants as well as both civil and military officials were involved in shipping cowries to Yunnan. Local officials in Shunyuán, Dali, Lin'an, Qujing, Wusa and Luoluosi were ordered to strictly check "each and every pass, ford, ferry, ports and strategic place."

When a criminal is seized, a report is to be presented immediately to the superior authorities who in accordance with the laws will decide on the verdict. The illegal cowries will be confiscated by the state. Those who file a charge [against a smuggler] or arrest [him], will receive a reward according to the regulations. In cases where the responsible officials and underlings do not block [contraband] or where they collude [with the smugglers] in committing abuses, they will be brought to trial and punished.⁸⁴

Shunyuán, Lin'an, Wusa and Luoluosi refer to present-day Guiyang (Guizhou), Jianshui (Yunnan), Weining (Yunnan) and Xichang (Sichuan), respectively, while Dali and Qujing have remained the same in Yunnan. All these passes were certainly strategic for overland and water trade routes: Dali and Lin'an for preventing cowries coming in from Southeast Asia and the others preventing an inflow from Jiangnan.⁸⁵

Forged or illegal cowries were officially defined as is cited above, and this definition was repeated in 1305 by the Grand Councillor of the Branch Secretariat, who pointed out that "cowries if not of the native land, were regarded the same as forged *chao* (*qibei fei bentu zhe tong weichaolun*; 其贝非本土者同伪钞论)."⁸⁶ As has been made clear, cowries were not native to Yunnan; thus the term "non-native" may cause confusion. Non-native cowries in this context referred to those shipped illegally under the official prohibition. Obviously, cowries had continued to flow into Yunnan after the promulgation of the prohibition in the 1270s.⁸⁷

Because of this official prohibition, local people seemed to be forced to clarify their genuine or legal cowries, namely, legal cowries from illegal ones (*siba*). That is why people stated that they had used their *zhenba* to donate to a monastery, or to purchase land, not only in the Yuan period, but also in the Ming Dynasty.⁸⁸ By making the inflow of cowries illegal, the Yuan state attempted to regulate and control cowrie money, eventually aiming to abolish it entirely. Such a policy sheds light on the imperial mentality that, on the one hand, was forced to acknowledge local power, practice and tradition, and on the other hand, attempted to regulate and penetrate local society. Money, after all, symbolises power, and the issue of money (in the case of cowrie money, the control of supply) must be possessed and monopolised not only by a highly centralised state such as the Yuan or the Ming Dynasty, but also by local elites in small communities, as in Papua New Guinea (see Chapter 8).

Routes linking Bengal, coastal mainland Southeast Asia and Yunnan

The issue of illegal shells naturally leads us to discuss the transportation routes of cowries from India and Southeast Asia to Yunnan. While cowrie money persisted in Yunnan, the zone of cowrie money still primarily remained in western Yunnan (Yongsheng, Heqing, Anning, Baoshan, Dali, Tengchong, Dengchuan, Jianchuan, Chuxiong, Fengyi and Lufeng) and southern Yunnan (Jinning, Yilinag, Luxi, Yuxi, Tonghai, Shiping, Guangnan and Jianshui), whereas eastern Yunnan in general (later Guizhou Province) did not use cowrie money.⁸⁹ Western and southern Yunnan were connected to Burma and Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. Hans Ulrich Vogel has already pointed out that the bulk of cowries were imported to Yunnan overland, via Siam and Burma⁹⁰ and these overland routes were crucial parts of the so-called Southern Silk Road that connected Southwest China with its neighbouring areas, including Tibet, mainland Southeast Asia and India.⁹¹

This trading route network was recorded by Xuanzang (mid-seventh century) and Yijing (late seventh century), as both described the roads between India and Sichuan. Their records of distances and days were fairly similar, indicating that people might have been familiar with the route. Fan Chuo, a military official who served in Tang China's Annam Protectorate, also recorded these roads in his *Man Shu* (Records of the Barbarians, compiled c. 863). Many coastal mainland Southeast Asian kingdoms were listed, such as the Pyu, a 75-day distance south of Yongchang; southwestern Yunnan that bordered Bosi (波斯) and Poluomen (婆罗门) and was a 20-day distance west of Rājagṛha; Michen (弥臣) and Miruo (弥若), a 60-day distance southwest of Yongchang; Kunlun (昆仑), an 81-day distance south of the Erhai Lake; Daqin Poluomen (大秦婆罗门), west of Miruo and a 40-day distance from Dali city; and Xiao Poluomen (小秦婆罗门), a 74-day distance north of Yongchang, where it produced cowries (*beichi*; 贝齿).⁹²

Jia Dan, a prime minister of the Tang court, presented the emperor with a book that documented routes linking China with the barbarians, including the one connecting Annam with India (*Tianzhu*; 天竺). This route started from Tonkin, via Yunnan, through Prome and on to Magadha. According to Jia Dan's records, there were two ways from Tonkin to Dali, one by river, the other overland. After arriving at Dali, the routes joined together and extended to Burma and India. From Yunnan to India, there were again two routes: the southern one from Dali to Yongchang, through the Pyu kingdom, Prome, the Arakan Range, Kamarupa and arriving in India, and the western one, crossing the Irrawaddy and Mogaung Rivers and then the Chindwin River to India and beyond.

Yang Zuo, a scholar from Sichuan, visited the Dali Kingdom to purchase warhorses in 1074. At a local postal station, Yang read a road direction that detailed the mileage between the Dali city and many foreign countries.⁹³ From there eastwards, people could reach Rongzhou in Sichuan, westwards to India (*Yandu*; 身毒), southeastwards to Vietnam (*Jiaozhi*; 交趾), northeastwards to Chengdu (capital of Sichuan), northwards to the Big Snow Mountain (*Daxueshan*; 大雪山) and southwards to the sea. Yang even mentioned that numerous locals had completed this journey.

In his work *Lingwai Daida*, Zhou Qufei (1135–1189) provided vague estimates for travel times from the Dali city to Pagan and then to Rājagrha. He said that there were five *cheng* (程; a unit of distance) from Dali to Pagan, and thus from Pagan to West Tianzhu, it was not far, but a difficult route.⁹⁴ He estimated it to be forty *cheng* from Dali to Rājagrha.⁹⁵ This estimate was somehow confirmed by Marco Polo, who said that it took about thirty days from southern Yunnan to Bangala (Pegu),⁹⁶ the latter being “tolerably close to India.”⁹⁷

These northern-centric descriptions were confirmed by Wang Dayuan and Ma Huan, who travelled across Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. Wang in the fourteenth century clearly pointed out that there was a road from Yunnan leading to Mecca (*Tiantang*; 天堂) and that it took about a year to travel this way.⁹⁸ He also mentioned a road from the Western Ocean (*Xiyang*; 西洋; roughly referring to the eastern part of the Indian Ocean) to Mecca.⁹⁹ Ma Huan provided further details about Shangshui, which was connected to the back door of Yunnan (discussed in Chapter 4).¹⁰⁰

Ma Huan’s notes were reiterated by Huang Xingceng in the sixteenth century. The routes connecting Yunnan and Siam seem to have been crucial for the transportation of cowries, and Paul Pelliot points out that the cowries in Yunnan were probably sourced from Siam.¹⁰¹ The networks connecting Bengal, Arakan and Pegu also drew the attention of Tomé Pires, who broadly described a trading network covering these areas where cowrie shells functioned as money. He particularly appreciated the connection between Siam and China (Yunnan), and the one between Burma and China (Yunnan), as he said:

it seems reasonable, that they can go overland from Pegu and Siam to take the pepper and sandalwood to China – on the hinterland side of China – because the people of Pegu and Siam trade with Burma in *lancharas* and *paraos* up the rivers there are in the said kingdom; and the merchants who go in this way say what they please and within a month they come back.¹⁰²

The Bengal-Southeast Asian connections had been the original sources for cowrie money in Yunnan, and later cowries were also shipped to Yunnan from Jiangnan.¹⁰³

All the early sources cited, Chinese and otherwise, lead us to envisage an economic network whose essential features included the use of cowrie money, as this form of money had long existed in and around these regions. The centre of this economic network was most certainly the Bengal world. Yunnan, although not a coastal area, was the furthest region touched by the Bengal monetary and economic world.

Functions of cowrie money

Numerous texts during the Yuan-Ming period provide us with a vivid picture of the functions of cowrie money in Yunnan. The monetary practices in imperial China were extremely complicated, as various forms of money such as paper

money, gold, silver, copper coins and local moneys all mixed together. When Li Jing served in Yunnan at the turn of the fourteenth century, he recorded that cowries were a medium of trade.¹⁰⁴ As late as the beginning of the sixteenth century, Zhang Wen in his memorial written in 1503 pointed out that coins had never wholly been circulated in Fujian and Guangdong, nor in the southwestern provinces of Yunnan and Guizhou.¹⁰⁵ Commodity money still dominated in the interior and peripheral provinces, for instance, furs substituted for money in Shanxi and Shaanxi, while cowrie shells were the primary money in Yunnan.¹⁰⁶

Both the Yuan and the Ming states on the one hand, acknowledged and employed cowrie money for official finance, such as collecting various taxes, revenues and levies, paying salary and tributary offerings;¹⁰⁷ but on the other hand, they made various efforts to restrict the use of this type of money. Saiyid Ajall Shams al-Din Umar (*Saidianchi Zhansiding*; 赛典赤 瞻思定), the first Grand Councillor of the Yunnan Branch Secretariat, pointed out that the paper money was not familiar to people in Yunnan, which was different from central plain, and he proposed to use a mixed monetary system comprising paper money and cowrie shells.¹⁰⁸ Kublai Khan approved that while local taxation in Yunnan was calculated in gold, it was paid in cowrie shells, with 1 *qian* (钱) of gold equal to 20 *suo* (索) of cowries. Hence, in taxation, Mongol Yunnan adopted a dual-monetary system of gold and cowrie shells. Meanwhile, silver was also one of the main media of exchange.

Once the government made cowries an acceptable form of tax payment, then a large number of cowries for all kinds of taxation flowed into the state coffers.¹⁰⁹ In 1304, the wine levy (*jiuke*; 酒课) in Yunnan was made into cowries of 201,117 *suo*;¹¹⁰ in the first year of the Tianli reign (1328–1330), the total corvée (*kechai*; 科差) of the country included cowries of 1,133,119 *suo*, in addition to *chao*, silk, cotton, cloth and so on.¹¹¹ In 1297, the provincial treasury stored cowries amounting to 2,700,000 *suo*; four years later, it was almost fourfold, amounting to 10,070,000 *suo*.¹¹² This huge figure was just what was kept in the provincial treasury; the scale of cowrie use on the markets and private households could have been even larger. Therefore, there must have been more than one billion cowries circulating in Yunnan at that time.

Cowrie money as a part of the official revenue during the Yuan period was generally retained during the Ming Dynasty. In 1384, as soon as Yunnan had been conquered, Zhu Yuanzhang, the founding emperor of the Ming, approved a memorial stating that local products such as gold, silver, cowries, cloth, cinnabar and mercury were to be used to pay taxes.¹¹³ While the Yuan taxation was wholly paid in cowries, a 1481 regulation by the Ming court allowed 70 per cent to be paid in cowries and the rest in *chao*.¹¹⁴ This rate may have varied by time and region. Secondly, the Ming state used cowries to pay salaries and provisions to officials and soldiers, or as grants to nobility. For example, Zhu Yuanzhang presented his son with cowries when the prince was assigned to Yunnan.¹¹⁵ In 1403, Emperor Yongle awarded Prince Runan, who was stationed in Dali, 100,000 *suo* of cowries.¹¹⁶ Similarly, as in the Yuan period, cowries were

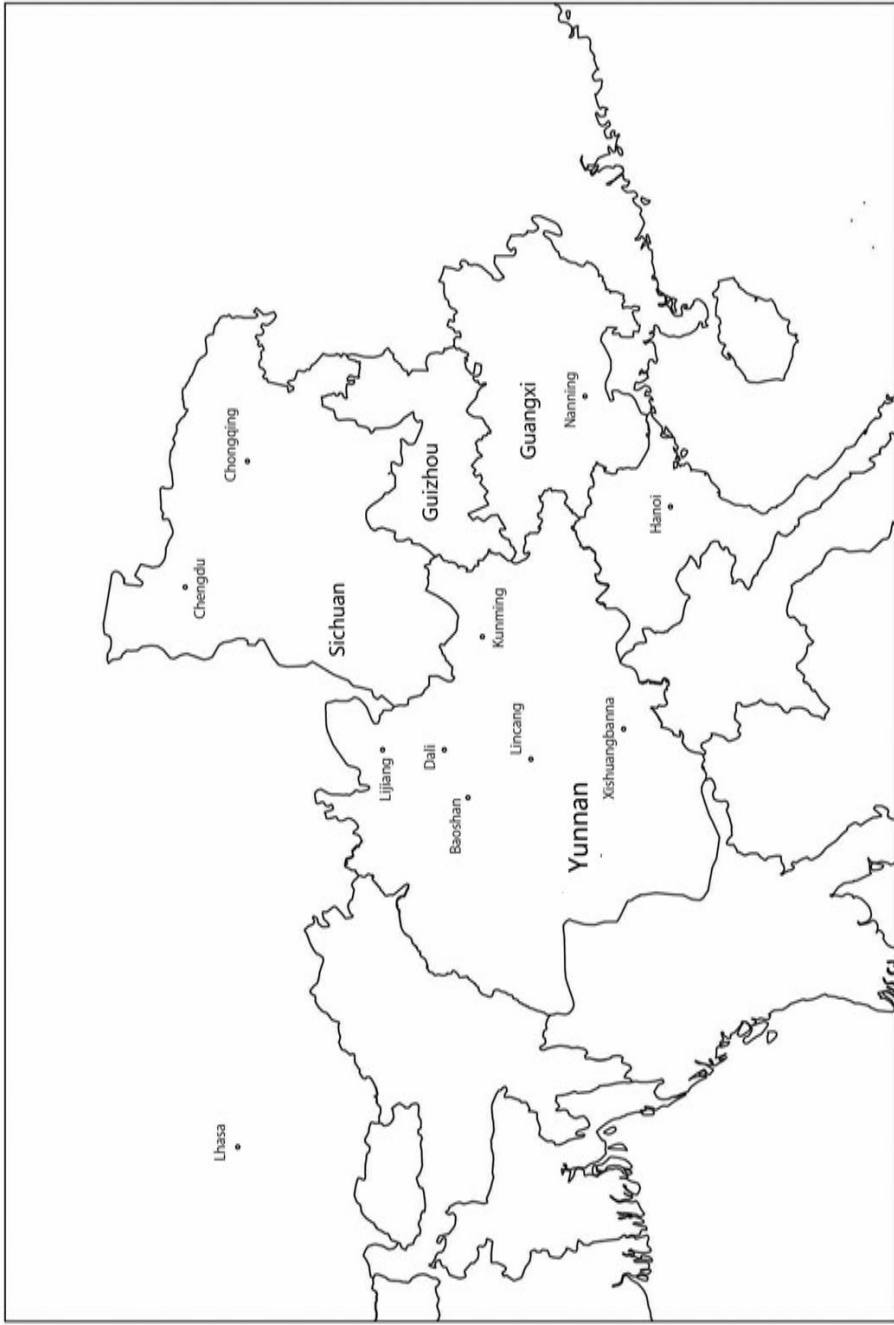
stored in other Ming treasuries. In 1437, the Ming court decided to move cowries from the Nanjing Treasury to Yunnan to pay officials' salaries.¹¹⁷ Three years later, the emperor ordered a shipment of 550,000 *jin* (斤) of cowries to Yunnan, again to pay salaries.¹¹⁸ Not all people liked to pay in cowries to the state. In 1411, Sien (思恩), the native chieftain of Xichidian, asked to pay silver instead of cowries of 79,800 *suo*; otherwise he would have to have purchased cowries from Lin'an.¹¹⁹

In the private economy, cowries were not only used in small transactions in daily life, but also in large deals such as land, mountains and houses (and to be accepted for the sale of a house). In one case in 1548, 2,160 *suo* of cowries were used to buy a house valued at 24 taels of silver.¹²⁰ Cowrie money was used to buy books, clothes and shoes, to issue short loans, to pay interest, to pawn and to hoard as wealth.¹²¹ Because of the prevalence of Buddhism in the late Nanzhao and Dali kingdoms, it seems that the use of cowrie money was extremely common for Buddhist activities. Laymen donated cowries to monasteries, as contemporary Tai people were doing. In 1972, over 38,000 shells were discovered on the top of the Qianxun Pagoda, built in the late Nanzhao period.¹²² Such a local tradition continued until the Ming period, when cowries were used to pay for the casting of bells for monasteries and to print Buddhist scriptures, in addition to direct contribution.¹²³ When Chinese people migrated to Yunnan, the elites, common soldiers and peasants alike quickly learnt the use of cowries as a form of money. Yang Shen (1488–1559), a scholar who was the *Zhuangyuan* (状元) of 1551 (ranking the first in the palace examination), was exiled in Yunnan, where he used 200 *suo* of cowries to buy a book (Map 5.1).¹²⁴

During the Ming period, cowrie money seemed to develop a new function as it was loaned. Sometimes, the loaner borrowed silver, but paid interest in cowries; other times, cowries were borrowed and paid back in cowries.¹²⁵ Due to the large amount of shells in circulation (especially considering the devaluation from the late Ming period) and the frequent exchange between shells, silver and paper money, a kind of cowrie bank (*bahang*; 賈行) emerged. In 1600, Zhang Jixian in Chuxiong County signed a certificate before the magistrate to run a cowrie bank in the county's city.¹²⁶ *Bahang* was a housed cowrie money exchange, a Chinese counterpart of the Indian. Because of their widespread usage, cowries in Yunnan symbolised wealth.

As such, cowrie money in Yunnan had fulfilled all the functions of a common money: as a medium of exchange, a standard of value, a means of payment and a way of storing value. In addition, the use of cowrie money in Yunnan was widespread and popularly circulated in terms of space, ethnicity, class and transactions of many various kinds.¹²⁷

While cowrie money penetrated daily life, its value gradually decreased. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Xie Zhaozhe, a native of Fujian serving in Yunnan, reported that cowries were greatly appreciated as a fractional money and thus especially helped the poor; however, the fragility of cowries certainly made them second in preference to copper cashes that, when worn out, could



Map 5.1 Yunnan Province of the Fifteenth Century

be recycled and minted; Xie also pointed out that the low value (10 cowries for one copper cash and 10,000 for a single *tael* of silver) made them difficult to carry and trade.¹²⁸ While Xie's opinion reveals a certain Sino-centric mindset that highlighted the advantages of Chinese metal money, he was correct to point out the inconvenience of the bulk and weight of cowries for high-value transactions. This problem would challenge the British officers in India as well as Western African merchants in the centuries to come, who later invented various solutions to deal with it.

While both the Yuan and the Ming courts accepted cowrie money, they both attempted to control, reduce and eventually replace cowries with their own moneys, such as copper coins. The Yuan differentiated genuine cowries (*zhenba*) and forged cowries (*siba*), hoping in this way to limit the circulation of shells. The Ming court thrice took further steps to replace cowries by minting copper coins, in 1555–1565, 1576–1580 and 1626, respectively.¹²⁹ The first two attempts both failed, because the cost of minting outweighed the reward and because local people preferred cowries to cash,¹³⁰ while the third was relatively successful, perhaps because of the development of commercialisation, a large Han population in Yunnan, the efforts made by the government to implement this change and the quick devaluation of cowries in the global context.

The minting project was continued by the Daxi regime in Yunnan during the Ming-Qing transition, and implemented by Wu Sangui, who governed Yunnan from 1659 to 1681, as well as by the Manchu movement from 1681. Sun Kewang, the leader of the Daxi region, banned the use of cowries, stating that anyone using cowrie money would be punished by having their noses cut off.¹³¹ It was during the mid-seventeenth century that cowries ceased their function of a form of money in Yunnan.

In addition to monetary functions, cowrie shells were also found in local burials from the tenth to the seventeenth century, when cremation dominated local funeral traditions in Yunnan. Cowrie shells have frequently been discovered in tombs' urns, numbering from just a few to more than 1,000. This practice might have resulted from cowries being symbolically seen to represent wealth. Indeed, in Yunnan, rich people were once nicknamed *youbu* (有贝; possessing or holding cowries),¹³² which indicates that common people then widely connoted cowries as symbols of wealth.

The collapse: global and local

Cowrie money lasted in Yunnan for about eight centuries, but it seemed suddenly to have collapsed within a few decades in the mid-seventeenth century.¹³³ Nevertheless, prior to this, there had been a fairly prolonged period of devaluation of and decline in its use. Hans Ulrich Vogel has examined the changes of exchange rate between cowries and silver and concluded that probably from the beginning of the seventeenth century, cowrie exports from Bengal (via Siam and Burma) to Yunnan were no longer profitable.¹³⁴ Von Glahn has pointed out that the devaluation of cowrie money "discouraged imports of new shells

from coastal areas, and in a matter of several decades, by the beginning of the 1650s, they abruptly vanished as a form of common currency.”¹³⁵

In terms of the collapse of cowrie money, scholars have emphasised two likely causes: the role of the state, namely, the penetration and control of central states, and changes in the wider trading world.¹³⁶ The first school of thought pays attention to how the state used power to contain and abolish cowrie money, which in turn helped to consolidate the empire’s penetration of its peripheral areas. Therefore, for the first school, state policies and local responses were key to the disappearance of the cowrie monetary system. The second school that favours broader causes argues that the end of cowrie money must be understood in a global context, as this monetary system in Yunnan was part of a much larger trading and monetary network.

Focusing on internal changes caused by state policies, the first school argues that cowrie money as primary money had been popular before the mid-seventeenth century because of low social productivity, and that it disappeared in the mid-seventeenth century because of the increased prosperity in the commercial economy.¹³⁷ Jiang Yingliang points out that during the Yuan-Ming period, the relationship between Yunnan and China became stronger than the alliance of Yunnan and Siam. Consequently, silver and copper coins, the Chinese official money, took the place of cowries as a “naturally economic choice.”¹³⁸ In addition, he believes that the lack of copper coins in Yunnan constituted the crucial reason for the long-standing status of cowrie money and that consequently, copper coins produced in large amounts at the end of the Ming and early Qing eras facilitated this replacement.¹³⁹ Yang Shouchuan focuses instead on the growing market in Yunnan, a result of Chinese immigration facilitated by the state.¹⁴⁰ The low value of cowries could not meet the demands of marketisation and commercialisation, and silver and copper became the main monetary forms for trade transactions. In addition, the copper mining industry provided local sources for copper minting. In sum, the retreat of cowrie money, on the one hand, was the result of central penetration; on the other hand, it aided and symbolised the empire’s penetration into its ethnic and frontier province.

Compared with the emphasis on Chinese migration and governmental minting efforts, Wan Ming instead highlights the role of silver, especially silver monetisation for taxation in the late Ming period.¹⁴¹ Wan has examined the quantity of cowries in local taxation in the Ming period, and found that a decrease in use was obvious in the early seventeenth century.¹⁴² In the late Ming period, from the late sixteenth century onwards, a major financial and monetary reform was made, that is, silver monetisation and consequently taxation paid in silver. This transformation was also evident in Yunnan, which witnessed the decline of cowrie money vs the dominance of silver money. Indeed, a look at the constituent portions of silver land taxation and various levies in Yunnan indicates the great progress of silver monetisation.¹⁴³ As a result, silver had begun to penetrate local governmental and private spaces, while the space of cowrie money diminished, especially when it no longer served as a form of payment for tax. It is

under this historical background that Wan Ming has argued that silver monetisation, especially in governmental taxation in China (and Yunnan), constituted the main reason for the decline of cowrie money in Yunnan.¹⁴⁴ Hence, silver rather than copper coins were the key to the decline of cowrie money in Yunnan. Nevertheless, cowrie money as small money in Yunnan continued for nearly another century.

The second school sets its sights on the greater trading world. Fang Guoyu points out that the cowries in Yunnan were shipped from coastal Southeast Asian areas, and thus, even when the state forbade the use of cowrie money, cowries continued to enter Yunnan.¹⁴⁵ Fang argues that the long-term existence of cowries in Yunnan was because of its close commercial relationship with the non-Chinese cowrie world and what happened there subsequently explained the monetary fluctuations in Yunnan. European capitalist expansion into South Asia and Southeast Asia broke the old trade networks, Fang points out, and as a result, cowrie money, a symbol of trade, could not be maintained. Fang Guoyu concludes that the collapse of the trade system around South Asia and Southeast Asia resulting from European colonialism functioned as the decisive factor for the end of cowrie money in Yunnan.

Like Fang Guoyu, Zhang Bincun places cowrie money in a global context within which he pursues the question of why the cowrie system collapsed in Yunnan within a relatively short period, which he concludes was around 1660–1680.¹⁴⁶ Zhang questions the influence of state policies or the growing local marketisation, which he thinks was insufficient to account for the quick disappearance of cowrie money; after examining the expansion of European capitalism in Southeast and South Asia, he concludes that the collapse of the cowrie money system in Yunnan was an unexpected consequence of European commercial capitalism, as the dramatic increase of the slave trade led to a growing demand for cowries which in turn destroyed the supply of cowries in Yunnan.¹⁴⁷ Therefore, global changes were the key cause of a local change within the Chinese empire.

It seems that each of the two schools of thought tells one part of the true story. Both local (and regional) and global changes contributed to the collapse of cowrie money in Yunnan during the mid-seventeenth century. Hans Ulrich Vogel points out that while the value of cowries increased in Bengal, in Yunnan it decreased. As a result, it was no longer profitable to ship cowries into Yunnan.¹⁴⁸ Meanwhile, the growing importance of silver and the simultaneous devaluation of cowries in Yunnan had a similarly important global-local cause and local impact. The large quantity of silver inflow from the world into Ming China stimulated silver monetisation for taxation adopted by the late Ming state and served as the key broad background for the decline of cowrie money in Yunnan. While the silver inflow into China resulted from the invisible hand of global markets, silver monetisation was promoted by way of the visible hand of the state. In addition, throughout the Ming Dynasty, about one million Han migrants moved into Yunnan, which dramatically changed Yunnan's demography. By the end of the Ming, Han Chinese constituted the

majority ethnic group in Yunnan, with a population of about three million in the reign of Tianqi (1621–1627).¹⁴⁹ The introduction of a Chinese agrarian economy and social traditions obviously clashed with the local economic system, including the monetary system. The three minting projects during the Ming period, although playing only a marginal role in the process,¹⁵⁰ facilitated the circulation of copper cashes in Yunnan from the 1620s onwards. Therefore, the long-term existence of cowrie money in Yunnan was a result of the Indian Ocean economic network, and its dramatic disappearance from Yunnan to a great extent resulted from the confluence of the expanding European modern world system into the Indian Ocean, West Africa and the New World, along with the inflow of silver to China, both being global. Put simply, both global and local contexts and factors were responsible for the rise and fall of cowrie money in Yunnan.

The history of cowrie money in Yunnan indeed gives rise to many intriguing and sensitive questions for contemporary historical research, which has usually been confined within a national or regional framework. It represents the deep and far-reaching influence of the Indian Ocean economy in an inland frontier sandwiched by Southeast Asia and China, and illustrates and magnifies the problems of confining historical investigations within the framework of a nation state or a giant empire, at a time when such states, empires or regions were yet to be defined as they are or are thought of today. Conventional spatial demarcations and paradigms can hardly provide a satisfactory answer for these questions due to their very nature of crossing boundaries.

After the end of cowrie money, these shells still maintained their cultural legacies in daily life in Yunnan. In imperial times, cowries were worn as precious ornaments and were used in religious and cultural activities, in addition to functioning as money. After the decline and especially the collapse of cowrie money, as noticed by the Qing scholar Ni Tui, the use of cowries as ornaments in dress became more popular amongst ethnic women.¹⁵¹ Jiang Yingliang in the 1940s drew up statistics stating that there were twelve ethnic groups in addition to the Han people that used cowries for decoration in their hair and on headdresses, caps, collars, costumes or necklaces.¹⁵² This practice was also popular amongst the Flowery Miao in Guizhou, as noticed by westerners in the 1930 and 1940s. In Chuxiong, the Black Luoluo people used cowrie shells in divination;¹⁵³ the Bai people in Dali used them for gambling and when the dead were cremated, a few cowries would be placed into the urn of ashes, a tradition established back in the Dali Kingdom.¹⁵⁴ Children also made cowries into common toys. These functions are not much different from those in other parts of the world. It seems that Yunnan was the northern limit of the Bengal-based cowrie money system in its eastern expansion, and cowrie money stopped entering South China. One may ask: what about the northern expansion of cowrie money into Central Asia and north China? The following chapter will discuss the use of cowrie shells in early China.

Notes

- 1 *Yuan Shi* (History of the Yuan Dynasty), juan 21, 466.
- 2 For Chinese studies on cowrie shells, see Shouchuan, 1997. For non-Chinese studies, see Pelliot, 1959, vol. 1; Vogel, 1993, Part I and II; 2013; Yang, Sept. 2004; 2008; 2011; Jan. 2011; 2012, 125–146. A most recent study in mainland China has been made by Wan Ming; unfortunately, it has not consulted any recent English scholarship on this topic. Wan Ming, “Mingdai Baiyin Huobihua: Yunnan Haibei Huobi Xiaowang de Xinshiye (Silver Monetisation in the Ming Dynasty: A New Perspective of the Decline of the Cowrie Money in Yunnan),” *Aomen Yanjiu* (Journal of Macau Studies), vol. 86, no. 3 (Sept. 2017): 115–133.
- 3 For this point of view, see Yang, 2008; 2009.
- 4 In 1413, the eastern Part of Yunnan was turned into Guizhou Province.
- 5 Yang, 2009, 197–210.
- 6 For the history of Nanzhao, see Charles Backus, *Nan-chao Kingdom and T'ang China's Southwestern Frontier* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
- 7 Yang Shouchuan, “Beibi Yanjiu: Zhongyuan yu Yunnan yong Haibei zuo Huobi de Lishi (Studies on Cowry: Historical Survey on Cowry as Currency in the Central Plains and in Yunnan),” in *Beibi Yanjiu*, 1997, 1.
- 8 For archaeological studies of the Dian culture, especially concerning cowries and cowrie containers, see Michèle Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens, “The Bronze Drums of Shizhaishan, their Social and Ritual Significance,” in *Early South East Asian*, eds. R.B. Smith and W. Watson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 125–136; “Cowry and Chinese Copper Cash as Prestige Goods in Dian,” in *Southeast Asian Archaeology 1990: Proceedings of the Third Conference of the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists*, ed. Ian Glover (Central for South-East Asian Studies, University of Hull, 1992), 45–52; Charles Higham, *The Bronze Age of Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 142–173.
- 9 Jiang Zhilong, *Dianguo Tanmi* (Explorations of the Dian Kingdom) (Kunming: Yunnan Jiaoyuchubanshe, 2002), 320–321.
- 10 Higham, 1996, 147.
- 11 Zhongguo Guojia Bowuguan and Yunnan Sheng Wunhuating, eds., *Yunnan Wenwu zhi Guang- Dianwangguo Wenwu Jingpinji* (The Light of Yunnan Cultural Relics: Collection of Fine Artefacts of the Dian Kingdom) (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehuikexue Chubanshe, 2003), 240.
- 12 Four-Buffalo and One-Horse Gold-Gilt Rider (*Siniu liujin qishi*; 四牛鑲金騎士) Bronze Container, the Western Han Period (206 BCE–8 CE), 50 cm in height, 25 cm in diameter (lid). Source: Guojia Bowuguan and Sheng Wunhuating, 2003, 283.
- 13 The Western Han Period (206 BCE–8 CE), 36 cm in height, 26 cm in diameter (lid). Guojia Bowuguan and Sheng Wunhuating, 2003, 80.
- 14 The Eastern Han Period (25 CE–220 CE), 47.5 cm in height, 24 cm in diameter (lid). Guojia Bowuguan and Sheng Wunhuating, 2003, 102.
- 15 Vogel, 1993, Part I, 216–218; Yang Shouchuan, 1997.
- 16 Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens, 1992, 49.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Wicks, 1992, 39–41.
- 19 Fang Guoyu, “Yunnan yong Bei zuo Huobi de Shidai ji Bei de Laiyuan (The Date and Source of Cowries as Currency in Yunnan),” in *Beibi Yanjiu*, 1997, 30.
- 20 Pelliot, 1959, 552.
- 21 Jiang, 2002, 321.
- 22 Fang, 1997, 28–64, esp. 30.

- 23 Xiao Qing, *Zhongguo Gudai Qianbi* (Ancient Money in China) (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1984), 207–208; Yang, 1997, 13; “Yunnan yong Haibei zuo Huobi de Lishi Kaocha (A Historical Review of Cowrie Money in Yunnan),” in *Beibi Yanjiu*, 1997, 119.
- 24 Li Jiarui, “Gudai Yunnan yong Beibi de Dagai Qingxing (A Sketch of Cowrie Money in Ancient Yunnan),” in *Beibi Yanjiu*, 1997, 95; Fang Hui, “Cong Jinshi Wenqi kan Yuan Ming ji Qingchu Yunnan Shiyong Beibi de Qingkuang (The Use of Cowrie Money in Yunnan of the Yuan-Ming-Early Qing Period: Based on Texts and Inscriptions in Bronze and Stone),” in *Beibi Yanjiu*, 1997, 128.
- 25 Jiang Yingliang, “Yunnan Yong Bei Kao (On Cowries in Yunnan),” in *Beibi Yanjiu*, 1997, 81–93.
- 26 For this discussion, see Vogel, 1993, Part I.
- 27 Vogel, 1993, Part I, 221–246; Yang, 1997, 6–7; Fang, 1997, 31–32; Li, 1997, 97–101.
- 28 Peng Xinwei, *Zhongguo huobishi* (A Monetary History of China) (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1965).
- 29 Jiang, 1997, 92–93.
- 30 Li, 1997, 98.
- 31 Yang, 1997, “Yunnan Yongbei zuo huobi de qishi shidai (The Original Age of Cowries Used as Money in Yunnan),” in *Beibi Yanjiu*, 71–72.
- 32 Von Glahn, 1996, 101.
- 33 Vogel, 1993, Part I, 237.
- 34 Vogel, 2013, 257.
- 35 For some discussions, see Liu Shixu, “Nanfang Sichou zhi Lu Chutu Haibai yu Beibi Qianlun (A Preliminary Discussion of Cowries and Cowrie Money Along the Southern Silk Road),” *Zhongguo Qianbi*, no. 1 (1995): 3–7.
- 36 Peng Ke and Zhu Yangshi, “New Research on the Origin of Cowries in Ancient China,” *Sino-Platonic Papers*. 68, www.sino-platonic.org/complete/spp068_cowries_china.pdf, Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA 19104–6305 USA, 1995, 1 and 12.
- 37 Wicks, 1992, 42, 45.
- 38 Ibid., 45.
- 39 Edward H. Schafer, *The Vermilion Bird: T'ang Images of the South* (Warren: Floating World, 2008), 208.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 *Han Shu* (History of the Western Han Dynasty), juan 95, 3852.
- 43 My visit to the Museum of the Nanyue Kingdom, Guangzhou, China, 25 May 2018. For the Museum, see www.gznywmuseum.org/.
- 44 Pelliot, 1959, 531–563.
- 45 Fang, 1997, 36–40.
- 46 Pelliot, 1959, 555; Vogel, 1993, Part I, 239.
- 47 Vogel, 1993, Part I, 220.
- 48 Ibid., 235–236.
- 49 Ibid., 234.
- 50 On Marco Polo’s notes on cowrie money in Yunnan, see Yule, 2010, vol. 2; Pelliot, 1959; Akimoto Naojito, “Chūsei ni okeru Unnan no baika,” *Shigaku Kenkyū* (Historical Research), vol. 41 (1950): 1–46; Vogel, 2013, 226–266.
- 51 Vogel, 2013, 229.
- 52 Ibid., 234.
- 53 Vogel, 2013, 234; Yule, 2010, vol. 2, 805–807.
- 54 Vogel, 2013, 234.
- 55 Ibid., 231.

- 56 Yule, 2010, 39, 45, 52, 85; Vogel, 2013, 233; When Marco Polo visited the region, both Guizhou and southern Sichuan were within the administration of Yunnan.
- 57 Vogel, 2013, 237.
- 58 Ibid., 237–238; Vogel, 1993, Part II, 383–341.
- 59 This table is a simplified version of “Table 2 Exchange rates between cowries and other types of money, Yunnan, 1280–1647” by Hans Ulrich Vogel. For sources and detailed discussions, see Vogel, 1993, Part II, 338–341.
- 60 Vogel, 2013, 238. For the purchase power of cowries in the Yuan period, see Li, 1997, 103–104.
- 61 Pelliot, 1959, 552; Vogel, 1993, Part I, 246–250.
- 62 Pelliot, 1959, 549; Li Jing, *Yunnan Zhilue* (A Sketchy Record of Yunnan), in Fang Guoyu, eds., *Yunnan Shiliao Congkan* (A Collection of Historical Texts of Yunnan, hereinafter *YNSLCK*) (Kunming: Yunnandaxue Chubanshe, 1998), vol. 3, 130; Fang Guoyu, 1997, 46–47; Li Jiarui, 1997, 102–103.
- 63 It must be noted that the names of these units were indigenous, invented and used by a non-Han ethnic people in Yunnan, but recorded phonetically in Chinese characters. A pattern of $4 \times 5 \times 5 = 80$ in Bengal differed slightly. Considering the lower value, the result of these patterns would not cause much confusion on markets, as the figure 80 was a backbone.
- 64 Pelliot, 1959, 557; Vogel, 2013, 239.
- 65 Pelliot, 1959, 557.
- 66 Pelliot, 1959, 552, 563; Vogel, 1993, Part I and II; 2013, 239; Heimann, 1980, 57–58.
- 67 Vogel, 2013, 239–240. Vogel mentions the former three sources, but forgets the last one here, as he is clearly discussing cowries from coastal areas. See Vogel, 2013, 250.
- 68 Ptak, 1987, 681.
- 69 Luo Maodeng (Ming), *Saobao Taijian Xiyangji* (A Record of Eunuch Sanbao’s Visit to the Western Ocean) (Beijing: Kunlun Chubanshe, 2001), 624; Ptak, 1987, 692.
- 70 Fang, 1997, 149–151; Vogel, 2013, 250.
- 71 Fang, 1997, 149–151; Vogel, 2013, 251. According to Hans Ulrich Vogel, Qielai might have been a high-ranking official in Yunnan.
- 72 Fang, 1997, 149–151; Vogel, 2013, 251.
- 73 Ibid. For the Chinese text, see Fang Linggui, collated and translated, *Tongzhi Tiaoge jiaozhu* (Regulation of the [Book of the] comprehensive Rules [of the Great Yuan], collated and annotated), with a preface by Beizhulu Chong (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2001), chapter 18, 552; Fang Hui, “Cong Jingshi wenqi kan Yuan Ming ji Qingchu Yunnan Shiyong beibi de Qingkuang,” in *Beibi yanjiu*, 1997, 127–157.
- 74 Pelliot, 1959, 548. Pelliot pointed out that cowries in Yunnan “were imported by regular maritime trade” during the Ming period.
- 75 Vogel, 2013, 252.
- 76 Ibid.
- 77 The issue of genuine cowries (*zhenba*) versus illegal cowries (*siba*) was first noticed by Pelliot and Li Jiarui in 1956 and later elaborated by Pelliot, Fang Hui and Hans Ulrich Vogel. Pelliot, 1959, 546–547; Li, 1997, 117–118; Fang, 1997, 148–151; Vogel, 1993, Part I and II.
- 78 It is said that cowrie shells were discovered near Kyoto, Japan in its Yayoi period (300 BCE–300 CE). Jinteng Qiaoyi (Kondo Yuichi), “Shangdai Haibei de Yanjiu (A Study of Cowrie Shells in the Shang Dynasty),” *Zhongguoshehuikexueyuan Kaoguanjijusuo*, ed., *Zhongguo Shangwenhua Guojixueshutailunhui Lunwenji* (A Collection of Papers on the International Conference of the Shang Culture)

- (Beijing: Zhongguo Dabaikequanshu Chubanshe, 1998), 389. A study on the sources and functions of these shells, as well as their relationship to the Chinese counterparts, would of great interest to me.
- 79 Kinoshita Naoko (Muxia Shangzi), "Cong gudai zhongguo kan liuqiu liedao de baobei (Ancient China and Cowrie Shells in the Ryukyu Islands)," *Sichuan Wenwu* 1 (2003): 29–34.
 - 80 Shunzō Sakamaki, "Ryukyu and Southeast Asia," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 23, no. 3 (1964): 383–389.
 - 81 Anthony Reid, "An 'Age of Commerce' in Southeast Asian History," *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1990): 6.
 - 82 *Yuan Shi*, juan 125, 3065.
 - 83 *Yuan Shi*, juan 9, 117.
 - 84 Pelliot, 1959, 546; Fang, 1997, 150–151; Vogel, 1993, Part I, 252–253; For the original Chinese texts, see *Da Yuan shengzheng guochao dianzhang* (State Codes of the Scared Government of the Grand Yuan), 1322, chapter 20, 31a (Taipei: Wenhai Chubanshe), vol. 1, 314.
 - 85 Fang, 1997, 151.
 - 86 *Yuan Shi*, juan 21, 466; Pelliot, 1959, 546; Fang, 1997, 149; Vogel, 2013, 253; 1993, Part II, 229–230.
 - 87 Fang, 1997, 152; Vogel, 2013, 253.
 - 88 Li, 1997, 117–118; Fang, 1997, 148. Vogel states that the difference between *zhenba* and *siba* "only makes sense" if they show some physical difference and he speculated that the former refers to *cypraea moneta* and the latter to *cypraea annulus*. Also, he thinks that different origins of *cypraea moneta* might be another possible interpretation. Vogel, 2013, 261–262.
 - 89 Li, 1997, 115–116; for a map of the cowrie zone in Yunnan, see Vogel, 2013, 254.
 - 90 Vogel, 1993, Part I, 237.
 - 91 Yang, 2004; 2008; 2009.
 - 92 Fan Chuo, *Yunnanzhi Buzhu* (Supplementary Annotation to the Record of Yunnan), annotated by Mu Qin (Kunming: Yunnan Renmin Chubanshe, 1995), 12–134.
 - 93 Yang Zuo, "Yunnan Maima Ji (A Record of the Horse Trade in Yunnan)," in *Yunnan Shiliao Congkan*, vol. 2 (1998): 244–247.
 - 94 Zhou Qufei, *Lingwai Daida* (Answers for Questions Concerning Out of the Range), annotated by Yang Ququan (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1999), 122–123.
 - 95 *Ibid.*, 108.
 - 96 Yule, 2010, vol. 2, 83.
 - 97 *Ibid.*, 78.
 - 98 Wang, 2000, 352.
 - 99 *Ibid.*, 352.
 - 100 Ma, 2005, 34.
 - 101 Pelliot, 1959, 552, 554.
 - 102 Tomé Pires, *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires, an Account of the East, From the Red Sea to Japan, Written in Malacca and India in 1512–1515, and The Book of Francisco Rodrigues Rutter of a Voyage in the Red Sea, Nautical Rules, Almanack and Maps, Written and Drawn in the East Before 1515*, translated from the Portuguese ms. in the Bibliothèque de la Chambre des Députés, Paris, and ed. Armando Cortesão (New Delhi and Chennai: Asian Educational Services, 2005), 111.
 - 103 Yang, 2011; 2012.
 - 104 Li, 1998, 128.
 - 105 Von Glahn, 1996, 99.
 - 106 *Ibid.*, 100.

- 107 Vogel, 1993, Part II, 322; Li, 1997, 113–114; Fang, 1997, 135–136; Yang, 1997, “Lun Mingqingzhiji Yunnan ‘Feibeishiqian’de yuanyin (On the Reasons for the Replacement of Cowries with Copper Coins during Yunnan in the Ming-Qing Transition),” in *Beibi Yanjiu*, 161.
- 108 *Yuan Shi*, juan 9, 177.
- 109 Hans Ulrich Vogel has discussed cowrie money in the Yuan public revenue and finance. Vogel, 2013, 262–266.
- 110 *Yuan Shi*, juan 94, 2396.
- 111 *Yuan Shi*, juan 93, 2363.
- 112 *Yuan Shi*, juan 176, 4108.
- 113 *Ming Shi* (History of the Ming Dynasty), juan 78, 1894.
- 114 *Mingxianzhong Shilu* (Veritable Records of the Xianzong Emperor of the Ming), juan 222, in *YNSLCK* 4:163.
- 115 *Mingtaizu Shilu* (Veritable Records of the Taizu Empore of the Ming), juan 241, in *YNSLCK* 4:162.
- 116 *Mingtaizong Shilu* (Veritable Records of the Taizong Emperor of the Ming), juan 16, in *YNSLCK* 4:162.
- 117 *Mingyingzong Shilu* (Veritable Records of the Yingzong Emperor of the Ming), juan 35, in *YNSLCK* 4:162.
- 118 *Mingyingzong Shilu*, juan 68, in *YNSLCK* 4:162.
- 119 *Mingtaizong Shilu*, juan 116, in *YNSLCK* 4:162.
- 120 *YNSLCK* 7:292–294.
- 121 Vogel, 1993, Part II, 312–319; Li, 1997, 103–112; Fang, 1997, 128–135.
- 122 Yang, 1997, 120.
- 123 Fang, 1997, 132.
- 124 Yang Shen, *Shengan Quanji* (Comprehensive Works of Yang Shen) (Shanghai: Shangwu Chubanshe, 1937), vol. 1, juan 2, 26.
- 125 Li, 1997, 110–111; Fang, 1997, 133–134.
- 126 Li, 1997, 112.
- 127 Vogel, 1993, Part II, 319.
- 128 Xie Zhaozhe, *Wu Za Zu* (Five Essays) (Shanghai: Shanghai Shudian, 2009), 249.
- 129 Vogel, 1993, Part II, 333–337; Yang, 2004; 2009, 197–210.
- 130 Vogel, 1993, Part II, 333–334.
- 131 Ni Tui, *Dianyun Linian Zhuan* (Annual Record of Yunnan), annotated by Li Yan (Kunming: Yunnandaxue Chubanshe, 1992), 570–571.
- 132 *Ibid.*, 588.
- 133 For detailed discussions, see Vogel, 1993, Part II, 331–340; Yang, 1997, *Beibi Yanjiu*; Yang, 2004; 2009, 197–210.
- 134 Vogel, 1993, Part II, 312; Table 3, 342.
- 135 Von Glahn, 1996, 194.
- 136 Yang, 2004.
- 137 Yang, 1997, “Lun Mingqingzhiji Yunnan,” in *Beibi Yanjiu*, 158–171.
- 138 Jiang, 1997, 81–93.
- 139 *Ibid.*, 92.
- 140 Yang, 1997, 122–124.
- 141 Wan, 2017.
- 142 *Ibid.*, 122–124.
- 143 *Ibid.*, 124–126.
- 144 Wan, 2017.
- 145 Fang, 1997, 54–56.
- 146 Zhang Bincun, “Shiqi Shiji Yunnan Beibi Bengkui de Yuanyin (Reasons for the Collapse of Yunnan Cowrie Money in the Seventeenth Century),” in *Beibi Yanjiu*, 1997, 172–208.

147 Ibid., 197–199.

148 Vogel, 1993, Part II, 312.

149 Lu Ren, *Jiaorong yu Bianqian – Mingdai Yunnan Zhanru Yimin Yanjiu* (Interactions and Changes: A Study of Han Migrations to Yunnan in the Ming Dynasty) (Kunming: Yunnan Jiaoyuchubanshe, 2001), 136–137; Yang, 2009, 141–191.

150 Von Glahn, 1996, 194.

151 Ni, 1992, 571.

152 Jiang, 1997, 88–90.

153 Ibid., 90.

154 Li, 1997, 102, 116.

6 Why not in early China?

At the beginning of the Chinese historic era, during the Yin dynasty, this shell was the commonest form of money.

– J. Gunnar Anderson¹

The case of China in the story of cowrie shells has been one of its most fascinating episodes. First and foremost, cowries have been excavated in Neolithic sites widely over northwest and north China, followed by numerous archaeological discoveries in the Shang and Zhou tombs from the sixteenth century BCE to the late first millennium BCE. Sometimes, a single tomb produced a few thousand cowrie shells, and cowrie shells did not disappear until the age of the first Chinese empire around the third century BCE. These cowries were surely imported from outside the Chinese cultural sphere and were regarded as precious items that symbolised power, prestige and wealth.

Secondly, while the frequency of archaeological discoveries in China may not be as remarkable as India, it was early China that produced the greatest number of textual sources that record the use of cowries in its early societies. Many inscriptions on oracle bones and in bronze vessels that contain messages concerning cowries have illustrated the political, economic, cultural and religious roles of cowrie shells amongst the elites in early China, and this phenomenon is eye-catching in terms of the cowrie culture across the world.

Finally, cowrie shells did not become an early form of money in China, although they did take on certain monetary functions, and thus have been envisaged by both Chinese (imperial and contemporary) and western scholars as having taken on a monetary role at least 2,000 years ago. More interestingly, while genuine cowries failed to be adopted as money, the imitation bronze cowries became one of the earliest forms of metal money in the second half of the first millennium BCE, which has complicated the story and at the same time been an intriguing point of contention when discussing the role of cowries in early China.

The frequency of findings and the large quantity of cowries in the late Shang-Zhou period in the Yellow River region naturally led scholars to ponder the source and nature of these cowries, particularly where they came from and how

and when cowries began to function as money (if ever). This chapter attempts to answer these questions one by one. It first reviews the discussion of the origin of cowries in early China, refutes the conventional wisdom that cowries came from the South China Sea and argues that the primary sources were from the Maldives through the Steppe Road (the late overland Silver Road). We then attend various issues concerning cowries, summarising some general information concerning their use in the Shang-Zhou funeral to illustrate their significance, and then scrutinising the question of cowrie money. While most scholars in China have been proponents of cowrie money (their only difference being in the specific period when it was prevalent), I concur with a few scholars, such as Li Yung-Ti, who has not found any convincing evidence from bronze inscriptions that refer to cowrie shells as money. Consequently, in this chapter, we attempt to answer why cowries did not develop into China's first kind of money. Here, we argue that the distance and thus the cost of transportation constituted the key insurmountable barrier and thus highlight the role of supply in making (or failing) money. Attention is also paid here to bronze cowries, and we argue that as one of the earliest forms of metal money in China, their presence reveals the deep monetary influence of cowrie shells in the Chinese mindset. Finally, we discuss the concept of cowrie culture in early China and illustrates its influence in the emergence of Chinese civilisation by highlighting the role of cowries in funeral rituals.

Where did cowries come from?

The discovery during the twentieth century of the Yin (Shang) Ruins at Anyang, Henan (the mid-Yellow River region), was one of the fundamental contributions to the construction of early Chinese civilisation. One of the most remarkable of these sites was the tomb of Lady Hao (*Fuhao*; 妇好), unearthed in 1975. Lady Hao was a favourite wife of Wuding (武丁), a king of the Shang Dynasty in the early twelfth century BCE. She was very influential in the Shang court, as she conducted various ceremonies and even led military campaigns. It is thus no wonder that so many precious items were buried with her. During the excavation of her tomb, 1,928 articles were discovered, including 468 bronzes, 755 jades (many from Xinjiang), 47 precious stones and 63 stone items.² In addition to these priceless treasures, on 7 June 1976, workers discovered piles of cowrie shells in her tomb in such quantities (more than 6,800 cowries) that they had to put the cowries into bronze containers to remove and lift them from the excavation site (Figure 6.1a).³

The nearly 7,000 cowries that accompanied Lady Hao into her afterlife, combined with many other funeral findings of cowries across northwest and north China, have raised many questions. The primary debate surrounds the significance of these cowries, while the source of cowries has been considered to have been answered, if somewhat vaguely. Let us first turn to the origin of these cowries.



Figure 6.1a Cowrie Shells Found in the Yin Ruins (*Yinxu*; 殷墟) of the Shang Dynasty (c. 1600 BCE–1046 BCE), including *Cypraea Moneta* and *Mauritia Arabica* (*Awenshoubei*; 阿文绶贝), Anyang, Henan Province, Yinxu Museum⁴

The majority of cowries found in the Shang and Zhou period (roughly the Bronze Age in China) were *Cypraea moneta* and to a lesser extent *Cypraea annulus*, as well as the even less used *Erronea errans*. These three shells look similar in terms of size and physical form and are thus not usually differentiated in Chinese archaeological reports.⁵ The first two species are found widely in warm sea waters and shallow lagoons in the basins of the Indian and Pacific oceans, ranging from the Red Sea to Mozambique in the west and to Japan, Hawaii, New Zealand and the Galapagos Islands in the east. *Cypraea moneta* exist in large numbers in the Sulu Islands, in Indonesia and in the Maldives, the last being the primary sources for cowrie shells in the world.⁶ The sources for evidence of cowrie shells during the Bronze Age in China have not yet received sufficient attention from scholars in mainland China.

Considering the use of cowrie money in Siam and other parts of mainland Southeast Asia, Robert S. Wicks thinks that the first cowries probably reached China via the overland routes of northern Southeast Asia.⁷ This is not likely, as there are more archaeological findings of cowries in early China than in mainland Southeast Asia. In addition, there existed an area in which no cowries have been found between the cowrie zone in upper mainland Southeast Asia and the other in northwest and north China.

Few other scholars have taken Wicks' stand on this. A persisting dominant view advocates the South China Sea route,⁸ while a more extreme view refers to all the coastal waters.⁹ Egami Namio comprehensively examined China's imperial textual records concerning various shells and cowrie shells and concluded that cowrie shells were brought from the South China Sea to north China, a popular assertion accepted by Chinese scholars, including Guo Moruo.¹⁰ Jan Hogendorn and Marion Johnson also accept that *Cypaea moneta* existed in the Sulu Islands and were exported to China and Indochina, but they provide no evidence for this distribution.¹¹ In the last three decades, scholars have further discussed two southern routes, one from South China through the Southern Range to Hunan and then north to the Yellow River, the other from southeast coastal areas to north China.¹² Kondo Yuichi in his studies of cowrie shells in the Shang period has put in a lot of effort to discuss the formation and changes of the southern routes. He asserts that cowries shells were indigenous to the South China Sea and were carried by sea to the Shang nobles; he argues that the cowrie shells placed in Lady Hao's tomb were obtained from her campaigns in the Huai River region; he raises a theory that in the late period, a major supply of cowries for the Shang nobility came from Shandong, whence these shells were obtained either from the Huai River region or from southern coastal areas.¹³ Obviously, his statement lacks solid evidence, either textual or archaeological. Indeed, the lack of archaeological data for cowries in the South China Sea has dealt a fatal blow to such a proposition.¹⁴

Furthermore, ancient Chinese textual records never differentiate general shells from cowrie shells, let alone *Cypraea moneta* from *Cypraea annulus*. Most textual sources are vague and always refer to certain shells that were seen as precious and used as ornaments because of their size (the larger, the more valuable) and bright colours. Even if one accepts Egami Namio's speculations, the string of questions concerning who might have brought these cowries, via which intermediaries and through which routes all remain unanswered. It certainly is puzzling that there is little evidence of any later practice of cowrie procurement in the South China Sea. Last but not least, why is it that no major findings of cowries have been excavated in South China, either in the Pearl River region or Southeast coast areas such as Zhejiang and Fujian provinces? The 1994–1995 discovery of the tomb of King Shoumeng (r. 585–561 BCE) in Suzhou of Jiangsu Province in the Yangzi Delta seems to be one southern case of cowrie shells. In the centre of thousands of cowrie shells there lay one turquoise shell, and an archaeologist on the spot immediately interpreted these cowrie shells (genuine and imitated) as the money of the Wu Kingdom.¹⁵ The Wu Kingdom, although located in the southern periphery of the Central Plain, the centre of early China, was an active player in the central politics. And it is no wonder that Shoumeng, the king of the Wu in the end of the Western Zhou period, followed his northern counterparts and valued cowrie shells. Nevertheless, this seems to be the southern limit of cowrie shells from the north, as there has been not any other major discovery of cowrie shells in the Yangzi Delta. To be exact, a scrutiny of Chinese sources does not support the hypothesis

of a South China Sea origin. Neither archaeological nor textual evidence leads to the conclusion that the South China Sea provided cowrie shells to north China, let alone on such a scale.

One question that is worth considering is whether or not cowrie species once lived in China's southeast coastal waters, especially around Taiwan, and if so, whether or not the cowrie shells were shipped to north China. Firm evidence for the existence of cowries in southeast coastal waters remains to be uncovered; whether or not they arrived in north China during the Bronze Age when the climate was warmer is as yet unknown.¹⁶

A scientific analysis of archaeological findings conducted by Peng Ke and Zhu Yanshi refutes the South China Sea hypothesis. They have pointed out that, naturally and geographically, the South China Sea could not have been the origin of the cowries used in ancient China.¹⁷ By examining temperatures and the salt concentration (both being too low in the South China Sea), the two cowrie species could not thrive in the present-day South China Sea and it is highly unlikely that they existed in the South China Sea in the periods of cowrie use in north China.¹⁸ As such, the Indian Ocean constitutes the most logical origin for the cowrie shells in early China.¹⁹

Scrutiny of the geographical expansion of cowrie use in early China supports this unconventional reckoning.²⁰ Archaeological surveys have revealed that cowrie shells were first used in the heartland of west China but not in north China during the Neolithic period, became prosperous in the Bronze Culture of the Shang-Zhou period and finally declined and disappeared in the Qin-Han period (late third century BCE to first century CE), that their use had been mainly confined to north China and that very rarely have cowrie shells been discovered south of the Yangzi River.²¹ It is evident that the use of cowries spread from the northwest to the north and predominantly stayed in north China (Figure 6.1b). The hypothesis that cowrie shells moved from south to north China does not have any extant archaeological evidence to back it up. Such a geographical distribution not only refutes the South China Sea hypothesis, but also suggests the Indian-Central Asian connection. Since cowrie shells from the Indian Ocean had reached north India and Central Asia before and during the period in question, it seems clear that they might easily have reached northwest China and consequently the Yellow River region. Considering the fact that cowrie shells were found in north India and Central Asia (Mongolia and Siberia) and Sichuan (Sanxingdui) and that jade from Xinjiang was found in the tomb of Lady Hao, it is highly evident that cowrie shells were brought from the Indian Ocean through Central Asia to the Shang nobility, along the Cowrie Road, which was then referred to as the Steppe Road before the emergence of the Silk Road.²²

Scientifically solid as the argument made by Peng Ke and Zhu Yanshi refuting the South China Sea being the cowrie sources for early China,²³ the clouds of doubt over the origins of cowrie discovered in northern China have been not wholly cleared away. Certain other scholars believe that it is



Figure 6.1b Cowrie Shells Discovered in Shandong Province²⁴

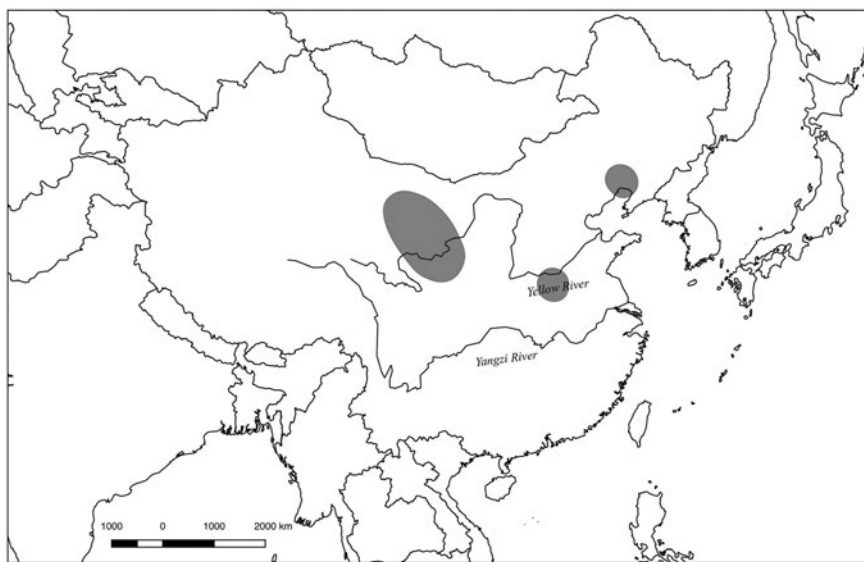
possible for cowrie shells to have been present in southeastern coastal areas during the Shang-Zhou times or earlier.²⁵ Whether or not cowrie shells existed in southeastern coastal waters is still open to question, and if the answer is positive, did they and how did they reach northern China during the Bronze Age?²⁶ Currently, there is no evidence, and I doubt that there would be any archaeological evidence supporting this southern hypothesis.

Considering all this archaeological, textual and circumstantial evidence, it is clear to us that the primary source of cowries in early China was from the Maldives through the overland Silk Road. This, however, does not exclude a few sporadic imports of cowries from other areas and through other routes.

Mortuary cowries

In the archaeology of early China, far fewer cowrie shells have been found in sites where communities lived than in graves, especially during the late Shang period (represented by the Yin Ruins). As most cowrie shells were found in tombs, the relationship between cowries and the funeral ritual has aroused much interest amongst scholars. Wu Danmin has analysed the latest and relatively comprehensive archaeological findings of cowries in China, dating from the late Neolithic period to the late Warring State period (475–222 BCE) and has shared many interesting findings.²⁷

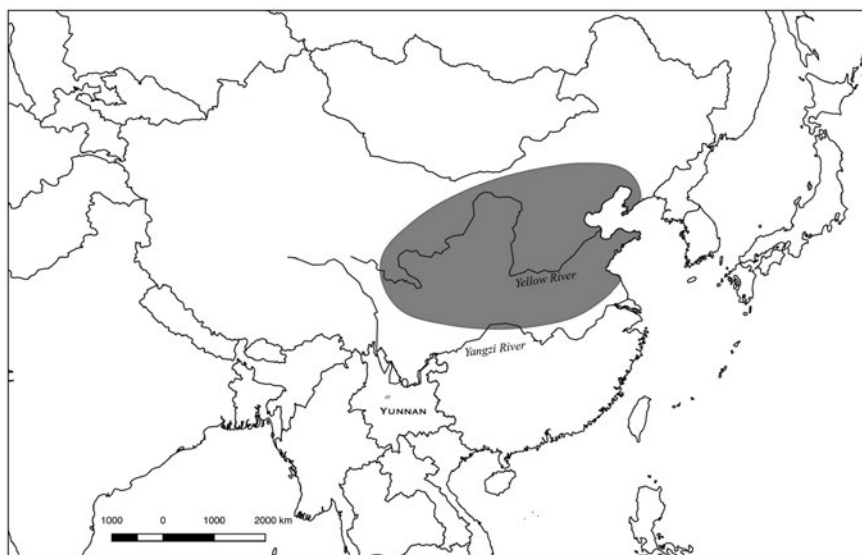
To put it in a perhaps rather oversimplified way, the spatial distribution of cowrie discoveries moved from a vast area of northwest-north-northeast China to the middle Yellow River region. During the Neolithic period, cowries were scattered over a large area, as far west as Qinghai (eastern Tibetan Plateau), as far northwest as both slopes of the Tianshan Range in Xinjiang and as far northeast as Liaoning (Map 6.1). From the Shang period onwards (sixteenth century to eleventh century BCE), they were concentrated in an area covering roughly present-day Shaanxi, Henan, Shanxi and Hebei along the Yellow River. In the early period, scattered shells were occasionally found in community relics, whereas from the Shang period onwards, cowrie shells were found only in tombs.²⁸ Chronologically, the number of archaeological cowrie shells increased over time. Usually, from a single site, they amounted to no more than fifty



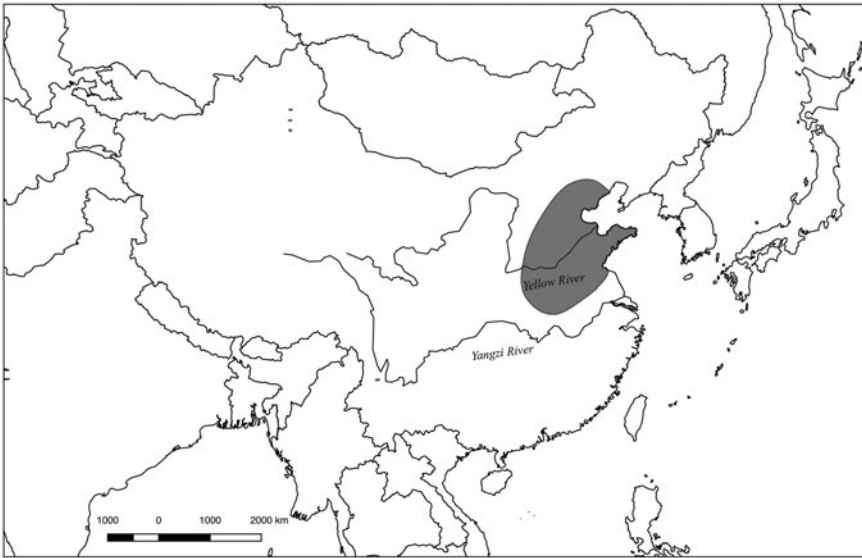
Map 6.1 Archaeological Discoveries of Cowrie Shells in Neolithic China (Pre-Thirteenth Century BCE)²⁹

during the Neolithic period, increased slightly during the Shang (except for the case of the Yin Ruins, i.e., the tomb of Lady Hao) and reached their greatest numbers during the mid-late Western Zhou (eleventh century to 771 BCE).³⁰ From the Western Zhou era, mortuary cowries became very common. In the case of Zhangjiapo, near Xi'an, Shaanxi, 81 per cent of the tombs contained cowries, so far the highest rate known (Map 6.2).³¹ The quantity of shells could amount to several hundred and even several thousand. From the mid-late Warring State period (475–222 BCE) onwards, the quantity gradually decreased (Map 6.3).³²

Imitation shells were simultaneously excavated from such sites. They were made of stone, turquoise, clam shell, clay, jade, lead, bronze (sometimes gilt), silver or gold, and these appeared as early as the Neolithic period (Figures 6.2a, 6.2b, 6.2c, 6.2d, 6.2e, 6.2f and 6.2g).³³ During the Shang era, most findings have been of genuine cowries, except for a small number of imitation shells in the Yin Ruins, while 109 bronze cowries were excavated in Baode County, Shanxi Province, an extremely rare phenomenon.³⁴ Imitation cowrie shells increased from the Western Zhou period. During the late Western Zhou, the ratio between imitation and genuine shells increased; during the Spring-Autumn period (770–476 BCE), more imitation shells were found than genuine ones in most tombs.³⁵ One can conclude from this that cowrie shells began to dominate the burial ritual.



Map 6.2 Archaeological Discoveries of Cowrie Shells in Shang-Zhou China (c. Twelfth Century BCE to Sixth Century BCE)³⁶



Map 6.3 Archaeological Discoveries of Cowrie Shells in Warring-State China (c. Fifth Century BCE to Third Century BCE)³⁷

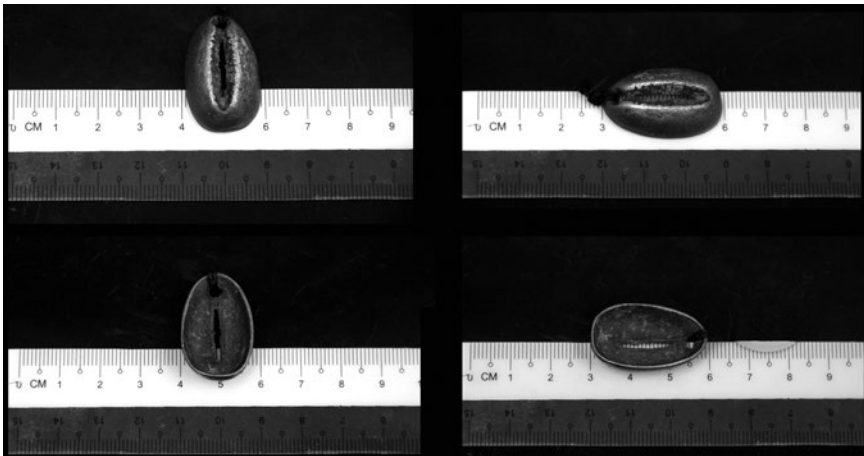


Figure 6.2a A Bronze Cowrie of the Late Shang Period³⁸

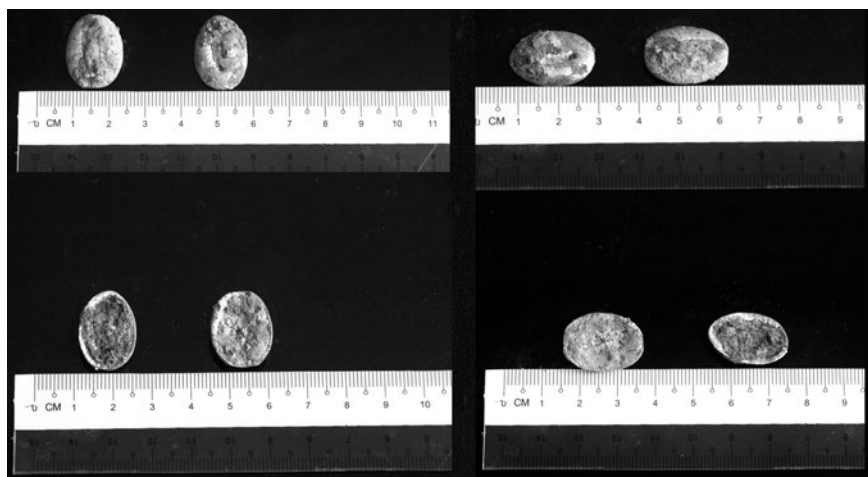


Figure 6.2b Gilt Bronze Cowries (back and front)³⁹

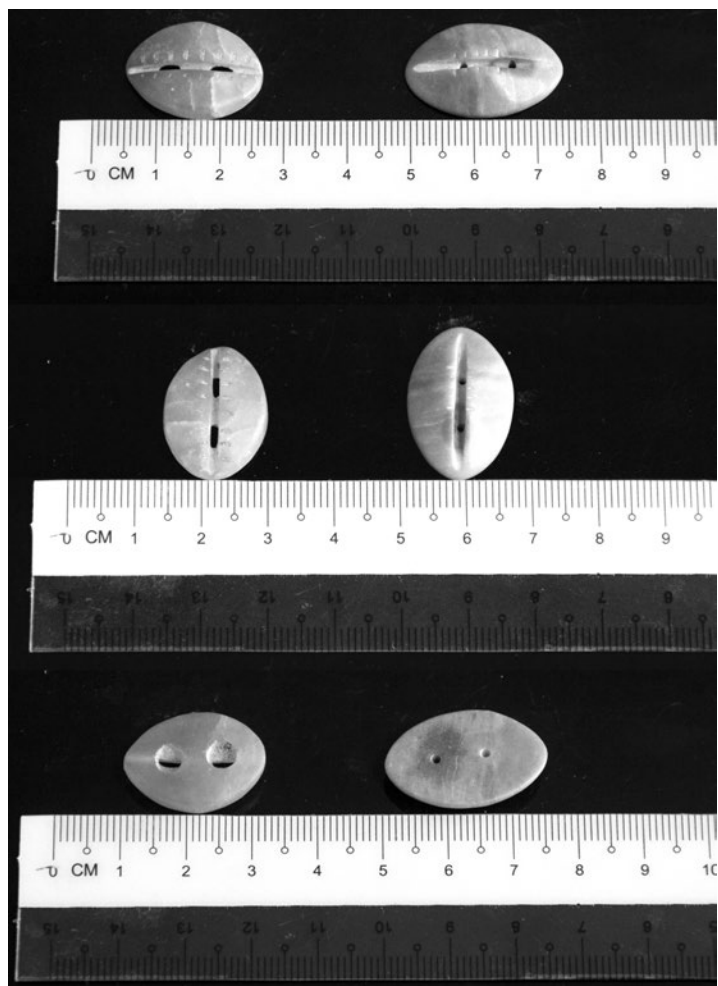


Figure 6.2c Two Jade Cowrie Shells⁴⁰

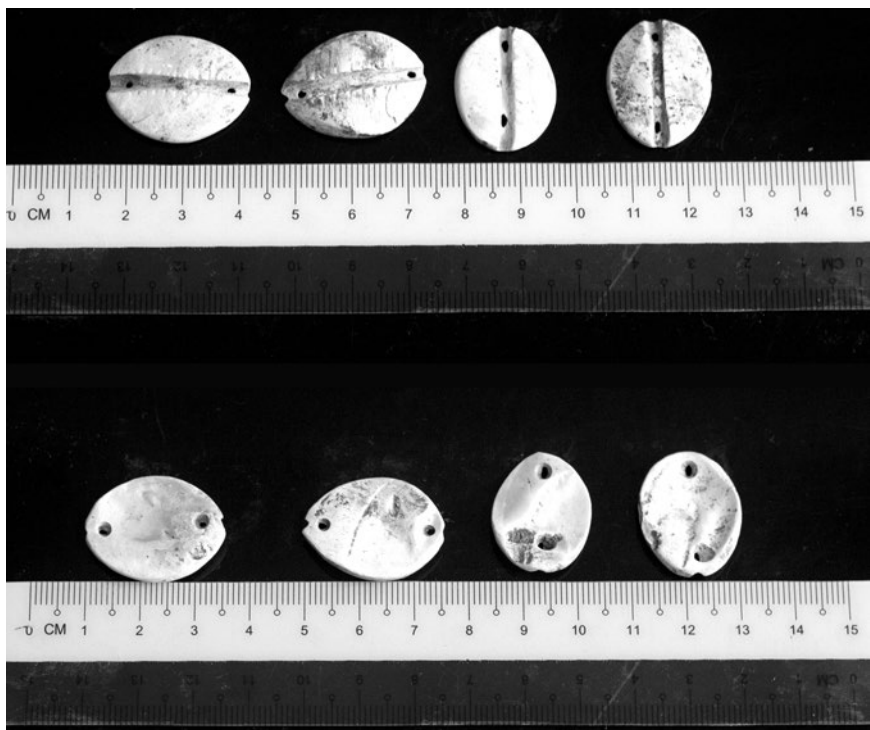


Figure 6.2d Tridacnidae (*chequ*; 砗磲) Cowries⁴¹



Figure 6.2e Steatite Cowries⁴²



Figure 6.2f Four Bone Cowries⁴³



Figure 6.2g A Pile of Bone Cowries⁴⁴

The cowrie burial ritual practices changed over time in terms of position of cowries in the tomb. During the Neolithic period, cowrie shells were mainly placed near the body of the deceased (from the legs to the upper torso and head), with a few cases in which cowries were put into the mouth, concentrated on the altar or placed together with other items.⁴⁵ From the Shang period onwards, the main practice seems to have been to place cowries near or in the body; the mouth-cowrie (*hanbei*; 含贝), namely, cowries placed in the mouth of the corpse, was very popular. In the Dasikong Village of the Yin Ruins, amongst the eighty-three tombs where cowries were found in 1953, mouth-cowrie practices were discovered in forty-nine of them.⁴⁶ Hand-cowries (*wobei*; 握贝), that is, cowries placed in the hand of the deceased, followed mouth-cowrie practices, but in fewer cases. It was also quite common for cowries to be placed together with a horse and a horse-cart.⁴⁷

Cowrie burials became more complicated during the Western Zhou period, while mouth-cowrie and hand-cowrie practices dominated wherever shells were placed around the body. Furthermore, while cowrie shells were placed both in and on the outside of the inner coffin, more often, they were placed between the inner and outer coffins. Cowrie shells were also utilised as decoration for the deceased and the coffin, especially strung together on the leather or cords used for various parts of the horse-cart.⁴⁸ During the Eastern Zhou period (770–222 BCE), cowrie shells were mainly placed inside the coffin, near other burial items or in containers in concentrated quantities; in a few cases, cowries were placed near the body.⁴⁹

In summary, whereas the quantity of burial cowries increased over time, the increase was most common and obvious during the Western Zhou period; while the quantity and scope of burial cowries during the Eastern Zhou period did not shrink, the number of tombs containing cowries decreased. In terms of imitation cowries, while these appeared as early as the Neolithic period, their number remained few until the Eastern Zhou period when imitation cowries seemed to be common. In terms of cowrie burials, broadly speaking, cowries were placed in three ways: near the body, between the inner and outer coffins and used as decorations for horse-carts. While the three types of practice generally seem to have evolved chronologically as cowries mostly moved from being placed in the coffin to out of the coffin, these practices also temporally overlapped.⁵⁰ Based on the quantity, burial ritual practice and location of cowries in tombs, it can be concluded that over time, the value as well as the symbolical significance of cowries amongst the early Chinese elite decreased.

Cowrie shells as money in early China

Did cowrie shells function as money in early China? If so, in which period? These questions are even more puzzling, partially resulting from the diverse scholarly definitions of money. Many scholars have argued that cowrie shells instead of metal or other non-metallic items were the earliest form of money in China, and this argument somehow has been accepted and adopted in the west.⁵¹ For those scholars who support the existence of cowrie money in China, the only division lies in when cowrie shells began their function as money.

Imperial historians and officials in charge of the economy undisputedly noticed the use of cowrie shells in early China, and some of them, such as Sima Qian, the grand historian of the second century BCE for the Han court, regarded cowrie shells as a medium of exchange. Sima Qian stated that when people first began to exchange goods, manifold forms of currency came into being, including tortoise and cowrie shells, gold and bronze coins and knife-shaped and spade-shaped money.⁵² A few decades later, in 81 BCE, in his famous economic thesis, *A Treatise on Salt and Iron*, Huan Kuan further explained the process of currency formation over time. He pointed out that in the beginning, there was no currency and everyone exchanged what they had for what they lacked and that gradually, tortoise shells, black and purple shells and gold and bronze coins emerged as the media of exchange.⁵³ The conceptualisation of shells (black ones in the legendary Xia Dynasty and purple in the Zhou Dynasty) as money was adopted by imperial scholars such as Lu Guimeng and caused many misunderstandings to subsequent academics.

J. Gunnar Anderson, a pioneering Swedish scholar who introduced archaeology into and participated in archaeological excavations and studies in modern China, was probably the first modern scholar to systematically conceptualise a history of cowrie money in early China. According to Anderson, as early as the Shang Dynasty, cowrie shells were “the commonest form of money”; later on, “the natural cowrie shell was replaced, first by metal imitations and later by metallic money modelled upon other objects.” Nevertheless, “the cowrie retained its position as money for centuries in remote parts of the country,” such as Yunnan.⁵⁴ Such a north-centric view indeed has dominated Chinese archaeology and early Chinese history for more than half century.

Early twentieth century China scholars such as Luo Zhenyu, Wang Guowei, Dong Zuobin and others were the first generation to work on oracle scripts and archaeological studies, and almost all were proponents of cowrie money in early China. Their assertions, however, are mostly vague and lack substantial evidence or empirical studies. More often than not, they failed to discuss the definition of money, and simply conflated a certain monetary function with actual money. Many western scholars, perhaps under the strong influence of these Chinese scholars and Anderson himself, usually agreed that cowrie shells were China’s earliest type of money.⁵⁵ Von Glahn, an eminent scholar of Chinese economic history, for example, points out that although many precious commodities, including jade, pearls, cowries shells, tortoise shells, livestock, slaves, leather, hemp and silk cloth, grain and metallic objects were routinely bestowed as gifts and rewards, “only cowrie shells seem to have been used as a medium of exchange” in the late Shang time.⁵⁶ Constance A. Cook seems to concur with this view when she says that cowrie shells in the Zhou era may have had a magical function and could have acted as medium of exchange in a gift-giving cycle.⁵⁷ Recent commentaries by non-Chinese scholars reiterate that it was the Chinese who first used cowries in their monetary transactions, as early as the thirteenth century BCE.⁵⁸

Chinese historians, archaeologists and numismatic experts from the 1950s continued to lend vigorous support to cowrie money in China.⁵⁹ Peng Xinwei

(1907–1967), a graduate of London University in 1936 and an authority on Chinese monetary history and numismatics, avoids giving a precise date for cowrie money; instead, he vaguely refers to the Shang-Western Zhou period.⁶⁰ Educated in the west, Peng Xinwei was much more cautious than most of his Chinese research fellows when discussing cowries, and he was probably the first scholar to notice the conflation of value and money in the discussion of cowrie money. Half a century ago, he pointed out that cowrie shells in Bronze Age China, like other precious items such as jade, gold and turtle shell, were treasured for their intrinsic value, and that it was not necessary to involve the concept of money when discussing these shells.⁶¹ According to the inscriptions on various Shang-Zhou bronze articles, many materials were presented as gifts, such as bronze, horses, bows, slaves, land, carriages, furs, jade, cloth, cattle and cowries, of which cowries were the most frequent.⁶² In some cases, over 1,000 cowries were given as a gift.⁶³ These granting-cowries, according to Peng, might not have been associated with money.⁶⁴ Although the use of cowrie shells as money during the Shang could not be demonstrated, he suggested that the functions of cowries were closely related to the role of money,⁶⁵ and the changing role of cowries from ornamentation to money might have taken place during the Shang-Zhou transition.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, he later went so far as to state that cowrie shells were the earliest form of money in Shang-Zhou China.⁶⁷

Unlike Peng Xinwei, who was rather cautious and controversial, contemporary scholars in China have enthusiastically supported the idea that cowrie shells were used as a form of money. In its conclusive work on the nearly sixty-year study of the Yin Ruins, the Institute of Archaeology (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing) points to the use of cowrie money in the Shang Dynasty.⁶⁸ A Japanese scholar only disagrees by asserting that cowries as money could not have been earlier than the middle Zhou period.⁶⁹ Based on a relatively comprehensive review of cowrie discoveries of pre-Qin China,⁷⁰ Huang Xiquan, an eminent scholar of monetary history, argues for the Shang period, if not the legendary Xia (c. twenty-first century to seventeenth century BCE), as the earliest example of cowries being used as money, and as the main form of money in the Western Zhou.⁷¹ Moreover, cowrie shells carried a high value in terms of their religious connotations, as mortuary cowries suggested their high value and cultural implications. In addition, during the Western Zhou, cowries were also found in the tombs of lower status people, which may imply that the appreciation of cowries, economically and culturally, had spread from the nobility to the common people.

A recent discovery and interpretation of the Kang Ding inscription, dating to the Western Zhou period, have enhanced Huang's confidence. In the inscription of the Kang Ding, a jade in the exchange was valued at 50 strings (*peng*; 朋) of cowrie shells, and the buyer did in fact give away 50 *peng* of cowrie shells.⁷² According to Ma Chengyuan, the discoverer of the Kang Ding, this is the earliest use of the character *mai* (买; lit. meaning buy, purchase) in such a context.⁷³ Huang Xiquan was very excited about this inscription, and argues that cowrie money was the earliest form of money in China, probably existing as far back as the Neolithic period.⁷⁴ Huang points out that the issue of cowrie

money is closely related to the origin of or the earliest money in China.⁷⁵ He believes that the character *mai* in the inscription means “buy” or “purchase” and hence, this inscription in the Kang Ding was the earliest bronze document recording the direct purchase or sale.⁷⁶ He also concludes that the inscription was the first to record the use of cowries to buy jade and thus this proves conclusively that cowrie shells were used as money at that time.⁷⁷ Furthermore, Huang has reviewed cowrie-granting inscriptions during the Western Zhou, and believes that cowries in these contexts were actual money; he further points out that the granting-cowrie in the Shang period was the same as in the Western Zhou, as the contexts for the two periods were not much different.⁷⁸ While it is now considered to be a fact that cowrie shells were used as money in the Shang period, from Huang’s viewpoint, commodity money including cowrie money can in fact be traced as far back as the Xia or the late Neolithic period.⁷⁹

Cowries not as money!

All the arguments cited above made by Huang Xiquan, however, could not stand up to the critical analysis made by Li Yung-Ti. Li has insightfully pointed out that the cowrie-money-in-China supporters have conflated a number of key yet different concepts such as wealth, value and money, and that some textual references to cowrie shells on the Shang-Zhou bronze inscriptions have been misinterpreted.⁸⁰ He has examined many cases, both archaeological and textual, to clarify the role of cowrie shells in the Shang and Western Zhou period, and concluded that the main function of cowrie shells in this period was more likely to have been ornamental, funerary or ritual. It was not until the middle Western Zhou period that cowrie shells began to assume the role of a standard of value, one type of monetary function. Li Yung-Ti’s statement is not so far from that of Yang Lien-Sheng’s some forty years ago. Yang cautiously advanced the position that “apparently the cowrie was merely one of several valuables which were used occasionally as money” in the Shang and Western Zhou times, since barter transactions remained predominant.⁸¹ Without doubt, cowries were highly valued and played important roles in politics (lord-vassal relationships), ceremonies and rituals.

Cowrie-granting inscriptions on the Shang-Zhou bronze item are the key evidence for scholars to argue for cowrie money in this period. These inscriptions record the bestowal of cowrie shells (counted in the unit of *peng*) by the king or the noble upon subordinates. A recurring phrase, “*yong zuo baozunyi*” (用作宝尊彝), with a few minor varieties was found, and scholars often translate this as “[cowrie shells] were used to make this precious vessel.” By this understanding, cowrie shells were used as either a means of payment for the casting or as the medium of exchange to purchase bronze as material for the casting.⁸² However, this dominant interpretation held by most Chinese scholars is essentially problematic. The phrase “*yong zuo baozunyi*,” according to Egami Namio, should be understood as “for this reason, a vessel is cast” or “on this occasion I made this treasured vessel.”⁸³ As such, the cowrie-granting inscriptions record “the casting of a vessel to commemorate an event, the king’s gift,” and they are not

intended to be an account book to record the cost of the bronze vessel.⁸⁴ Therefore, these cowrie-granting inscriptions cannot and do not support cowrie shells being money in this period or place.

In addition, cowrie shells were not the only item for granting on such occasions. Jade, horses, oxen and so on were also recorded in many inscriptions that commemorated the casting of bronze vessels. These items including cowries were mentioned because they were gifts from the king, and thus they were part of political ritual and symbolised esteem and glory rather than focusing on the value of the bronze item; they did not assume a monetary function in these granting rituals.⁸⁵

Because cowrie shells were considered precious, they gradually took on the role of units of value. In some other bronze inscriptions, barter exchanges between nobles of the Shang-Zhou period were recorded and sometimes cowrie shells were taken as standards of value in these. In the *Qin Wei He* inscription, a few units of land were exchanged for ceremonial attire and jade. The value of the jades was measured in strands of cowrie shells, in total 80 *peng*, for ten units of land; and the value of attire was 20 *peng* for three units of land.⁸⁶ The *Qin Wei He* case illustrates that cowrie shells were employed as a standard of value to measure the items exchanged, namely, land, jade and clothing.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether or not cowrie shells actually changed hands during the deal. And indeed, it is most likely they did not, considering the circumstance. While a standard of value constitutes a key function of money, it is not convincing to argue that cowrie shells functioned as actual money in this case and many other similar ones.

Li Yung-Ti has presented a different understanding of the inscription of the *Kang Ding*, as he has reservations about Huang Xiquan's interpretation. Li points out that in the *Kang Ding* inscription, cowrie shells "seem to be items exchanged, not the means of payment," and that the transaction was "something more like bartering."⁸⁸ In addition, the character *mai*, which in later times referred to a monetary transaction, should not be assumed to mean "purchase" in this case.⁸⁹

In a word, it is quite clear that in the gift-granting rituals cowrie shells did not function as money in the early and middle Western Zhou, as this most often cited evidence in bronze inscriptions by cowrie-money supporters does not bear scrutiny.⁹⁰ However, cowrie shells did fulfil the function of a standard value in Zhou rituals and exchanges, and this seems to be a solid step towards their assuming certain monetary function.⁹¹

In inscriptions on oracle bones, the character *bei* (贝) was taken as a popular radical to form or create other characters such as *bao* (宝; treasure), *huo* (货; goods), *cai* (财; wealth), *gong* (贡; tribute), *zhu* (贮; store), *mai* (卖; sell) and *pin* (贫; poverty), amongst others.⁹² Such a case has been often cited as supporting the existence of cowrie money. This, however, again, conflates value or wealth with money, as cowrie shells were highly valued and thus taken as standards of value and symbols of wealth. In addition, the character *bei* was written in many ways with slight differences,⁹³ which might have been due to its not being standardised, or from the fact that shells (both various kinds of shells and cowrie shells) in early China varied (Figure 6.3). The character *bei* did not necessarily refer to cowrie shells.

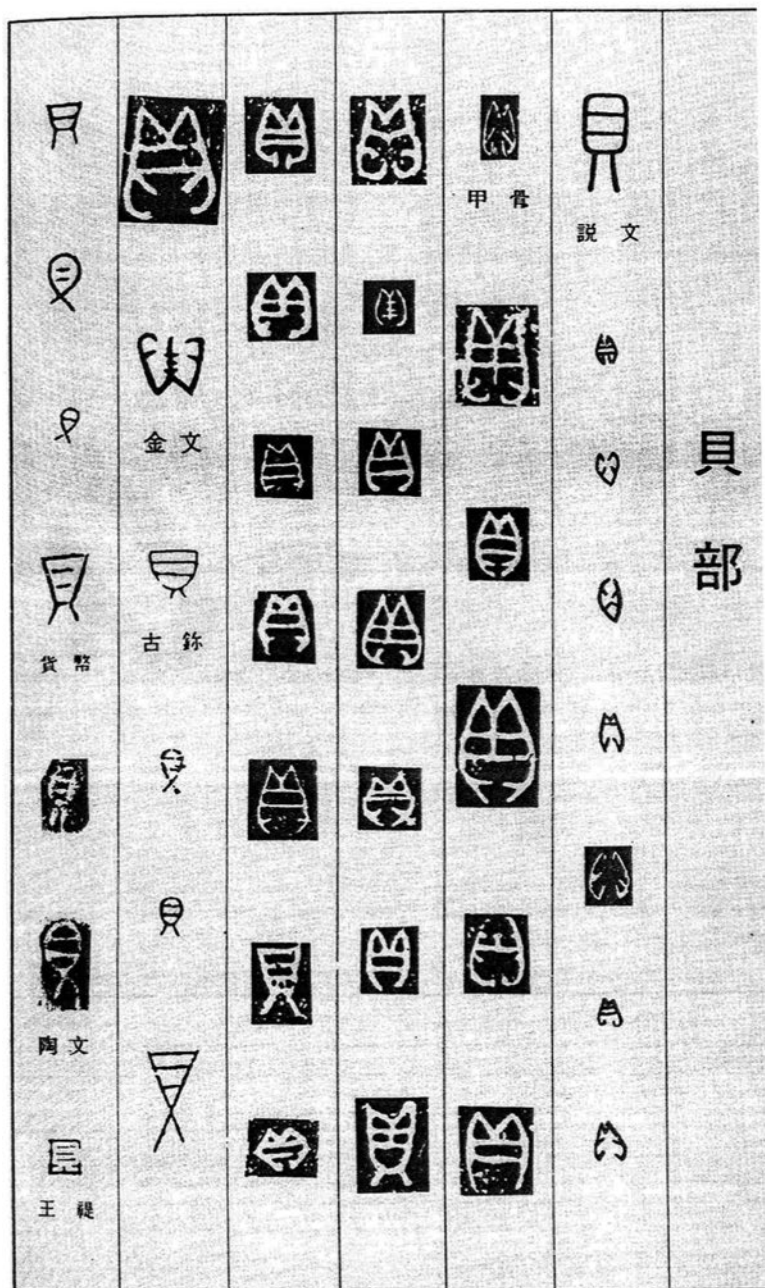


Figure 6.3 Ancient Chinese Scripts for the Character *Bei* (Shell)⁹⁴

To conclude, in the Shang-Western Zhou period, due to their rare and exotic nature, cowrie shells were highly valued, thus taking the role of a standard of value in elite rituals and exchanges. They symbolised prestige and esteem, thus constituting part of gift-granting ceremonies, and they were typically used as ornaments and decorations for people and horses; because of these valuable roles, cowrie shells were used as mortuary objects, illustrating the social status and wealth of the deceased. Like jade or probably preceding jade, they were placed into the mouths, in the hands and near the knees or ankles of the deceased.⁹⁵

Why didn't cowries become money?

As has been discussed above, Li Yung-Ti has scrutinised the content and context of the inscriptions concerning cowries and pointed out that cowrie shells were not used as money during the Shang-Western Zhou period. Naturally, one may go on to ask, what about the Eastern Zhou (the Spring-Autumn and the Warring State eras)?

Archaeological studies have illustrated that the apex of cowrie use in China was the Western Zhou period, when they were frequently granted and exchanged between kings and nobles, in addition to their religious and cultural status, as is revealed by their presence in tombs. However, during the subsequent Eastern Zhou period the use of cowries diminished drastically, as they no longer carried their former importance. To be exact, cowrie shells in the Zhou period did take on certain monetary functions such as measures of value and probably as forms of storage of value, and together with salt, cloth and metal coinage, they can be considered as monetary candidates, but cowrie shells failed to become actual money in early China. The reason lies in the supply-demand chain.

Certain goods as standards of value, sporadic or common, can be seen as possible kinds of money, or a money candidate, as I call them. Whether or not they might develop or be accepted by a society as general money depends on many elements. In addition to their physical features or advantages such as size, weight, portability, durability and/or intrinsic value, the balance of supply is the most decisive. By the balance of supply, I refer to a continuous and nearly sufficient, that is, neither being extremely in short nor in over-sufficient supply, and nor with an unaffordable process of production or transportation. As the market and commercialisation in a certain society develop, so the desire for a medium of exchange (money) increases, and traders will look for and eventually favour a certain form of money candidate over others. The selection of a certain form of money candidate over others requires a continuous supply of this candidate to meet the demands of the market. Without a sufficient supply, it would not be able to meet the market's needs and would thus be set aside; with an oversupply, its value would decrease, and this devaluation would largely weaken its potential in the competition against

other candidates. If the cost of making, processing or transporting is high, its value increases, so the cost would make this money candidate difficult to meet various demands and thus it would become especially unpopular for small transactions.

While this analysis is purely theoretical and thus idealised, the case of cowrie shells as a money candidate in the Western Zhou period did in fact face the challenge of supply. I contend that while cowrie shells constituted a strong candidate for money (as is illustrated by the bronze inscriptions), their shortage (as is illustrated by the increasing number of imitation cowries) and high cost of transportation over a long distance could only serve to make them into a precious valuable, and thus they would be unable to be used as a common form of money to meet the large demands of transactions (small and big) in early China. Indeed, due to their high value, cowrie shells were primarily confined to use by the nobility and did not circulate amongst Chinese commoners. That is why few cowries have been found in communal sites, or in the tombs of common people.

Why did cowrie shells fail to develop into a universal form of money in early China, while in early India they came to be used as “small money”? Geographical distance was the key. As a giant economy, China required a tremendous amount of money, be it in the form of metal coins or cowrie shells. The Maldives were too far away to be an economically feasible source due to high maritime and overland transportation costs. The long-distance transit trade crossed many societies, and was thus unable to meet the demand, since the cost of transportation would increase beyond any use as money and the multiple-transit trade was difficult to ensure the supply chain. Had cowrie shells become money in early China, they must have been a kind of “big money,” due to the high cost of transportation. The only exception was Yunnan, because of its geographical and cultural intimacy with Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, and because of its being a latecomer in the cowrie money story.

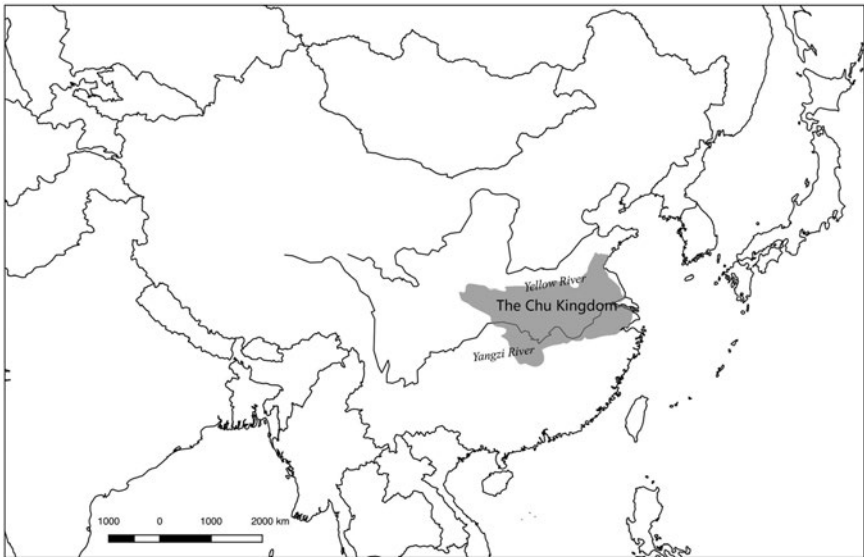
Geographical distance alone is not entirely convincing as a barrier. Why, one might ask, did the Mali Empire, more than 5,000 km by air away from the Maldives, let alone the great time and distance by sea or land at that time, import cowrie shells and create a cowrie monetary system? Here the temporal factor must be taken into consideration, too. A monetary economy in West Africa (and early Yunnan) emerged much later than did China. China clearly needed a common form of money as early as the mid-first millennium BCE when cowrie shells and many other items were money candidates. Cowrie shells failed to be adopted because of their scarcity (and high cost of long-distance transportation) and metal coins began to dominate instead.

Therefore, the long distance from embryonic imperial China to the Maldives precluded cowrie shells from developing into a common form of money in China, even when these shells might have once fulfilled certain monetary functions in the Western Zhou period and been a dynamic medium of exchange in India, Southeast Asia and West Africa.

Bronze cowries: one of China's earliest monies

Since cowrie shells' early arrival, manmade cowrie shell imitations, such as those made of bone, jade, stone and metal, have been found alongside the expensive marine shells. This implies that at least in an early period, cowrie shells were favoured by the Chinese elites. Although cowries failed to become a form of early Chinese money, they left a deep mark on the monetary history of China. What has particularly interested scholars is the combination of bronze and cowries, that is, the role of bronze cowries (*tongbei*; 铜贝) in early China. The Chu Kingdom was the most astonishingly prolific, as it produced hundreds of thousands of bronze cowrie shells, revealing the enduring role of cowrie shells in the Chinese creation of its own monetary tradition (Map 6.4).

By the second half of the first millennium BCE, many powerful Chinese states had created and promoted their own metal currencies, resulting in three metal money zones: the spade money, around the Middle Yellow region (north China); the knife money, in the lower Yellow River region (eastern part of north China); and the bronze cowrie money, in the south of China. Bronze cowries were made as early as the Shang period,⁹⁶ but only were widely used in the Zhou era.⁹⁷ Although the earliest bronze cowries did not function as money, they might have been the earliest form of metal money in China.⁹⁸ However, before the Eastern Zhou period, neither cowries themselves nor bronze cowries had been circulating as actual money.⁹⁹



Map 6.4 The Chu Kingdom (c. Third Century BCE)

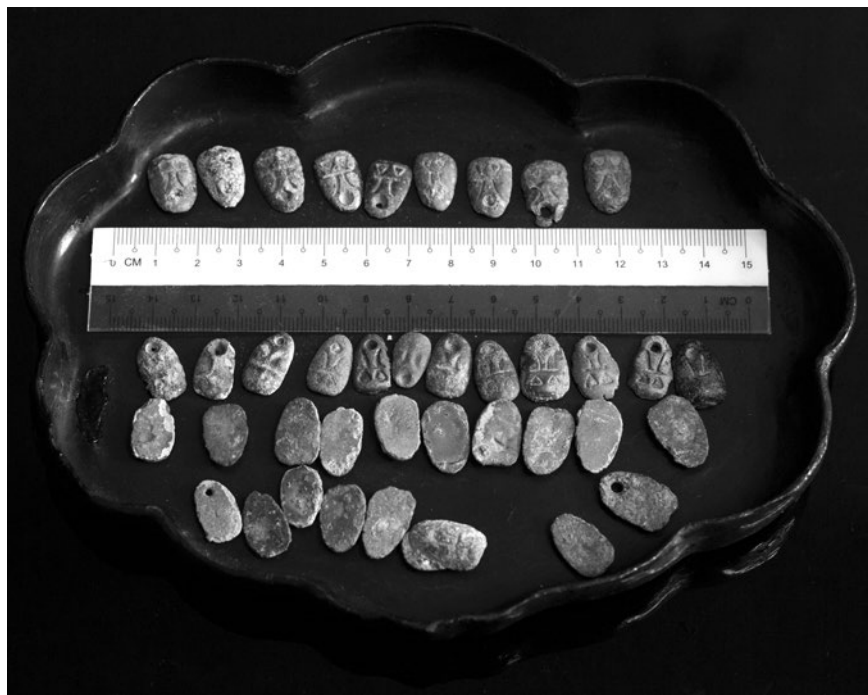


Figure 6.4 Ghost-Face Coins¹⁰⁰

Certain bronze coins, oval in shape, are believed to be imitations of genuine cowries. They are known as the ant-nose coin (*yibi qian*; 蚁鼻钱), the ghost-face coin (*guilian qian*; 鬼脸钱) or the money-shell coin (*huobei qian*; 货贝钱) amongst numismatists, and were very popular in the Chu state of the Eastern Zhou period (Figure 6.4). Ant-nose and ghost-face coins, first raised by Terrien De Lacouperie in 1888, “were nothing but debased bronze imitations of cowries,” and his view was soon accepted by eminent Chinese scholars such as Luo Zhenyu.¹⁰¹

The majority of bronze cowries were cast by the Chu state. The Chu, an immense kingdom of the period, occupied the mid-Yangzi region, and extended its influence into the south, the north, the Yangzi Delta and the Huai River area. A certain kind of bronze cowrie was probably cast with the character of *bei*.¹⁰² Bronze cowries were widely discovered in Hubei, Hunan, Anhui, Jiangsu and Shandong, where the Chu had its main influence. Although the statistics are incomplete, over 100 discoveries of these have been found, amounting to more than 150,000 pieces.¹⁰³ On one occasion, a hoard of about 5,000 bronze cowries was discovered in Hubei.¹⁰⁴ The number of bronze cowries found varies from case to case, ranging from one piece to

several dozen, several hundred to over 1,000. The largest single-site discovery consisted of 15,978 bronze cowries in Shandong, and there was also another cache of bronze cowries weighing about 200 kg. The weight of individual bronze cowries varies as well: the lightest one was 0.6 g, while the heaviest weighed 5.65 g, with an average weight of around 2 g. In most cases, they are less than 2 cm in length, 1 cm in width and 0.3–0.6 cm in height.¹⁰⁵ The bronze cowries surprisingly imitated genuine cowries in terms of size, especially the Maldivian ones. The combination of bronze metal and cowrie shell designs in the bronze cowrie, on the one hand, has demonstrated the economic and cultural legacy of cowries as one money candidate; on the other hand, their production overcame the problems of supply and cost, which had ruled out cowries as a form of money.

The Chu state probably began to produce bronze cowries with inscriptions during the Warring State period (475–222 BCE), and by the mid- to late-Warring State period, bronze cowries had become very popular.¹⁰⁶ One extraordinary finding was a mould used for casting bronze cowries that provides a glimpse into the process of bronze cowrie minting (Figure 6.5). The large quantity and the casting mould tend to confirm that bronze cowries functioned in the Chu area as money, rather than merely as decoration.

When the Qin state unified China in 221 BCE, it began to standardise metal money. As a result, bronze cowries were stripped of their monetary function, and the Qin coinage (*qin banliang*; 秦半两) continued to be universally circulated up until the very end of imperial China. Nevertheless, cowries did briefly reappear during the short-lived Xin Dynasty (9–25 CE) established by Wang Mang, a devoted Confucian who worked to re-establish the glorious Zhou Dynasty, including the restoration of what he assumed to be the Zhou monetary system. Accordingly, cowries, as well as tortoise shells (the latter also believed to have functioned as money in the Zhou period), found their places in Wang's monetary reform. In this reform, five materials (gold, silver, copper, tortoise shells and cowries) were made official currencies, and each of them was classified based on their size or weight. In terms of cowries (in five denominations) and tortoise shells (in four), the larger the size, the higher the value. Therefore, while the rehabilitation of cowrie shells by Wang Mang serves to show their historical role, Wang's system was in nature different from the cowrie use in the Shang-Zhou or the bronze cowries in the Chu, as the latter two were based on the number of cowries rather than size. The reckoning of cowries as money in early China by Wang Mang of the first century preceded the studies in this area of the much later twentieth-century Chinese scholars.

In addition to the popular bronze cowries, cowrie shells imagined as money has been also illustrated by a less popular bronze money in which the character of *bei* (贝; shell) was cast.¹⁰⁷ Various kinds of spade coin circulated in north China, especially in areas such as what are present-day Hebei, Henan, Shanxi and Shandong. The inscriptions on these coins usually consisted of one

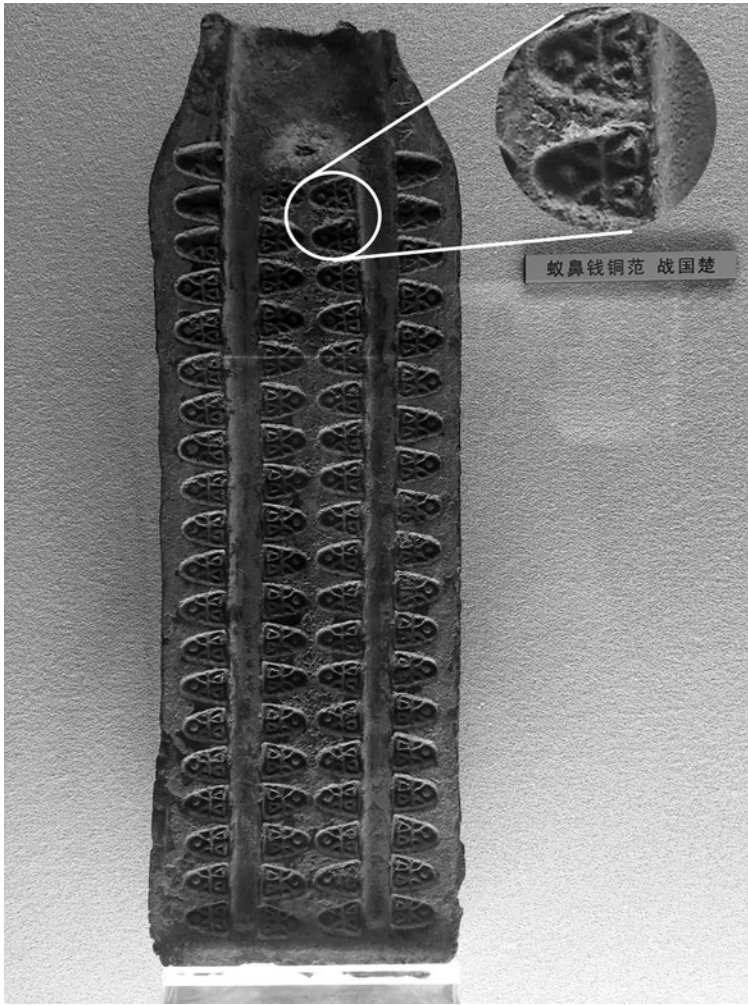


Figure 6.5 Ghost-Face Coin Mould¹⁰⁸

character, which could either be a number, a cyclical character, a place name or the name of a clan, and the character *bei* (shell) was amongst them (Figure 6.6). Although the spade coin with the character *bei* was not as popular as bronze cowries, they both symbolise a perfect marriage between cowrie shells and metal coinage across the land of China, one in the south and the other in the north.

With the prevalence of types of metal cash in imperial China, cowrie shells gradually disappeared from the Han people's life, while nomadic peoples in



Figure 6.6 Spade Coin (*Bubi*: 布币) with a Character of “Bei”¹⁰⁹

north China continued the tradition of cowrie decoration. The Xiongnu, the Tuyuhun and the Xianbei peoples, for example, continued to use cowrie shells as precious ornaments.¹¹⁰ A gilt cowrie-shape ornament intended for adorning clothing, probably from the Liao-Jin period (tenth to thirteenth centuries), serves as an example (Figure 6.7).

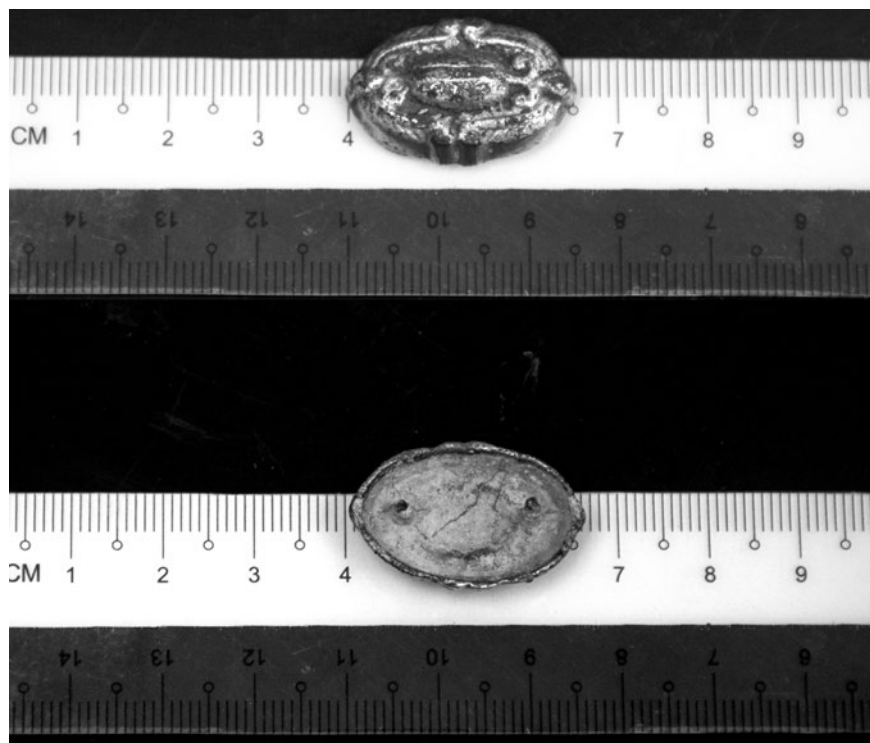


Figure 6.7 Gilt Cowrie-Shaped Decorative Bronze Buckle¹¹¹

In South China: the case of Sanxingdui

From October 1928 to August 1937, fifteen excavations were made at the Yin Ruins, and for the first time, archaeological methods were employed to verify and test the rich textual documentation produced over China's long history. This major discovery had considerable meaning for China, which at that time was under the encroachment of Japan. It was thus highly significant for arousing Chinese patriotism that the history of the Shang Dynasty and its kings recorded by Grand Historian Sima Qian were confirmed with these archaeological findings. Archaeologists, historians and linguists amongst others were hugely excited and proud, because the evidence of the bronze, jade and oracle cultures led to the confirmation of an advanced ancient Chinese civilisation, comparable to any other western culture in the same period.

Nevertheless, scholars generally tended to ignore the widespread presence of cowrie shells in the Yin Ruins. Half a century ago, when William C. White reviewed *The Beginnings of Chinese Civilization: Three Lectures Illustrated with Finds at Anyang*, a pioneering study of Chinese archaeology by Li Ji, he was

disappointed that “Dr. Li did not mention the widespread use of cowrie shells for currency, decoration or reward, or for good-luck amulets.”¹¹² This wrong has still not been righted, as the significance of cowries in the formation of Chinese civilisation has still not been sufficiently addressed.

Understandably, the chief focus when documenting the magnificence of early Chinese civilisation has been on the jade, oracle and bronze cultures in the Shang and Zhou periods, and in comparison, this little marine product seems to contribute little towards any further glorification. Bronze, jade and oracles, with their implications of cultural complexity and sophistication, have been widely scrutinised and as a result have come to represent the essence of “Chineseness,” while the complex roles of cowries have been allowed to remain relatively unexplored.

The tomb of Lady Hao epitomised the conventional narrative of Chinese civilisation, the Yellow River as the Mother River and north China as the cradle. Had major discoveries not been made in many other macro-regions, this narrative would have been convincing. Finds from the Shang period in the Northwest, Upper Yangzi, Middle Yangzi and the Gan River, however, have complicated the depiction of this early era. In terms of cowrie shells from this period, the relics from the Sanxingdui site near Chengdu, Upper Yangzi, are surely comparable with the Yin Ruins. In 1986, at Pit 1, over 460 items were unearthed (bronze: 178; gold: 4; jade: 129; cowries: 124); at Pit 2, over 1,300 items (bronze: 735; gold: 61; jade: 486) and over 4,600 actual cowrie shells (Figure 6.8a).¹¹³ More interestingly, a set of triple-chained bronze cowries was discovered in Pit 2 (Figure 6.8b), in addition to a turquoise cowrie (Figure 6.8c).¹¹⁴ In addition, cowrie shells were also found in Xin’gan, on the east side of the Gan River in Jiangxi Province (Lower Yangzi), dating to the late Shang period, the same period as the Yin Ruins. Rich bronze items and other findings in Xin’gan have indicated a powerful early polity south of the Yangzi River paralleling the Shang state in the north. However, it is a pity



Figure 6.8a Cowrie Shells Discovered in Sanxingdui¹¹⁵



Figure 6.8b Triple-Chained Bronze Cowries¹¹⁶



Figure 6.8c A Turquoise Cowrie in Sanxingdui¹¹⁷

that information on cowries in Xin'gan remains unstudied. The relationship between Sanxingdui and the Yin Ruins has drawn a great deal of attention, considering the same period, similarities in their bronze vessels and the large number of cowries (genuine and bronze imitations).¹¹⁸ Meanwhile, although the bronze culture in Sanxingdui (and that in Xin'gan) have showed links, connections and influence from its counterpart in the Shang, it is distinct in itself.

In Sanxingdui, some cowrie shells were placed in the bottom of pits, while others were put in bronze vessels, the same as for those excavated in the Dian tombs in Yunnan. The majority of these cowries, perforated or with eroded backs, belonged to three types: *Cypraea annulus*, *Cyparea moneta* and *Cypraea tigris*. *Cypraea annulus* constituted the largest group, while *Cypraea tigris* the smallest. Unlike those cowries in north China, the set of three chained bronze cowries in Sanxingdui were larger in size,¹¹⁹ with a length of 3–6 cm, compared with a length of 1.5–1.7 cm in the Yin Ruins.

The source and nature of the cowries discovered in Sanxingdui are still being debated. Due to their various kinds, cowries in Sanxingdui are speculated to have originated from different areas via different routes, such as the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean via Southeast Asia and Yunnan or the Indian Ocean via Central Asia. One should bear in mind that over 200,000 cowries were discovered in Yunnan from the 1950s to the 1970s, all of which were from the Maldives. Yunnan is not far from Sanxingdui in the upper Yangzi and Sanxingdui is close to the middle Yangzi where the Chu was based. The geographical proximity may imply some cross-regional cultural connections between Yunnan and Sanxingdui. Nevertheless, while Yunnan is closer to the Indian Ocean, cowries found in Sanxingdui were dated much earlier than those found in Yunnan, which might indicate cowries in Sanxingdui did not pass through Yunnan. In terms of their nature, I am persuaded that cowries in Sanxingdui were not a form of money but symbols of wealth, power and social status, the same as in the Shang culture.¹²⁰

It seems that due to reasons unclear to us, the people who had established the Sanxingdui Culture abandoned their homes (that is why so many sacrificial objects were buried in the two pits upon their departure) in the end of the second millennium BCE. Very interestingly, some 60 km away in Chengdu, there emerged another cultural center, the Jinsha (lit. Gold Sands) that reached its heydays around 1,000 BCE. Cultural continuities and similarities between the Sanxingdui and the Jinsha are evident, comparing archaeological findings. However, archeological reports on the Jinsha site have never mentioned any discoveries of cowrie shells. In July 2018, I paid a visit to the Jinsha Museum in Chengdu, Sichuan, and I saw three imitated cowries being exhibited: two made by agate (L.1.4, W. 1.05, H.0.31 cm; L.2.14, W.1.79, H. 0.67cm, respectively) and the third by crystal (L.3.23, W.2.7, H.0.63 cm). All have been perforated and that is why they are explained as pendants in the exhibition. The three imitation cowries have hence revealed the cultural influence of the Sanxingdui in terms of the use of this marine object in such an inland area. One may also reckon that by the end of the second millennium BCE, cowrie shells might have no longer reached Sichuan.

The case of cowrie shells in Sanxingdui thus raises several tantalising questions for the writing of Chinese civilisation. First, what role did cowrie shells play in the development of Chinese political, economic and cultural systems? This general question leads to a broader one: how did foreign items and external links help to create Chinese civilisation? Secondly, how does the Sanxingdui case relate to the cowrie culture of the Shang-Zhou period and thus add to the dominant narrative of early China? Did cowries in both Sanxingdui and north China share the same origin and come through the same routes? No satisfactory answers have been given so far to these questions. The following section attempts to shed some light on the role of cowrie shells in Chinese civilisation by highlighting mouth-cowrie and hand-cowrie practices in Chinese funerary ritual.

Mouth-cowries and hand-cowries

Unlike in India and Southeast Asia, where cowrie shells functioned as money, this marine species, though reaching the land later called China during the Neolithic period, was not used as actual money there. Cowrie shells in early China were once a top money candidate during the Shang period, but retained instead their designation as status and religious items. More interestingly, early China produced the greatest types of cowrie imitations made of gold, silver, jade, bone, clay, stone, tin and bronze. Circumstantial evidence indicates that bronze cowries were utilised as local money over a vast area, including the middle and lower Yangzi until the third century BCE. Due to the frequency and great number of cowries found in the Shang sites, one Japanese scholar once saw the Shang as the age of cowries and the Zhou as the age of jade.¹²¹

The case of mortuary cowries, especially mouth-cowrie and hand-cowrie practices, throws light on the enduring influence of cowries in Chinese culture. A close examination of the Shang-Zhou tombs may suggest that mouth-cowrie and hand-cowrie practices paralleled or probably preceded the use of jade, and together constituted the funeral ritual practices for China's 3,000-year history, right up until the end of imperial China. It must be pointed out that cowries found in tombs were of the Shang-Zhou nobility, and thus the burial ritual was restricted to high-class culture. Nevertheless, the funeral culture of the Shang-Zhou continued and influenced China up until modern times.

In 1936, Kao Chü-hsün participated in the excavation of the Yin Ruins. A total of eighteen cowrie shells were found in fourteen graves in Dasikong Village excavated by Kao and his colleagues. These shells, all genuine *Cyparea moneta* with perforations, were placed in three ritualistic locations: in the mouth, near the hands and in the space under the body between the knees and the waist.¹²² Based on close observation and careful analysis, Kao argued that the cowries near the hands were originally placed on the palms of the hands with fingers folded over them, as if the deceased were holding them. For those cowries

found under the body, Kao believed that these were the same hand-holding-cowrie practice, but the cowries had fallen under the body when the hand decomposed. Kao concluded that of the fourteen graves, three demonstrated the cowrie-in-mouth practice, nine the cowrie-in-hand and one had both the cowrie-in-mouth and cowrie-in-hand practices.¹²³ Some other graves in Xiaotun Village in the Yin Ruins were also found to have cowrie-in-mouth and cowrie-in-hand practices.¹²⁴

Mouth-cowrie and hand-cowrie practices were used as early as the jade ones, if not earlier. Both practices were clearly seen in the Yin Ruins, while such cowrie burial practices gradually disappeared after the Qin-Han period. Why did the Shang people put cowries in the mouth and hand of the deceased? Kao explained that the resemblance between cowries and female genitalia caused the shell to be seen as a symbol of life and fertility in the mindset of the Shang people, and thus cowries in the mouth or hand were believed to bring eternity to the body or soul of the deceased.¹²⁵

Mouth-jade and hand-jade practices were once very popular in the tombs of the Han period (207 BCE–220 CE) and hence have been regarded as a symbolic feature of early Chinese funerary culture. During its mature period, funeral jade was put into or covered the nine bodily orifices (eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, genitalia and anus), which were called the Nine Jades, a well-known symbol of the jade culture and the elite funerary culture. Meanwhile, jade artefacts (such as jade pigs) were placed in the hands or armpits, as well as near the body. It was believed that funeral jade was able to keep the body and soul immortal and even help the soul to enter heaven and obtain a new life. By the same token, funerary cowries were thought to have had the same or a similar function in the practices of the Shang-Zhou nobility.

The cowrie burial phenomena were cross-checked by Kao Chü-hsün with burial rituals recorded in early Chinese texts, and he found that mouth-cowries, mouth-jade and mouth-pearls were commonly referred to in funeral ritual texts of the Eastern Zhou period. This practice continued in imperial China until the Ming-Qing period, with copper coins being added to the list and becoming prevalent in the later period. Similarly, with the practice of hand-cowries. As such, it seems that cowries had initiated a funeral ritual that continued for over 3,000 years in China.

Even up until recent times, cowrie shells, an early foreign item, still found their way into daily life. In Shaoxing, along the coastal area of Zhejiang Province, cowries were used as amulets, with the nickname of *gui jian pa* (鬼见怕; lit. meaning “ghost would be scared”), and they were worn by children around the wrist.¹²⁶ In Fujian, women in labour held a cowrie in their hand, believing it would bring about a smooth delivery, and hence, cowrie shells were nicknamed *cuisheng zi* (催生子; facilitating the birth of a child).¹²⁷ Li Jiarui, a scholar native to Jianchuan, Yunnan, shared with his colleagues in the early twentieth century that in Yunnan, gambling was called bidding-*pia* (*pia* being the local pronunciation of *bei* or *pa*).¹²⁸ All of these examples provide a glimpse of the uses of the humble cowrie shells in daily China over time.

The previous three chapters have illustrated the use of cowrie money in India, Southeast Asia and Yunnan, and this chapter has analysed why cowrie shells failed to become money in early China. Did cowrie money spread to other regions such as the Arabic Peninsula, the Mediterranean World or Africa? The following chapter focuses on the use of cowrie money in West Africa in a global context.

Notes

- 1 Anderson, 1934, 300.
- 2 Zhongguo Shehuikexueyuan Kaoguanjiesuo, ed., *Yinxu Fubao Mu* (Tomb of Lady Hao at Yinxu in Anyang) (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 1980).
- 3 Ibid., 220.
- 4 The Yinxu Museum (Anyang, Henan Province), Courtesy of Yang Liu.
- 5 Peng Ke and Zhu Yanshi, "Zhongguo Gudai Suoyong Haibei Laiyuan Xintan (A New Study of the Source of Cowrie Shells in Early China)," *Kaoguxue Jikan*, vol. 12 (1999): 119. Other scholars seem to overlook *Erronea errors*.
- 6 Jackson, 1917; Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986.
- 7 Wick, 1992, 63.
- 8 Guo Moruo, *Shi Pipan Shu* (The Ten Treatises) (Beijing: Sheke Chubanshe, 1956), 10; Egami, 1974, 44–45, Xiao Qing, *Zhongguo Gudai Qianbi* (Ancient Money in China) (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1984), 1; Jinteng (Kondo Yuichi), 1998, 389–412.
- 9 The Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Science, ed., *Yinxu de Faxian yu Yanjiu* (Archaeology Excavation and Researches of the Yin Ruins) (Beijing: Kexuechubanshe, 1994), 403; Peng Xinwei, *Zhongguo huobishi* (A Monetary History of China) (Shanghai: Shanghai Renmin Chubanshe, 1988), 25. Peng's book was first published in 1954, revised and republished/reprinted a few times in 1958, 1965, 1988 and 2007. His views on cowrie shells and cowrie money have changed slightly over time. The book was translated into English in 1994. Peng Xinwei, *Zhongguo huobishi* (A Monetary History of China) (East Asian Research Aids and Translations, vol. 5), 2 vol., trans. Edward H. Kaplan (Bellingham: Western Washington University, 1994, first edition); Wang Xiantang, *Zhongguo Gudai Huobi Tongkao* (A Comprehensive Examination of Ancient Money in China) (Qingdao: Qingdao Renmin Chubanshe, 2005), 87–88.
- 10 Egami, 1974, 45 and 52; Guo, 1954, 17; Peng and Zhu, 1995.
- 11 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 7.
- 12 Kinoshita, 2003, 30.
- 13 Jinteng, 1998, 391, 402, 408 and 410. Jinteng is controversial himself, as he supports that cowrie shells found in Qinghai was more likely spread from the west rather than the Central Plain. Jinteng, 1998, 409.
- 14 Peng and Zhu, 1995, 4.
- 15 Qian Gonglin, "Jiekai Wuwangling zhimi (Unearthing the Myth of the Tomb of the King of the Wu)," in *Kaoguren Shouji*, ed. Zhu Qixin (Working Notes by Archaeologists), vol. 2 (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 2002), 137.
- 16 Jung Bar-sheng, "Shiyusuo cang Yinxu haibei jiqi xianguan wenti chutan (A Preliminary Investigation of Cowrie Shells from Yinxu in the Collection of the Institute of History and Philology)," *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philology Academia Sinica*, vol. 64, no. 3 (1993): 687–737.
- 17 Peng and Zhu, 1995, 2–3.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid., 14.

- 20 Ibid., 1995, 2–13; 1999, 119–147.
- 21 Ibid., 1999, 127.
- 22 Ibid., 1995, 19; 1999, 131.
- 23 Ibid., 1995.
- 24 C. the Western Zhou Period, Collection of Bin Yang.
- 25 Li, 2003; Kinoshita, 2003, 29–34.
- 26 Jung, 1993, 687–737.
- 27 Wu Danmin, “Chutu Bei Xianxiang Fenxi Yanjiu (An Analysis and Research on Excavated Cowries),” *Shanghai Bowuguan jikan* 9 (2002): 102–133.
- 28 Ibid., 102.
- 29 Wu, 2002, 122.
- 30 Ibid., 103. The concentration of cowrie shells in large numbers found in the Yin Ruins probably resulted from the fact that this was the area where the king and his nobility lived.
- 31 Ibid., 104.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Peng, 1988, 25–28.
- 34 Wu, 2002, 105.
- 35 Ibid., 105.
- 36 Ibid., 124.
- 37 Ibid., 125.
- 38 From Shanxi Province, Collection of Bin Yang.
- 39 The Spring-Autumn Period (770–476 CE), from Shandong Province, Collection of Bin Yang.
- 40 The Eastern Zhou Period (770–255 BCE), Collection of Bin Yang.
- 41 The Eastern Zhou Period, from Shandong Province, Collection of Bin Yang.
- 42 The Warring State Period (475–222 BCE), from Shandong Province, Collection of Bin Yang.
- 43 The Western Zhou Period, from Shandong Province, Collection of Bin Yang.
- 44 The Spring-Autumn Period, from Shandong Province, Collection of Bin Yang.
- 45 Wu, 2002, 106.
- 46 Ibid., 106.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid., 106–108. In early times, Chinese burials employed two coffins: the deceased was placed in the inner one that in turn was placed into the outer one.
- 49 Ibid., 108.
- 50 Ibid., 109.
- 51 Li 2003, 2.
- 52 *Shiji* (Grand Historian), juan 30, 1442.
- 53 Huan Kuan, *Yantie Lun* (A Treatise on Salt and Iron), annotated by Zhang Zhixiang (Shanghai: Shanghai Gujichubanshe, 1990), 18.
- 54 Anderson, 1934, 300.
- 55 Li, 2003, 2.
- 56 Von Glahn, 1996, 24.
- 57 Constance A. Cook, “Wealth and the Western Zhou,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, vol. 60, no. 2 (1997): 260.
- 58 Garg, 2007, 249; Bill Bynum and Helen Bynum, “Egyptian Cowrie Necklace,” *The Lancet*, vol. 386, no. 1003 (2016): 1525.
- 59 For example, see, Xiao Qing, 1984, 1, 29; Wang, 2005, 82.
- 60 Peng, 1965, 14.
- 61 Peng, 1965; Li, 2003, 6.
- 62 Peng, 1965, 12.

- 63 The character *peng* (朋) was the unit used by the Shang and Zhou peoples to measure cowries. Most scholars agree that one *peng* contained ten cowries.
- 64 Peng, 1988, 15.
- 65 Peng, 1965, 5. Peng believes that before the minting of metal coins, cowries in China had achieved the status of currency or proto-currency. See Peng, 1965, 8.
- 66 Peng, 1988, 14.
- 67 Ibid., 2, 16.
- 68 The Institute of Archaeology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 1994, 402–403.
- 69 Jinteng, 1998, 411.
- 70 Huang Xiquan, *Xianqin Huobi Tonglun* (A Comprehensive Examination of the pre-Qin Currencies) (Beijing: Zijincheng Chubanshe, 2001), 10–20.
- 71 Ibid., 12–13.
- 72 Li, 2003, 9.
- 73 Ma Chengyuan, “Kang ding mingwen – Xizhou zaoqi yong beibi jiaoyi yuqi de jili (The Kang Ding Inscription: An Early Western Zhou Record of Exchanging Jade with Cowrie Money),” *Shanghai Bowuguan jikan*, vol. 8 (2000): 121.
- 74 Huang Xiquan, “Zhongguo Huobi Lishi de Guding (An Estimate of Monetary History in China),” *Guwenzi yu Gukhuobi Wenji* (A Collected Essays on Ancient Characters and Ancient Money) (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 2009), 694–700.
- 75 Ibid., 694.
- 76 Huang Xiquan, “Xizhou Huozhi Shiliao de Zhongyao Faxian – Kangding Mingwen de zai Yanjiu (A Re-study of the Inscription of the Kang Ding – The Important Discovery of Monetary Document of the Western Zhou),” *Guwenzi yu Gukhuobi Wenji*, 2009, 40.
- 77 Huang, 2009, 694–695.
- 78 Ibid., 696–697.
- 79 Ibid., 699.
- 80 Li, 2003, 1–26.
- 81 Yang Lien-sheng, *Money and Credit in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2nd print, 1971), 13.
- 82 Li, 2003, 5.
- 83 Egami, 1974, 20; Li, 2003, 17.
- 84 Li, 2003, 13.
- 85 Ibid., 17.
- 86 Ibid., 7.
- 87 Ibid., 7–8.
- 88 Li, 2003, 11; Ma, 2000.
- 89 Li, 2003, 11.
- 90 Ibid., 11.
- 91 Ibid.
- 92 In these simplified version of the characters *bao* and *mai*, the radical *bei* disappeared.
- 93 Peng, 1988, 24.
- 94 Wang Hong, ed. *Jinwen Kaishi Dazidian* (Dictionary for Bronze Scripts), vol. 3 (Jinan: Shandong Meishuchubanshe, 2006), 1427. All these scripts are on bronze items discovered during the Shang-Zhou period.
- 95 Kao Chü-hsün, “Yinli de hanbei wobei (The Ritual of Cowrie Shells in the Yin Period),” *Annals of the Academic Sinica*, vol. 1 (1954): 373–401; Wu, 2002, 102–133.
- 96 Peng, 1988, 17, 27.
- 97 Li, 2003, 17.
- 98 Ibid., 27.

- 99 Ibid., 28.
- 100 The Chu Kingdom, the Warring State Period (475–222 BCE), from southern Shandong, Collection of Bin Yang.
- 101 Pelliot, 1959, 539.
- 102 Xiao, 1984, 50.
- 103 Huang Xiquan, “Chu Tongbei Beiwen Shiyi Xintan (A New Exploration of the Chu Bronze Cowrie Inscriptions),” in Huang Xiquan, *Xianqin Huobi Yanjiu* (A Study of the Pre-Qin Currencies) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2001), 224.
- 104 Xiao, 1984, 50.
- 105 Huang has listed all the previous findings of bronze cowries in China up until 2001, the date of his publication. The details concerning the physical features of bronze cowries given here are drawn from his statistics. See Huang, 2001, 230–235.
- 106 Huang, 2001, 225.
- 107 Xiao, 1984, 45; Peng, 1988, 32.
- 108 The Metropolitan Museum of Shanghai.
- 109 The Qi Kingdom during the Warring-State Period, 44 mm in height, Courtesy of Zhao Gang.
- 110 Egami, 1974, 49–50; Peng and Zhu, 1999, 131. Egami Namio, however, thinks that this Central Asian tradition might have been spread not only from China, but also from India.
- 111 The Liao-Jin Period (tenth to thirteenth centuries), Collection of Bin Yang.
- 112 William C. White, “Review of *The Beginnings of Chinese Civilization: Three Lectures Illustrated with Finds at Anyang*, by Li Chi (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1957),” *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 17, no. 3 (1958): 464–465.
- 113 Chen Xu, *Xia Shang Kaogu* (Archaeology of the Xia and Shang) (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 2001); Tan Jihe, “Sanxingdui Wenming yu Bashu Wenhua San (Three Notes on the Sanxingdui Civilization and the Ba-Shu Culture),” in *Yinshang Wenming ji Jinian Sanxingdui Yizhi Faxian Qishi Zhounian Guoji Xueshu yantaohui* (Collections of International Conference Essays in the Memorial of the 70th Anniversary of the Sanxingdui Discovery and the Yin Culture), eds. Song Zhenhao and Xiao Xianjin (Beijing: Sheke Wenxian Chubanshe, 2003), 47–49.
- 114 Editors, *Zhongguo Kaogu Wenwu zhi Mei-Shangdai Shuren Mibao* (The Beauty of Chinese Archaeological Relics – Treasure of the Shu People in the Shang Period) (Beijing: Wenwu Chubanshe, 1994), 143.
- 115 The Sanxingdui Museum, Courtesy of Fan Xue.
- 116 Sanxingdui, Late Shang Period, 6.28 cm in length, 3.4 cm in width, and 2.45 cm in height. Source: Chen Dean, *Sanxingdui: Gushuguo de Shengdi* (Sanxingdui: Sacred Land of Ancient Shu Kingdom) (Chengdu: Sichuan Renmin Chubanshe, 2000), 86.
- 117 The Sanxingdui Museum, Courtesy of Fan Xue.
- 118 For some discussion on this point, see Zhang Shanxi and Chen Xinadan, “Sanxingdui Wenhua de Beibi Shitan (A Study of Cowrie Money in the Sanxingdui Culture),” *Sichuan Wenwu*, no. 1 (1989): 69–71; Mo Honggui, “Guanghan Sanxingdui Yizhi Baide de Yanjiu (A Study of Cowries in the Sanxingdui, Guanghan),” *Sichuan Wenwu*, no. 5 (1993): 40–44; Liu Guangshu, “Shilun Sanxingdui Haibei Laiyuan jiqi Yingxiang (On the Source and Influence of Cowries in Sanxingdui),” *Sichuan Wenwu*, no. 5 (1993): 45–47; Ao Tianzhao, “Sanxingdui Haibei Laiyuan Chutan (A Preliminary Examination of the Source of Cowries in Sanxingdui),” *Sichuan Wenwu*, no. 5 (1993): 48–50.
- 119 Chen, 2000, 86.

- 120 Based on cowries found in Sanxingdui, Qian Jiang argues that “part of historical Sichuan” was “an indispensable part of the Indian Ocean maritime civilization,” which goes too far. Qian, 2017, 26, 44.
- 121 Kao, 1954, 374.
- 122 A small pit dug under the diseased was found in some graves in the Yin Ruins. Kao, 1954, 376.
- 123 Kao, 1954, 377.
- 124 Ibid., 378. Jinteng has also discussed mouth-cowries in the Shang tombs. Jinteng, 1998, 389–412, esp. 391, 396, 409 and 411.
- 125 Kao, 1954, 399–400.
- 126 Peng, 1988, 13.
- 127 Kao, 1954, 399.
- 128 Ibid., 374.

7 West Africa

Connecting the worlds, old and new

Your chief knows more about counting cowries than the art of war.
– The King of Dahomey, 1850¹

This mocking piece of ridicule was flung by the king of Dahomey in his legal court on 10 June 1850 at a shamed general who had fled from the battlefield. The king's metaphor of counting cowries and the art of war indeed epitomised how the interlock of trade and violence shaped local power structures following the introduction of cowrie shells from the Indian Ocean into West Africa by the Europeans.

The preceding chapters have examined the eastern extension of the India-based cowrie money, and this chapter turns to the cowrie trade and the use of cowrie money in West Africa, all at once connecting the Indian with the Atlantic Ocean, and the Maldives, India, Europe, West Africa with the New World, thus linking the old and the new worlds.

The use of cowrie money in West Africa was noticed and recorded by numerous colonial officers, merchants, missionary priests and adventurers. Their descriptions, partially supported or confirmed by archaeological and anthropological studies, are a hodgepodge of facts, bias, faiths and misinformation. In their classic studies of cowrie money in West Africa and its relationship with the slave trade, Jan Hogendorn and Marion Johnson have clarified, illustrated and most importantly, quantitatively analysed the rise and collapse of the cowrie trade and cowrie money in the region.² This leaves little space, if any at all, for this current work to make contributions to this topic. Based on a summary of contributions made by Africanists, supplemented with some recent scholarship unknown and unavailable to them, together with an emphasis on cross-regional and glocal interactions, this chapter makes an attempt to fit the story of West Africa into the larger interactive context, aiming at drawing a global picture of cowrie money and complementing other chapters in this book.

The chapter briefly traces the periods, routes and agents for the import of cowrie shells into Africa before and the during the European colonial period, introduces the evolution of the cowrie money zones over time, discusses the denomination systems in local and global contexts, and highlights two cases,

Whydah at the end of the seventeenth century and Dahomey in the mid-nineteenth century, to illustrate how the cowrie trade and cowrie money penetrated and thus shaped local African societies. Cowrie shells, along with gold, silver and other local monetary goods, serve to reveal the dynamics of regional economies and their integration before the arrival of the Europeans. The large importation of cowrie shells by the Europeans reshaped the use of cowrie money in many ways and also facilitated the integration of West Africa in the Atlantic trade. As such, cowrie shells symbolised the European creation of a new global trading network that consisted of Asia, Europe, Africa and the New World, from a land-based point of view, or the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean, from a maritime one. This, of course, was long a painful process for numerous African people.

When did cowrie shells reach Africa?

The precise period when cowrie shells were first exported from the Indian Ocean to Africa has yet to be determined. Fragmentary sources, scattered over scope and time, are also vague.

Archaeological findings have indicated the use of cowrie shells, both *Cypraea moneta* and *Cypraea annulus*, in pre-dynastic Egypt, their main functions being as charms, amulets and decorations, while many scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries mistook these as money.³ Amongst genuine cowries, there are imitated cowries (Figure 7.1), including a gold imitation one, 1.5 cm long, found in the northern cemetery near tomb enclosure 758 of Dynasty 12–13 (ca. 1990–1650 BCE), indicating that cowrie shells were brought to and used in Egypt probably well before the beginning of the second millennium BCE. It is highly likely that cowries (both genuine and imitated) were favoured by the nobility for adornment, with specific cultural or religious significance.⁴ As for the northern coast, evidence has shown that before the Christian era, cowries from the Indian Ocean were carried to Levantine ports such as Antioch, Latakia, Tripoli, Beirut and Acre.⁵ The Romans possessed shells and kept outposts deep in the Sahara, and it is said that a cowrie market had been established in Cairo by the Middle Ages, although only based on circumstantial evidence.⁶

The Mediterranean World was familiar with these shells from early times. Marco Polo called these shells *porcellani*, meaning “little pig.” These shells were



Figure 7.1 Cowrie Shell Girdle of Sithathoryunet⁷

so called probably because of the hog-backed shape, the resemblance of its issued underside to the vulva of a sow, their outstanding fertility, or their whitish-yellowish flesh colour. It was also probably because of this white colour that the derivative name of porcelain was later used to refer to white China clay and chinaware. The term *porcellani* and its nickname “little pig” appears repeatedly in texts that refer to the cowrie trade from mediaeval to modern times. A Portuguese writer in the mid-sixteenth century mentioned “shells which in Italia are called porcellette – little white ones which we call *buzios*,” “used for money in Ethiopia.”⁸ It was in West Africa that cowrie shells from the Mediterranean World found their destiny and became money.

The routes from the Maldives to West Africa

Western exports of cowries from the Maldives are comparatively vague, due to scanty textual records, but the Arab traveller Ibn Battuta was one of its most enthusiastic observers. Whenever he mentioned maritime trade and the export of goods in the Indian Ocean, he almost paralleled the three destinations from the Maldives, with the route to India in the centre, eastwards to China and westwards to Yemen. Yemen, to him, represented the whole Arabian Peninsula and probably the western limit for Indian ships.

Ibn Battuta often mentioned the presence of the Yemenites in the Maldives, and he documented all three major export goods (in addition to honey made from coconut) sold to Yemen.⁹ Coir cords

are exported to India, China and Yemen, and are better than hemp. The Indian and Yemenite ships are sewn together with them, for the Indian Ocean is full of reefs, and if a ship is nailed with iron nails it breaks up on striking the rocks, whereas if it is sewn together with cords, it is given a certain resilience and does not fall to pieces.¹⁰

In addition to coir cord, local Maldivians sold cowrie shells to Bengal, “as well as to the Yemenites who used them instead of sand [as ballast] in their ships.”¹¹ Cowrie shells were not used as money in Yemen or elsewhere in the Arabian Peninsula, and the majority would have been shipped to the Mediterranean World and eventually to West Africa. Nevertheless, cowrie shells were commonly used in Yemen for decoration and divination.

Aden, the port of Yemen, according to Ibn Battuta, was “the port of the Indians, and to it come large vessels from Kinbáyat [Cambay], Kawlam [Quilon], Cálicút and many other Malabar ports. There are Indian merchants living there, as well as Egyptian merchants.”¹² From Aden, Ibn Battuta boarded a ship for Africa. It seems that this maritime trade made some merchants a fortune, as they “are immensely rich, so rich that sometimes a single merchant is sole owner of a large ship with all it contains.”¹³ Recent archaeological discoveries in East Africa have shown that Chinese porcelains reached there before the age of Battuta, illustrating the role of Indian Ocean trading networks.

Trade and navigation between India and the Arabian Peninsula were regular and convenient. Indeed, an Indian ship owner Mithqāl in Calicut “possessed vast wealth and many ships for his trade with India, China, Yemen and Fars.”¹⁴ On another occasion, Ibn Battuta embarked on one of the eight ships from Fattan (probably Devipatam in South India) sailing for Yemen.¹⁵ The Chinese merchant Wang Dayuan in the 1330s also mentioned the cowrie trade in Bombay (*Fangbai*; 放拜), which preceded and supported Ibn Battuta’s accounts.¹⁶ The Zheng He Treasure Fleet anchored at Aden and East Africa in the early fifteenth century. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the Portuguese were informed that “many ships from Pegu, Siam, and Bengal were passing through the Maldives Islands to Mecca.”¹⁷

Ships loaded with cowries and other cargo might have anchored in the lower part of the Red Sea, as a strong north wind blows over the upper part of that sea all year round. Cowries unloaded in Arabian ports such as Jiddha were shipped to Cairo and other Levantine ports along the camel caravan; those on the African side were first carried by camel to Aswan at the Nile’s first waterfall and then shipped onwards by boat.¹⁸ This was the main route before the arrival of Europeans for the cowrie trade to Africa and the Mediterranean World.

An alternative route to the Mediterranean World began with a sea voyage to the Persian Gulf and then overland by caravan routes to the Levant.¹⁹ Abd-ur-Razzaq, a Persian emissary to India, noted in 1442 that there were Maldivian merchants in Hormuz, an important trading stop for overland trade bound for the Mediterranean World.²⁰ Hormuz was mentioned by Wang Dayuan and Ma Huan, both impressed with the prosperity of maritime trade there. Wang Dayuan particularly highlighted the horse trade in Hormuz (*Ganmaili*; 甘埋里),²¹ while Ma Huan provided more information when he pointed out that, with good winds, it took twenty-five days by ship from Calicut (*Guliguo*; 古里国) northwestwards to Hormuz (*Hulumosi*; 忽鲁谟斯), where both maritime and overland merchants came to trade.²²

The cowrie trade made its way from the Mediterranean World into West Africa via various routes. Jewish merchants were actively involved in the cowrie trade from the Indian Ocean to North Africa as early as the eleventh century.²³ They were stationed in Tunisia, Morocco and as far south as Tāhert (in modern-day Algeria) and imported cowries by corresponding with their partners in the Indian Ocean.²⁴ Aside from the Maghribi Jews, it is highly likely that Genoese merchants may have engaged in importing cowries, since they otherwise played a significant part in Mediterranean trade, primarily in Alexandria (Egypt), Bejaïëa (Algeria) and Ceuta (Morocco).²⁵

Without any doubt, Muslim merchants and sultanates were main actors in the cowrie trade, especially for the caravan trade in the last part of the cowrie journey. When Kankan Mansa Mūsa, the Emperor of Mali, visited Cairo in the 1320s on his ostentatious pilgrimage caravan that boasted one hundred camel-loads of gold and several hundred slaves, he is said to have explained to his hosts that the main form of money in his country was the cowrie shell and that “the merchants, whose principal imports these are, make big profits on them.”²⁶ These merchants also knew the right season for the cowrie trade. A trader stationed in Al-Madhiyya, Tunisia, noted that “cowry shells have no market in

the winter. They are traded only with people coming by sea during the summer. There is no one here who would travel [with cowries] by land."²⁷

J.W. Jackson once raised the hypothesis of an east-to-west spread of cowries in Africa, and this theory has been endorsed and promoted by a few others.²⁸ The theory argues that cowries were carried from East Africa to West Africa, based on circumstantial evidence. This hypothesis has, however, been criticised as being impossible, due to the lack of evidence, the difficulty of the route for camel caravans, the absence of evidence of cowries en route and most importantly, the relatively recent presence of cowries in East Africa.²⁹ When Ibn Battuta visited Mombasa and Kilwa on the east coast of Africa, he did not mention seeing any cowries there, nor did the early Portuguese. And although cowrie shells reached East Africa in the eighteenth century, it was not until the nineteenth century that this shell money gained any significance amongst local societies.³⁰

Therefore, cowrie shells were shipped from the Maldives via the Arabian Sea to the Arabic Peninsula, whence they moved to East Africa, Egypt or the Mediterranean World; or else they were shipped from the Indian Ocean to the Persian Gulf and from there, they moved to the Mediterranean by overland caravans. Upon reaching Egypt, cowrie shells crossed the Sahara Desert to reach West Africa; upon various ports such as Venice and Marseille in the Mediterranean World, cowrie shells were again loaded on ships and transported to West Africa. There is little extant information concerning these routes and what is available remains vague and fragmentary. It seems that the Balearic Islands, west of Spain, served as a transit centre from the Mediterranean World to West Africa.

Majorca, the largest island in the Balearic Islands, was a home for influential communities of Genoese and Pisan businessmen, of Catalan merchants, of naturalised Italians and of Jewish merchants, linking northern Europe, southern France and Mediterranean Spain to Africa and Italy. These traders imported and re-exported such prized commodities as cloves, lac (to make lacquer), pepper, coral and cowrie shells, a particularly exotic commodity, referred to in documents as "*porcellanae*" carried from the Maldives through various intermediaries and thence to Africa.³¹

An examination of some documents left by the merchants of this trade in Mallorca throws some light on the cowrie routes.³² In 1289, two galleons from Marseille to Mallorca carried prized commodities such as cloves, lac, wine, cloves, aspic, pepper, oral and cowrie shells. "The porcellane were packed in tubes similar to those used for peppers."³³ For the Italian merchants, the business of this humble shells in North Africa was a golden opportunity. Other evidence shows that another ship, also in 1289, carried incense and *porcellanae* from Marseille to Mallorca.³⁴

Cowrie money: prior to the fourteenth century

The origin of the cowrie money in West Africa remains unclear. Philip Curtin tends to support the indigenous theory that before the arrival of cowries from the Indian Ocean, this region had adopted a local shell money. So, the theory

goes, when merchants found this business opportunity, they brought Indian Ocean cowries to North Africa to replace the indigenous Atlantic shells.³⁵ This theory is difficult to confirm or to refute.

Mervyn Hiskett pointed out that Arabic sources presented a clear account of the use of cowrie shells (*wada'*, *wada'ah*) from the first Islamic century, but it seems doubtful whether they were really used by ancient Egyptians as money.³⁶ Mervyn Hiskett stated that it was the Arabs who "carried cowries into the Sahara in their trading packs," but "it was certainly not their example which prompted their use as currency."³⁷ As to the origin of cowrie money, he listed two possibilities:

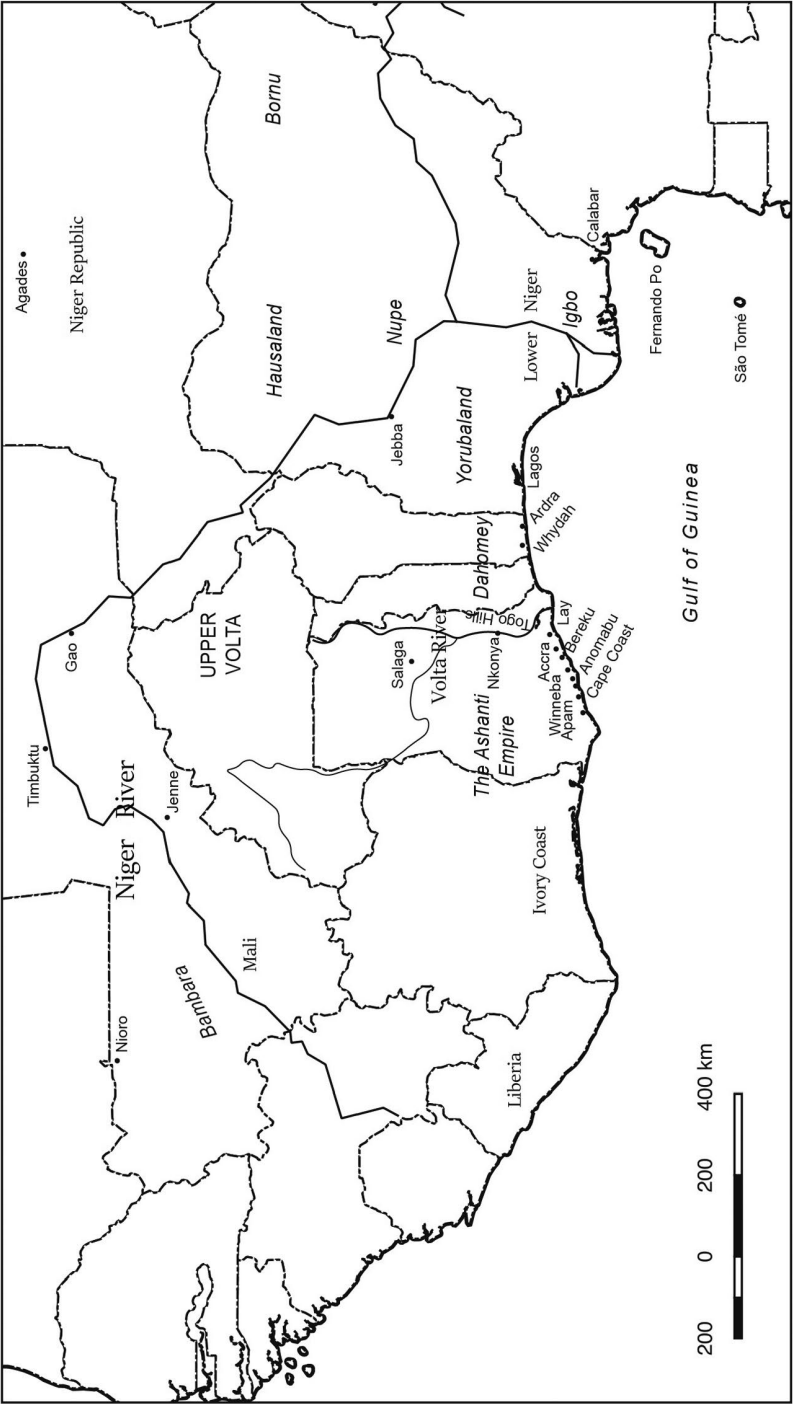
Either they learned that the negroes already used them as an exchange medium, and decided to profit by this, or else, which seems more likely, they carried them in to sell as ornaments much in the same way as European traders brought in beads and the Saharans themselves converted them to use as money. Be this as it may, at the same time as they traded in them with the negroes, the Arabs continued to use them as amulets and ornaments.³⁸

The earliest area for cowrie money was probably along the great bend of the Niger River. An early account of cowrie use was made by al-Bakri in 1046, when he mentioned that cowries were amongst the imported goods in Kougha, once a capital of the Songhay (Songhai) Empire.³⁹ Nearly one century later, al-Zuhri also noticed the importing of cowries, but gave no details;⁴⁰ about another century later, Ibn Sa'id (?–1274) provided more information, noting how cowries were shipped by merchants who travelled from Morocco across the desert en route to the Ghana Empire, which has since been confirmed by a recent archaeological discovery.⁴¹

It was not until the beginning of the fourteenth century that cowrie shells were definitively recorded as being used as money in West Africa (Map 7.1). Al-'Umarī (1301–1349) in his *Masalik al-absar* pointed out that in the Mali Empire, "all internal business transactions" are "in cowries imported by the merchants at a considerable profit."⁴² Not long after, Ibn Battuta added his emphatic voice on the presence of cowrie money in Africa, as he was a Moroccan scholar who had travelled to many of the cowrie money regions across the world. He

went on from there to Gawgaw [Gao], which is a large city on the Nile, and one of the finest towns in the Negro lands. It is also one of their biggest and best-provisioned towns, with rice in plenty, milk and fish, and there is a species of cucumber there called "inani" which had no equal. The buying and selling of its inhabitants is done with cowry-shells, and the same is the case at Malli.⁴³

Gawgaw mentioned by Ibn Battuta was Gao or Gaogao, variations of the original name of Kugha, which had been an important trading station at the convergence



Map 7.1 West Africa

not only of the salt route from the west and the trans-Saharan route from the northeast, but also as part of the transcontinental trade-route in Africa.⁴⁴

In the following centuries, more records of cowrie money in various parts of West Africa were made. Alvise Cadamosto (1432–1488), a Venetian merchant and navigator who under the patronage of the Portuguese prince Henry the Navigator embarked on voyages to West Africa, explored the coastal areas of the present-day countries of Senegal, Gambia and Guinea-Bissau. In 1455, he heard about the use of cowrie money inland from Arguin, an island off the western coast of Mauritania, claiming that

It is true that I understand that inland these Azanaghi, and also the Arabs in some of their districts, are wont to employ white cowries, of those small kinds which are brought to Venice from the Levant. They give certain numbers of these according to the things they have to buy.⁴⁵

The use of cowrie money in the Mali Empire was again mentioned in the fifteenth century when the Berber Leo Africanus (c. 1494 to c. 1554), who was the most authoritative scholar on Africa from his age, described the monetary practices including cowrie money in Timbuktu in the early sixteenth century:

The coine of Tombuto is of gold without any stampe or superscription: but in matters of smal value they vse certaine shels brought hither out of the kingdome of Persia, fower hundred of which shels are worth a ducate: and sixe peeces of their golden coine with two third parts weigh an ounce.⁴⁶

It seems that Leo Africanus mistook Persia instead of the Maldives as the origin of cowrie shells, but the Persian Gulf had been a transit centre whence cowrie shells were shipped to West Africa.

The territory for the presence of cowries was much larger than the cowrie money zone in West Africa and beyond. Local people used them as decoration and amulets, for game pieces, in fortune telling, in ceremonies and for religious activities as well.

The cowrie money zone: prior to 1500

By the mid-fourteenth century, a cowrie money zone in which both cowries and gold were used as money had been formed in West Africa, and it gradually expanded. The earliest cowrie zone started on the upper and middle Niger River in the northern part of West Africa, probably from the eleventh century. It took roots in the Mali Empire by the fourteenth century, continued to expand eastwards to Gao, capital of the Songhay empire, before eventually reaching Timbuktu, Jenne and probably the western part of old Mali by the sixteenth century.⁴⁷ During the process of expansion, states, markets and merchants all

had their role, but it is hard to determine precisely what these were, due to the paucity of information.

In the southern part of West Africa, shell money was used in an enclave near Benin when the Portuguese arrived there in the late 1480s. However, most of these shells were of the small olive shell type available on some West African beaches, particularly at Luanda Island. Locally known as *zimbo*s, these Atlantic shells constituted the dominant money in the Kingdom of Kongo.⁴⁸ Whether or not cowries from the north arrived here is uncertain. This snippet of information might be the reason why Philip Curtin supports the indigenous theory.

Philip Curtin has provided a concise description of the cowrie money zone prior to the arrival of cowries via Cape Town. Cowrie shells “were monetized in the region of the Niger bend and some distance up and down the Niger to the southeast and southeast – perhaps as far south as the Gulf of Guinea at some points.”⁴⁹ Very interestingly, the cowrie money zone was centred around the Niger River region (Map 7.1).

The Niger River, about 4,180 km long, is one of the most surprising rivers in terms of its flow. Like a giant bow, it starts from the Guinea Highlands in southeastern Guinea, only 240 km inland from the Atlantic Ocean, but runs directly away from the sea into the Sahara Desert, then takes a sharp right turn near the ancient city of Timbuktu, and heads southeast to the Gulf of Guinea in the Atlantic Ocean. The northern portion, known as the Niger bend, provides a crucial source of water for the southern part of the Sahara Desert, and created a focal point for trade for the kingdoms of Mali and Gao. The lower (southern) Niger, or the Niger Delta, is densely populated, with the nickname of Oil Rivers, because it was once a major producer of palm oil. Generally speaking, cowrie money began in the upper Niger region, and spread to the south.

Although the early cowrie money zone was not great in size, its distance from the home of cowrie shells is tremendous. There are some 5,000 km of land and sea between West Africa and the eastern Mediterranean and another 5,000 km of land and sea to the Maldives. In addition, the eastern cowrie zone in Bengal was another 3,000 km away from the Maldives, let alone lower Burma, Siam and Yunnan.

The cowrie money zone: 1500–1900

After the arrival of cowrie shells carried by European vessels, there existed two routes for the cowrie trade: one from North Africa (mainly Morocco) across the desert to West Africa and the other by sea to the Guinea Coast (between Accra and the western portion of the Niger Delta).⁵⁰ The first one had predominated for cowrie imports before the sixteenth century, while subsequently, the second soon took over the hegemony and indeed shaped the expansion of the cowrie money zone. From the sixteenth century onwards, the cowrie area “expanded steadily from its beachhead at the Niger bend, and from another centered in southern Dahomey.”⁵¹ In the following two or three centuries, the

zone expanded dramatically and as a result, the northern and the southern parts joined together.

In the north,

Timbuktu seems to have been the northern limit of the use of the shells in the nineteenth century; they were then at a discount because they were not accepted by the desert traders . . . West of Timbuktu, in the mid-nineteenth century, cowries were found in the region of Nioro, but they may have been a relatively recent introduction there.⁵²

To the east,

they have been found in the ruins of Azalik, near Agades . . . In Agades itself, cowries had been in use when the gold trade was flourishing there, and an Agades chronicle tells of an eighteenth-century chief making a gift of a horse and a million cowries.⁵³

In the south, the southern import of cowries soon became the major route for the expansion of cowrie money, indeed reversing the north-south direction of cowrie circulation. Along the coast, Whydah and Ardra immediately became two major cowrie centres for the slave trade, and by the seventeenth century, cowrie shells had been used in Lay, west of the Volta mouth. They kept spreading westwards and reached Accra and Christiansborg by the early eighteenth century, the Dutch posts in Bereku and Apam by the late eighteenth century, the English post at Winneba by the early nineteenth century and Anomabu by 1850.⁵⁴ To the west, these shells seem not to have reached Cape Coast or Elmina on the central Gold Coast; nor did they spread to the eastern Niger Delta, to the east.⁵⁵

Cowries were carried inland by various means of transportation.⁵⁶ Once unloaded on the coast, they were shipped by canoe, along the Volta River, for example, whenever possible, and then transported on land by camels, donkeys and people for the rest of the journey. The Volta River, over 1,600 km long, is the chief river system of Ghana. Confluent by three major tributary rivers of the Black Volta, the White Volta and the Red Volta and joined by a small tributary river the Oti from Togo in the east, the Volta starts from Bobo-Dioulasso highlands of Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta) and flows generally southwards through Ghana into the Gulf of Guinea. Indeed, the Volta River became a major route of the cowrie trade, with its region a crucial part of the expanded cowrie money zone in the south.

In the north, the camel caravan that crossed the desert was exclusively adopted in North Africa to the northern part of West Africa. A camel could carry 100,000 to 240,000 cowries, about 250 to 600 pounds in weight, depending on distance and the animal. Donkeys were mainly restricted to the northern zone, due to their high mortality in the southern part. A donkey could carry 32,000 to 50,000 cowries, about 80 to 120 pounds. Human portage was also widely adopted, due to convenience and resilience. It was also

why some units of measurement for cowrie shells were adopted in local societies, such as a mat, a bag or a sack (20,000 shells, roughly 50 pounds), which was one man's load. Therefore, the transportation expense served as one of the main contributors to the rise of price.

It was through the traditional trade routes that cowries moved northwards and inland, and by the first half of the eighteenth century, the northern and the southern/coastal part had joined up. In the west, in the Togo hills, cowries moved from the Volta Delta to as far north as Nkonya in the later nineteenth century and were generally used on the peripheral markets of the Ashanti Empire, in which Salaga in the northeast was the most important.⁵⁷ By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the cowrie money zone had reached its heyday. John Adam in the 1820s noted that cowries from Whydah, Ardra and Lagos "are also sent to Dahomey, Hio, Hausa, Jaboo and into the very heart of North Africa, where it is known they are the circulating medium."⁵⁸ Alongside the northern (inland) movement of cowrie shells was the export of slaves, followed by the export of palm oil to the coast. The interior penetration of cowrie money facilitated inland economies and commercialisation, especially for poor people.⁵⁹ For an extended period, cowrie money had coexisted with gold dust and silver coins, while somewhere and sometimes, it replaced them and became regionally dominant.

The northern movement of cowrie shells can be vividly illustrated by the changes of exchange rate between cowries and gold or salt. The further the shells were from coastal areas, the higher the price of cowries to gold (Table 7.1).

While the ratio of cowries to gold is indicative, the issue of cowrie price in West Africa is extremely complicated. The price of cowries was not only due to regional differences, but also due to the existence of various European currencies. In addition, the price of cowrie shells was often expressed by all kinds of local products and European goods. Generally speaking, before the European importation of ring cowries from East African from the mid-1840s onwards, the cowrie price in West African had remained relatively stable (with some local and temporal fluctuations); after the 1850s, there emerged the so-called Great Inflation of cowrie shells.⁶⁰ Robin Law has contributed himself to this issue by exploring the cowrie price in the Slave Coast from the seventeenth century onwards.⁶¹

Table 7.1 Cowries to One Ounce of Gold⁶²

<i>Time</i>	<i>Niger Bend</i>	<i>Coast</i>
1300–1399	8,000	–
c. 1520	(2,667)	approx. 8,000
c. 1700–1750	20,000 (or 16,000)	15,360–16,000
c. 1780	20,000	32,000
c. 1810–1816	20,000	25,600
c. 1820	20,000	32,000
c. 1850	25,000	38,400

The dominant state in the seventeenth-century Slave Coast was the Kingdom of Allada, replaced by Whydah in the end of the century; in the 1720s the hinterland state of Dahomey conquered Whydah. As a major supply of slaves, the region produced a great deal of detailed information on the price of goods including cowrie shells in contemporary European accounts.⁶³

The counting of cowries in the Slave Coast followed the general pattern: a string of 40 cowries (called by Europeans as a “tocky,” “toggy,” “toccy” or “tocque”), five tockies making a galina of 200 cowries, 20 galinas making a head (“cabess” or “grand cabess”) of 4,000 cowries. In the second half of the eighteenth century, an “ounce” of four cabess (16,000 cowries) was created; by the 1870s, the size of the string had been increased to 50 cowries, making a head equal to 2,500 cowries.⁶⁴ Robin Law has scrutinised the cowrie price in relation to British shilling and pence. In 1721, one shilling (12 pence) bought 1 pound cowries (400 cowries) in Europe, and 400 cowries were sold for 30 pence in Whydah; from 1752 onwards, 400 cowries in Whydah were valued at 15 pence (sometimes 24 pence when distributed into inland areas). Throughout the eighteenth century, while the price of cowrie shells increased from 12 to 15 pence per pound in Europe, the sale price in the Slave Coast decreased from 30 to 24 pence per pound; in the first few decades of the nineteenth century, cowrie shells were equated with 12 pence per pound. Therefore, there was a devaluation of cowrie shells from the 1720s onwards, especially in the second half of the century.⁶⁵ The Great Inflation caused a drastic decrease of cowrie value. By 1864, 2,000 cowries had been valued at two shillings (less than five pence per pound), and by 1871, 10,000 cowries at five shillings (2.5 pence per pound).⁶⁶ While the changes of cowrie price in the Slave Coast is indicative for West Africa, cautions must be taken against over-generalisation.

Despite this widespread distribution, many parts of West Africa did not belong to the cowrie money zone. These shells did not become money in modern Senegal, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone or Liberia.⁶⁷ But most importantly and most interestingly, all of the major West African shippers of slaves were mostly located within this zone.⁶⁸

The northern penetration of cowrie shells kicked off when the Portuguese invented a new cowrie route that linked the Indian and the Atlantic oceans.

The Portuguese

It was the Portuguese who brought about the link between cowries and the slave trade. The Portuguese noticed the use of cowries in India, but did not immediately take part in this trade, nor did they immediately sail to the Maldives. It was the combination of another important commodity, coir rope, and the strategic location of the Maldives that eventually attracted the Portuguese to the islands. Without a second thought, the size of the cowrie trade impressed them so much that they jumped straight into this trade, shipping shells to Bengal and, for the first time, to West Africa. Duarte Barbosa, a Portuguese soldier who served in the east from 1501 to 1517, noted that “little shells, in which

is great traffic with Cambay and Bengal, where they are used for petty cash, being considered better than copper.”⁶⁹

Realising and understanding the cowrie supply in the Maldives, the use of cowrie money in West Africa and the new navigation route around South Africa linking Europe with India, the Portuguese quickly loaded cowrie shells as ballast (as the Bengali had done for centuries) into their vessels that were filled with Asian goods and sailed back to Lisbon, thence reshipping these shells together with European products to West Africa. “When the Portuguese are well received, they associate with the natives and join their voyages; yet all the marines and pilots are Indians, either Gentiles or Mahometans,” François Pyrard concluded.⁷⁰

The first shipment of shells completed their journey to São Tomé Island in the Gulf of Guinea around 1517–1519.⁷¹ This shipping became frequent during the 1520s. J. de Barros, around 1540 in his Indian Office at Lisbon, not only understood the use of cowrie money in Bengal and Siam, but also observed the new cowrie trade invented by the Portuguese:

even to this kingdom of Portugal, in some years as much as two or three thousand quintals are brought by way of ballast; they are then exported to Guinea, and the kingdoms of Benin and Congo, where also they are used for money, the Gentiles of the interior in those parts making their treasure of it.⁷²

The direct sea shipping of cowries by the Portuguese marked a turning point for cowrie money in West Africa. It not only changed the major supply channel, but also re-structured the cowrie money zone. Sea shipping brought shells in such copious quantities that it dwarfed the camel caravan, although the lack of data makes it difficult to estimate how many tonnes of cowries were shipped by the Portuguese over one and half centuries. Philip Curtin estimates it to have reached as much as 150 tonnes per year, while Jan Hogendorn and Marion Johnson believe it was much lower than this.⁷³

Cowrie shells as ballast served the Portuguese and other Europeans just like one stone for two birds. Ocean-going ships needed ballast, which usually consisted of stones, sand or scrap iron, the latter being solely for the purpose of safeguarding navigation. As ballast, these shells did not occupy any precious space reserved for desirable Asian goods in the navigation from Asia to Europe or desirable European goods in the navigation from Europe to West Africa. Once unloaded in West Africa, cowrie shells immediately transformed themselves from ballast into hot items and ready cash. This special ballast not only produced sizable profits, but could also buy goods directly, especially slaves. No other ballast could be better than this one.

To monopolise this trade, the Portuguese attempted but mostly failed to colonise the Maldives. One interesting episode involved their interaction with a Muslim merchant called Mamalle. In 1509, they learnt that Mamalle from the city of Cannanor on the Malabar Coast was “trading with the Maldives Islands, under an agreement with the king of these islands,” thus winning the

nickname “Lord of the Maldives” due to his monopoly of both the import and export trade of the islands.⁷⁴ The Portuguese threatened Mamalle and forced him to give them trading rights in the Maldives, in addition to delivering “annually to the Portuguese factors at Cannanor 1,000 ropes of fine and 1,000 ropes of coarse coir.”⁷⁵ Very soon, the Portuguese broke this agreement, and executed Mamalle in 1525.⁷⁶

In 1550, when the Maldivian sultan became a Catholic and was baptised by St Francis Xavier, the Portuguese came again, seeing this as a golden opportunity. Chaos ensued. The Christianised sultan was exiled to Cochin under the Portuguese protection, while a new sultanate was established. A treaty was signed that provided an annual tribute in cowries, coir and other goods, in part sent to the exiled sultan. In the seventeenth century, the Portuguese made two more failed attempts to conquer the Maldives. The second, around 1650, ended the tribute of cowries and other goods, although the cowrie trade continued. By that time, both the Dutch and English had come to challenge the Portuguese hegemony in Asia and in the cowrie trade.

The Dutch and English

While the Portuguese invented the cowrie trade, the Dutch Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (V.O.C., Dutch East India Company) and the English East India Company (E.I.C.), though only chartered in 1602 and 1600 respectively, quickly followed and ended the Portuguese predominance in the game within a few decades. They stayed on top for the remaining centuries in which the cowrie and slave trades were connected into one major business.

The V.O.C. began to participate in the cowrie trade in the early 1640s. At the beginning, the Dutch purchased cowries from the Portuguese in Goa and Cochin along the Coromandel Coast. Soon after, Bengal and Ceylon became another two sources. Bengal had already established itself as a major centre for the cowrie trade, but it was the Dutch who turned Ceylon into one. Traditionally, the Maldives shipped cargoes of dried fish and coconuts to Colombo or Galle in exchange for Ceylonese rice; from this moment onwards, cowrie shells were also shipped to Ceylon to meet the needs of the Dutch, who succeeded in achieving a monopoly in the Ceylonese market.⁷⁷

The Dutch wanted to monopolise the Asian markets, but faced a powerful competitor, the English. As early as the 1630s, the English in the Gulf of Guinea and India began to consider the shipping of cowries from India to West Africa. In the late seventeenth century, the E.I.C. made direct orders to purchase shells, at one time, up to a hundred tonnes.⁷⁸ India, particularly Bengal, was the key supplier for the E.I.C.

The long-established chief entry point for the cowrie-rice trade was Balasore, a port city in Orissa and south of the Bengal border, facing the Bay of Bengal and 96 km from the mouth of the Hooghly River. Indeed, Balasore remained a centre of the trade for more than 150 years until the end of the cowrie business. Due to its advantageous harbour position, it was one of the first choices

in the Bay of Bengal for the Portuguese, the British, the Dutch and the French to establish their factories. The cowries that arrived there were sold and bound either for Indian markets in Bengal and Orissa or for the Europeans, who wanted them for trade in West Africa. Meanwhile, local goods such as rice, cotton cloth, oil, butter, opium and some other imported goods were loaded in local vessels for the Maldives, with cargoes of up to 300–600 tonnes.⁷⁹ With the powerful presence of the British, Balasore soon became the main centre for the E.I.C. and its dominance in the cowrie trade in the Bay of Bengal did not end until the end of the seventeenth century, when the British founded its head office in Calcutta.

Two main routes for the Indian-Atlantic cowrie trade were created in the second half of the seventeenth century: one by the Dutch, sailing from Ceylon to the Netherlands and finally to the Guinea Coast; the other by the English, from Balasore and other Indian ports, to Europe (principally London) and finally to West Africa. Hence, European cities such as London and Amsterdam became large cowrie centres where auctions were held. Upon the arrival of cowrie shells in London or Amsterdam, they were removed from their original packaging, “counted in groups of 100,” and placed in either bags or more usually wooden containers designated for the mass shipment of various goods.⁸⁰ In Amsterdam, cowrie shells were cleaned and sorted out in sizes, the smaller ones being more popular in African markets.⁸¹ From London and Amsterdam, cowrie shells were auctioned and then shipped to other European port cities before they made their way to West Africa. Advertisements to announce their sale were placed in newspapers and even coffee houses. If cowrie shells were sold and shipped away within one year of arrival by English merchants, or nine months by “strangers,” they were known as being “in certificate” and a portion of customs duty would be waived. If longer than a year, they were known as being “out of time,” and became relatively costly.⁸² In 1876, W.H. Pratt observed,

many tons of these shells are imported into Great Britain and exported for barter with the native tribes of Western Africa . . . They are called “Guinea money” (referring to the African coast where they are used) and are, or have been used in the slave trade.⁸³

Great profits were made from the journeys of cowries, as their price in Bengal was three to four times that in the Maldives; once shipped to West Africa, it was up to fivefold that in Asia,⁸⁴ a consequence of the confluence of the cowrie and slave trades. Readers may recall that it was exactly during this seventeenth century transition that cowrie money declined drastically in Yunnan.

Cowries for slaves: the eighteenth century

No sooner had the Portuguese arrived in the second decade of the sixteenth century than cowries were transported from the Indian Ocean to the Forcados area to buy slaves. Other Europeans quickly followed. The eighteenth century

was the golden age for the cowries-for-slaves trade. Cowrie money had linked South Asia (via Europe) and West Africa, but declined in Southeast Asia and ended in Yunnan. In India (Bengal and Orissa), the growth of the economy, especially the textile industry, created an insatiable need for cowrie money until the 1750s; simultaneously, European demands for cowries rocketed as well. With the increasing demand for slaves for the New World sugar plantations, the Portuguese, English, Dutch and French seized the opportunity to ship cowries to purchase slaves along the Guinean Coast up to the east of the Volta River (soon to be known as the Slave Coast).⁸⁵ As a result, the price of cowries rose and remained high until the end of that century. Perhaps this was one reason why cowrie money disappeared from Yunnan and declined in Siam, the latter two being unable to afford the soaring prices on the Indian and international markets.

The eighteenth century witnessed the involvement of other European countries in the cowrie-slave trade, including the Danes, the Ostend Company, Altona (Hamburg) and the French as the major participants. Extant information on the French purchase of cowries in Asia is relatively scanty, but its active participation in West African trade demonstrates its enormous involvement. French vessels sailed to Bengal (Chandernagore and Balasore) for cowries and other Asian goods and used these cowries to purchase slaves in West Africa, just as its other European rivals had done. Occasionally, French vessels also called at Malé in the mid-eighteenth century.⁸⁶ The major sources of French cowries, however, seem to have been from auctions in Amsterdam, England and Altona.⁸⁷ In other words, the French bought cowries on European markets from the Dutch and English and re-exported them to West Africa.

Except for occasional cases, European merchants did not accept cowrie shells once they had sold them for slaves. Therefore, almost all the shells brought by the Europeans to Africa would have stayed in Africa. The increased supply and the near-zero outflow resulted in the increase of slave prices in West Africa in the eighteenth century, from 40,000 to 50,000 cowries per slave in the 1710s to 160,000–176,000 cowries in the 1770s. The cowrie-slave trade can be quantitatively illustrated by the English and the Dutch imports to West Africa (Table 7.2). It must be noted that while the following statistics constituted the major imports in the eighteenth century, imports by other Europeans are not included here.

Table 7.2 shows that the total import for the century was 25,931,660 *lbs* (11,436 metric tonnes), or more than ten billion cowrie shells.⁸⁸ On average, more than 259,316 *lbs* (114 tonnes) of cowrie shells entered West Africa each year, and averagely, they could buy 2,500 adult slaves per year, based on 40,000 per slave in 1693, or about 600 adult slaves in the 1770s, based on 170,000 cowries per slave (Table 7.3). As a result, some tens of thousands of slaves were sold for cowries from West Africa to the New World in the eighteenth century.

The cowrie-slave trade constituted a key element in the West African economy. Cowries, as well as other goods such as cloth and guns, all used to purchase slaves, were often recorded as being on these ships in the following manner:

Table 7.2 Cowrie Imports to West Africa by Decade, 1700–1799⁸⁹

<i>Year</i>	<i>English (English Exports Minus Imports From Northern Europe)</i>	<i>Dutch (V.O.C. Kamer Sales at Amsterdam, Hoorn, Enkhuizen, Delft, Rotterdam and Kamer Zeeland)</i>	<i>Total (English and Dutch)</i>
1700–1710	791,637	1,501,149	2,292,786
1711–1720	765,882	2,134,845	2,900,727
1721–1730	3,146,257	2,004,260	5,150,517
1731–1740	1,089,493	2,013,543	3,103,036
1741–1750	1,116,249	2,300,960	3,417,209
1751–1760	352,369	1,101,605	1,453,974
1761–1770	120,237	1,240,788	1,361,025
1771–1780	1,350,244	1,050,312	2,400,556
1781–1790	1,630,292	1,501,270	3,131,562
1790–1799	680,064	40,204	720,268
Grand Total	11,042,724	14,888,936	25,931,660

Table 7.3 Approximate Slave Price in Pounds (*lbs*) of Cowries⁹⁰

<i>Year</i>	<i>Price (lbs)</i>	<i>Number of Cowries</i>
1667	100	40,000
1668 (before)	100	40,000
1680	25	10,000
1681	72	28,800
1681	78	31,200
1682	50–60–70	20,000–24,000–28,000
1693	100	40,000
1694	100	40,000
1704	200	80,000
1716	130–136	52,000–54,400
1724	300	120,000
Approx., 1726 ()	180	72,000
1744	320	128,000
1767	200	80,000
1772	400–440	160,000–176,000

the pounds of shells, certain pounds per slave and the number of slaves.⁹¹ Cowrie shells were so favoured by local African people that European merchants found themselves unable to meet local demands (although they probably would have loved to). In certain cases, up to half the value was paid in cowrie shells, but

in general, the proportion was about one-third, or even lower. In the case of the Bight of Benin, Patrick Manning estimates that cowrie shells constituted about 20 to 35 per cent of the import value.⁹² It is certain that the cowrie proportion was deliberately manipulated by the Europeans, as Captain Phillips in 1694 instructed (see the following section “The *Hannibal*”). When the price of cowries in Europe rose, other European goods increased on West African markets and the cowrie proportion fell.⁹³

John Barbot, a Frenchman who made two voyages to West Africa between 1678 and 1682, witnessed the dominant role of cowrie money, understood the triangular cowrie trade of Asia, Europe and West Africa and observed the link between cowries and slaves.⁹⁴ “The *Boejies* or *Cauris*, which the French called *Bouges*, are small milk-white shells”; these “are produced and gathered among the shoals and rocks of the *Maldives* islands” “and thence transported as ballast to *Goa*, *Cochin* and other ports in the *East-Indies*”; then “from the above-named places,” shells

are dispersed to the *Dutch* and *English* factories in India; then brought over to *Europe*, more especially by the *Dutch* who make a great advantage of them, according to the occasion the several trading nations of *Europe* have for this trash, to carry on their traffick at the coast of *Guinea*, and of *Angola*; to purchase slaves or other goods of *Africa*, and are only proper for that trade; no other people in the universe putting such a value on them as the *Guineans*; and more especially those of the *Fida* and *Ardra* have long done, and still do to this very day.⁹⁵

The cowrie-slave trade in the Gulf of Guinea was vividly recorded by Captain Phillips during his voyage on the *Hannibal*, as is reviewed in the following section.

The *Hannibal*

The evil of the cowrie-slave trade can be glimpsed by the notorious slave ship the *Hannibal*, in its 1693–1694 voyage. Thomas Phillips, a British captain, commanded the *Hannibal*, while the voyage was financed by the Royal African Company of London, which held an English crown monopoly on slave trading. The *Hannibal* anchored at Ouidah, an African port located in modern-day Benin, and purchased 694 African slaves, about a third being women. When it arrived in the New World, only 372 slaves survived the voyage.⁹⁶

The voyage of the *Hannibal* provides a vivid description of the cowrie trade. The ship with its 450 tonnes and 36 guns had recently been bought by Sir Jeffrey Jeffrey, who together with his brother and some other eminent merchants, including a sub-governor of the African company, part-owned the vessel, along with Thomas Phillips, who was appointed its captain. The ship was loaded with “needful cargoes” (presumably including cowries) to purchase “elephant teeth, gold and Negro slaves” from Guinea. At about three o’clock on the morning, 12 September 1693 and together with other ships bound for West Africa, the

ship sailed from Gravesend, a significant port on the south bank of the Thames Estuary and about 36 km from London.⁹⁷ On 2 December, after a navigation of 82 days, Captain Phillips landed in West Africa and immediately busied himself in the trade of cowries for local goods.

On 23 December, Captain Phillips recorded that an “inland king” “presented me with a good leopard’s skin and I him with 3 or 4 bottles of rum, and as many handful of cowries, and so we parted very friendly.”⁹⁸ On 13 January 1694, he was informed that along a local river “for a few cowries, and giving them buckets, then negro women will bring water and fill your cask in the boat” and about 14 km up river, brass kettles, pewter basins, knives, booges and cowries were in demand.⁹⁹ He noticed that one galina (string) of cowries could buy three or four chickens, or one chicken could be exchanged for a knife.¹⁰⁰ He also noted that negro porters employed special “instruments like wedges” to steal cowries.¹⁰¹ At Whidaw, “The king had two little dwarfs which would often come begging cowries of us, which we durst not refuse them.”¹⁰² In local eateries at the market, cowries were used to buy a meal:

When anyone came to eat, he would down on his knees by the table, and lay eight or nine cowry shells thereon; then the cook would very dexterously cut him the value of what he pitched on in small bits, and give him his piece of cancy and some salt; if that did not satisfy his stomach, he would lay down more shells, and accordingly have more meat. I have seen eight or nine round his table at once, and he serve[s] them all, and receive[s] their money with great dexterity, and without the least confusion; but there was no need to change money, which was a great ease to him.¹⁰³

At Whidaw he traded with the local king:

To the king six slaves value in cowries, or what other goods we can perswade him to take, but cowries are most esteem’d and desir’d; all which are measur’d in his presence, and he would wrangle with us stoutly about heaping up the measure.¹⁰⁴

Upon leave, diverse services were required to be paid in cowries. “Half a slave, or as much cowries as the cavity of the bell can contain, to the bell-man”; and paying porters who moved goods on board, “took up great quantities of our cowries, we paying these last charges in nothing else but these shells.”¹⁰⁵

While European cargoes were welcome in local communities, Captain Phillips reiterated that cowrie shells were the most favoured goods in the slave trade:

With the above goods a ship cannot want slaves here, and my purchase them for about three pounds fifteen shillings a head, but near half cargo value must be cowries or booges, and brass basons, to set off other goods that we buy cheaper, as coral, rangoes, iron.”¹⁰⁶

Nevertheless,

The best goods to purchase slaves here are cowries, the smaller the more esteem'd; for they pay them all by tale, the smallest being as valuable as the biggest, but take them from us by measure or weight, of which about 100 pounds for a good man-slave.¹⁰⁷

Other preferable goods were many European manufactured products, such as brass neptunes or basins, blue paper sletias (linen), cambrick or lawn, caddy chintz, broad *ditto*, coral, iron bars, powder and brandy.¹⁰⁸

It must be pointed out that in these transactions, cowrie shells were used for the same purpose as European products, all being goods for the barter trade. Only when African people accepted and used them on local markets did cowrie shells turn from being goods themselves to a medium of exchange or money. Captain Phillips clearly understood this, calling these shells "shell money" when he described the accounting and use of shells. At Whidaw,

as soon as the negroes have them, they bore holes in the backs of them, and string them on rushes, 40 shells on each, which they call a foggy; and five of such foggys being tied together, is call'd a galina, being 200 shells, which is their way of accounting their shell-money. When they go to market to buy anything they bargain for so many cowries, foggys, or so many galinas, and without these shells they can purchase nothing.¹⁰⁹

On another occasion, he emphasised that "The only money they have here are these cowries or shells we carry them, being brought from the East-Indies and were charg'd to us at four pounds per cent, of which we gave 100*lb.* for a slave."¹¹⁰ Thus, a slave cost only 25 cents in West Africa at that moment, excluding the expense of cowrie shipping.

Captain Phillips described in detail how strategic cowrie shells were for the European purchase of slaves,

for if a cappasheir sells five slaves, he will have two of them paid for in cowries, and one in brass, which are dear slaves; for a slave in cowries costs us above four pounds in *England*; whereas a slave in coral, rangoes, or iron, does not cost fifty shilling; but without the cowries and brass they will take none of the last goods, and but small quantities as best, especially if they can discover that you have good store of cowries and brass abroad, then no other goods will serve their turn, till they have got as much as you have; and after, for the rest of the goods they will be indifferent, and make you come to their own terms, or else lie a long time for your slaves, so that those you have on board are dying while you are buying others ashore.¹¹¹

Captain Phillips concluded these observations thus:

therefore every man that comes here, ought to be very cautious in making his report to the king at first, of what sorts and quantities of goods he had, and be sure to say his cargo consists mostly in iron, coral, rangoes, chints . . . so that he may dispose of those goods as soon as he can, and at last his cowries and brass will bring him slaves as fast as he can buy them.¹¹²

A kind of “save the best for last” strategy!

In July 1694, the *Hannibal* departed for the New World:

Having bought my compliment of 700 slaves, viz. 480 men and 200 women, and finished all my business at Whidaw, I took my leave of the old king and his cappasheirs, and parted, with many affectionate expressions on both sides, being forced to promise him that I would return again the next year, with several things he desired me to bring from England.¹¹³

It seems that the king and Captain Phillips were both very pleased with their dealings, and Captain Phillips was happy to sail for Barbados. However,

The negroes are so wilful and loth to leave their own country, that they have often leap'd out of the canoes, boat and ship, into the sea, and kept under water till they were drowned, to avoid being taken up and saved by our boats, which pursued them; they having a more dreadful apprehension of Barbadoes than we can have of hell, tho' in reality they live much better there than in their own country.

With seeming sympathy, Captain Phillips added, “but home is home.”¹¹⁴ “We had about 12 negroes did wilfully drown themselves, and others starv'd themselves to death; for 'tis their belief that when they die they return home to their own country and friends again.”¹¹⁵

Misfortune followed the *Hannibal*, or as one might quip, the *Cannibal*. In the voyage,

there happen'd such sickness and mortality among my poor men and negroes, that of the first we buried 14, and of the last 320, which was a great detriment to our voyage, the royal African company losing ten pounds by every slave that died, and the owners of the ship ten pounds ten shillings, being the freight agreed on to be paid them by the charter-party for every negroe deliver'd alive ashore to the *African* company's agents at Barbadoes.¹¹⁶

Captain Phillips bitterly calculated, “whereby the loss in all amounted to near 6560 pounds sterling.”¹¹⁷ The loss of African lives was calculated in British pounds, but it should be remembered that they had been paid for in Maldivian shells.

Cowries for palm oil: the nineteenth century

The legal abolition of the slave trade at the beginning of the nineteenth century caused the sudden decline of the cowrie trade in West Africa, and as a result, most cowries from the Maldives went to Bengal. During the decade of 1808–1817, the British only exported about 85,000 pounds of cowries to West Africa, but in 1807, the export had amounted to 136,976 pounds in the single year.¹¹⁸ The Maldivians must have felt this economic decline keenly and been very pleased to see the revival of cowrie exports thereafter, when West Africa resumed its import of shells. From 1818 to 1850, more than ten million pounds of cowries were shipped to West Africa (Table 7.4), which was not very different from the preceding century except for the fact that private companies replaced East India Companies. Indeed, five years in the 1840s saw annual exports totalling nearly or over 500 tonnes, an unprecedented figure.¹¹⁹

The revival of cowrie imports was the consequence of a new export from West Africa: palm oil. This commodity was in demand as a lubricant, as fuel for lighting and an ingredient for soap, amongst other products for industrial use in Europe. The rocketing export of palm oil from West Africa can be glimpsed by a few individual years in the six decades of the nineteenth century (Table 7.5).

During the two decades between 1851 and 1870, another 24,509,856 pounds of cowries were exported to Britain, which works out at 11,118 tonnes and nearly 556 tonnes per year; these shells were mainly purchased from British India and Ceylon, while a small portion were bought in Singapore, the Philippines, Europe, East and South Africa and other places.¹²⁰ These areas of supply should be scrutinised. Cowrie shells (*Cypraea moneta*) were found in the Sulu Sea, and it was no wonder that the Philippines now began to be drawn into the global cowrie trade. As for Singapore, a new British colony, it might have been the transit port for the Sulu Sea cowries or the Bengali cowries loaded as ballast in the ships from India to Southeast Asia or China, or the transit point for cowries from Siam, the traders for which were attracted by the high price of these shells in the Indian Ocean. Meanwhile, the purchasing ports of East

Table 7.4 British Cowrie Exports to West Africa, 1818–1850¹²¹

Year	1818–1820	1821–1830	1831–1840	1841–1850	Total
Cowries (lbs)	200,704	696,258	2,911,110	8,730,064	12,538,136

Table 7.5 Palm Oil Exports from West Africa (Some Individual Years in the Nineteenth Century)¹²²

Year	1810	1820	1830	1840	1850	1860
Tonnes	1,000	5,000	10,000	20,000	30,000	45,000

and South Africa were for the *Cypraea annulus*, the predominant cowrie in these regions. It seems that merchants not only explored every corner of the world to discover other sources of *Cypraea moneta*, but also *Cypraea annulus*, to meet the insatiable demand created by the palm oil export business from West Africa.

Cypraea annulus, indigenous to the East African coast, were orange-ringed and similar to *Cypraea moneta* from the Maldives but larger in size. These had been shipped to Bengal before going to markets in West Africa. It remains a puzzle as to why *Cypraea annulus* suddenly flooded into the West African markets. Jan Hogendorn and Marion Johnson have proposed that conventional trade and high profits are far from being convincing or satisfactory answers and pointed out that the question must be understood in the context of the rise of demand for and supply of money driven by the palm oil boom.¹²³ Certain pioneers shipped ring cowries and as this substitute money was accepted in West Africa, more merchants followed. Money did talk, as the purchase price in East Africa was less than one-tenth of the sale price in West Africa.¹²⁴

The shipping of *Cypraea annulus* seemed to be a German invention. In 1845, driven by the booming demand in West Africa, a German vessel called at Malé, planning to buy cowries from their most original source instead of from Calcutta or Ceylon.¹²⁵ In spite of their efforts, they managed to purchase only a limited quantity of cowries and on the way home, the ship called at Zanzibar and bought *Cypraea annulus* there. With its relatively small number of cowrie shells, this purchase started a new stage in the cowrie trade that in twenty years would give the Maldives the fatal punch.

From 1845 onwards, the German Hamburg firms nearly monopolised the ring-cowrie trade and the Germans attempted to keep their source and trade secret. Ring cowries were recorded in ships' cargo lists as "kaffee" (coffee) and French visitors in Zanzibar were falsely told that these shells were shipped as raw materials to Dresden to make porcelain (remember cowrie shells were called "porcelain").¹²⁶ However, in the early 1850s, the French joined the competition. Within the nineteen years between 1851 and 1869, German and French traders sold over 35,000 tonnes of ring cowries (an average of 1,800 tonnes per year), "almost equal in number to *all* the shipments of Maldivian *moneta* by the Dutch and British in the eighteenth century and by the British between 1800 and 1850."¹²⁷ Between 1865 and 1880, 38,279 tonnes of *Cypraea annulus* were shipped to Lagos (an average of 2,392 tonnes per year), and the 1880s witnessed a sudden drop in imports as from 1881 to 1891, only 3,573 tonnes reached Lagos.¹²⁸ The Maldivian money cowrie thereafter waned in value to the world.

Compared with the Maldivian cowrie, the ring-cowrie trade enjoyed some certain advantages. Its transportation routes were more direct and thus involved shorter, less costly journeys to ship ring cowries from East to West Africa. In contrast, ships carrying Maldivian cowrie ballast had to go to Europe first, with cowries being unloaded, stored, auctioned and then shipped to West Africa. The shorter distance for the ring cowrie led to a lower transportation cost and

allowed for a greater frequency of shipments. The ensuing frenzied pursuit of profit probably accounted for the unprecedented influx of ring cowries into West Africa within less than two decades. In West Africa, ring cowries were generally mixed with *Cypraea moneta* in local communities, but Accra and areas on the Gold Coast west of the Volta, as well as Igbo country east of the Niger did not accept them.¹²⁹

The unprecedented inflow of *Cypraea annulus* resulted in disastrous inflation in the second half of the nineteenth century. The cowrie price fell in 1895 to nearly one-tenth of what it had been in 1850.¹³⁰ Merchants found to their horror that a whole load of cowries could only just pay the carriers to cover the transportation cost. In 1896, there was a drastic rise of imports into Lagos, amounting to 1,025 tonnes, but this was probably the final clearance sale for *Cypraea annulus*.¹³¹ Small quantities of cowries continued to arrive in the following years, especially after cowrie imports were banned and the colonial governments ordered taxation to be paid only in coin. Cowrie shells, previously thought of as treasure, now became almost worthless. In general, the cowrie money zone soon shrank.

Local agents

It must be pointed out that although cowrie money was universally adopted, various merchants, local peoples and states, with their differing financial customs and practices, transportation expenses, multiplicity of counting systems and variation in prices and purchasing power, created numerous opportunities and divisions in the cowrie money zone. Cowrie shells were also used together with gold and later with various silver dollars and coins in West Africa. One of the most difficult questions to answer concerning cowrie money was how and why these foreign shells were accepted as a universal form of money, of which only a vague understanding of their worth seems to have been achieved. Local agents, especially political states, should be scrutinised to understand how they were recipients, shapers of cowrie money and builders of the reach of the cowrie money zone. The following are some examples.

The Askias of Songhay came to know that cowries from Cairo were cheaper than those from Morocco and thus banned those from Morocco.¹³² In 1591, Askiya Ishaq proposed to continue to accept Moroccan cowries as part of his offer of homage to Ahmad al-Mansur, the Sultan of the Saadi Dynasty (r. 1578–1603) who ruled Morocco.¹³³ In this case, the tension and struggle between state and market were revealed.

In the first decade of the nineteenth century, when the Sokoto Caliphate expanded and centralised its power, gradually annexing the plains to the west and key parts of Yorubaland, several kinds of taxation were required to be paid in cowries, which encouraged the spread of cowrie money (and the cash economy) decades before the colonial authorities would have done.¹³⁴ Thus, indigenous monetisation by cowrie shells serves to challenge the stereotype of considering cowrie shells to be simply primitive money.

A similar policy was adopted in Bornu in the mid-nineteenth century. Sheikh Omar, the ruler of Bornu, once attempted but failed to mint his own coins in Europe. Beschir, one of his high-ranking officials, was inspired by the monetary systems along his *hajj* journey to Mecca in 1845 and suggested for the inclusion of cowrie money. Sheikh Omar accepted the idea, making the Maria Theresa thaler (a silver bullion coin named after Empress Maria Theresa who ruled Austria, Hungary and Bohemia from 1740 to 1780) the standard large denomination and cowrie shells the small one, a similar bi-monetary system as had been adopted in Bengal and Yunnan. The official status of cowrie money in Bornu, from 1848 to 1849, immediately attracted cowries from Hausaland. Even the Egba palm oil traders far to the south insisted on payment in cowries rather than manufactured goods.¹³⁵ The state once again played a significant role in promoting cowrie money in the region.

Certain local incidents had their influence on shell money, too. In the late eighteenth century, there was a flow of substitute shells (*Cypraea marginella*) from the West African coast into Timbuktu. These substitute shells, known locally as *koroni*, were available in abundant quantities and might have partly been the result of a local accident or a remote European political event. It is said that in 1787, over one million cowries that had been secretly sent to Djenne were either accepted or seized; meanwhile, the French Revolution might have disrupted the supply of replacements.¹³⁶ The loss of the one million cowrie shells promoted the circulation of *Cypraea marginella*. Traditionally, 3,000 cowrie shells could be exchanged for one gold *mithqal*, but for *marginella* shells, one gold *mithqal* required as many as 100,000. The cheap price of these substitute shells hence caused many problems. In September 1795, a local ruler ordered the circulation of *marginella* shells to cease.

When a state was threatened, it might attempt to contain the cross-boundary flow of cowrie money. While in general the Ashanti Empire adopted cowrie money,¹³⁷ from the last three years of the 1810s onwards, cowries were banned there. Such a monetary change resulted from the new Ashanti policy to exclude Muslim traders in the 1820s and 1830s, when the Empire lost its control over Salaga and the northeast (and probably also the northwest).¹³⁸

The influence of local agents and local factors can also be illustrated by the Kingdom of Dahomey, which accumulated wealth and centralised power through the export of slaves and palm oil for cowrie shells.

The making of the Kingdom of Dahomey: cowries, slaves and palm oil

The Kingdom of Dahomey was a giant African polity (c. 1600–1894) located within the area of present-day Benin.¹³⁹ In coastal Benin, the Atlantic trade had continued for several centuries, due to its environmental advantages of fertile land, connected waterways and interactions with the Atlantic World and the hinterland. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Kingdom of

Dahomey was an influential regional power due to its continuous expansion and centralisation. In 1727, for example, it conquered the Kingdom of Whydah, a traditional slave export centre where Captain Phillips had purchased nearly 700 slaves in 1694. The grandeur of Dahomey, built on conquest and slave plunder, Atlantic trade and the use of cowrie money, was depicted by Frederick Forbes, a British naval officer who visited the kingdom in 1849 and 1850 and provided an excellent glimpse for us to appreciate not only the great quantities of shells engulfed first by the slave trade and then by the palm oil trade, but also the significant role of cowries in the local reproduction of political power.¹⁴⁰ Frederick Forbes and many of his contemporaries realised the inhumanity of the slave trade, and he volunteered to visit the Kingdom of Dahomey, a major centre for the export of slaves, making an unsuccessful attempt to persuade King Gezo to stop this evil business.

The grandeur of the territory of the Kingdom of Dahomey was understood by the British:

Lying inland on the Guinea coast, this great military kingdom extends almost from the banks of the Niger to those of the Volta, and domineers over, if it does not possess, the entire land that lies between the coast thus cut off between the mouths of these rivers and the bases of the Kong Mountains.¹⁴¹

Thus, a large part of the southern cowrie zone and the slave export business were under Dahomey's control.

The kingdom's militarisation and thus its conquest capacity were even more impressive:

When the king goes to war, he levies in all about 24,000 men, and an equal number of commissariat followers. Thus he moves on his war march with nearly 50,000 of both sexes, or one fourth the whole population of his kingdom. It is necessary to state that Dahomey was under a military rule and government, and had no parallel in history. Time in Dahomey was thus yearly divided in war and festival.¹⁴²

The war part was to obtain slaves in exchange for cowries, in other words, wealth and festivals were for the king to show off and share cowries with his subjects. Driving the expansion and militarisation tendencies was the desire to accumulate wealth through the cowrie-slave and cowrie-palm oil trades. Otherwise, the state military machine could not operate.

Cowrie money and its local accounting system interested Frederick Forbes:

The currency of the Dahoman kingdom is the cowrie shell, of which 2,000 are calculated to form one 'head', to which a nominal value of one dollar is attached. Such, however, is the scarcity of a metallic currency, that, in exchange, the silver dollar is eagerly taken at 2,400 to 2,600 cowries.¹⁴³

On 11 October 1849, the British “prepared for the journey, by purchasing fifty heads of cowries, valued at fifty dollars. Each head contains 2,000 cowries, and ten heads form a load for a woman. Thus, to carry fifty dollars, we had to hire five women!”¹⁴⁴

According to local custom, service and servants received no wages, but gifts instead. For those people who carried their luggage, “are what is termed ‘subsisted,’ at two strings of cowries (eighty) a day, and, according to their work are rewarded with a present when it is concluded.”¹⁴⁵ He also pointed out that “all gold and silver is current at a valuation, but scarce.”¹⁴⁶ Later, more than one hundred local people (including their families) were assigned to serve Frederick Forbes and his delegation, which seemed to be a burden to him. “Every week it costs us upwards of ten heads of cowries merely to subsist our people, and about fourteen gallons of rum, which articles (besides cost) will require four men to bring them from Awhydah.”¹⁴⁷

Frederick Forbes recorded various functions of cowrie shells and cowrie money in the local society. “If a man seduces a girl, the law obliges marriage, and the payment of eighty heads of cowries to the parent or master, on pain of becoming himself a slave.”¹⁴⁸ Taxes were collected in cowrie shells: “Taxes are heavy to all parties, and farmed to collectors. The holders of the Customs have collectors stationed at all markets, who receive cowries in number according to the value of the goods carried for sale.”¹⁴⁹ Access to markets was taxed too, as “at the roads leading to the market stood tax-gatherers, demanding from five to ten cowries from all who carried goods to sell.”¹⁵⁰ The king also received annual tributes from his ministers. In one case, it was observed that one man paid “2000 heads of cowries annually to the king!”¹⁵¹ Most, if not all, these practices were found in India, Siam and Yunnan.

Frederick Forbes was very impressed with the local markets in Whydah:

The market is the finest I have seen in Africa; well supplied with every luxury and many useful articles. As there are no shops, all trade is carried on here; and the market is divided into appropriate proportions for each description of article. The meat, fish, corn, flour, vegetable, fruit and foreign goods have all separate markets.¹⁵²

He recorded the prices for some of these goods in cowrie money (Table 7.6). On another occasion, he provided a detailed list of salaries for servants and services provided to him.¹⁵³

Frederick Forbes noticed the palm plantations and how this palm trade was thriving, with merchants and dealers making their fortunes first through the slave and then the oil trade. A certain Don Jose Dos Santos, “although a slave dealer, is also a palm-oil purchaser to a great extent. He arrived here without a shilling, and now has an immense establishment, though I believe little capital.”¹⁵⁴ Much of Don Jose Dos Santos’ fortune made through slaves and

Table 7.6 Goods and Price (in Cowries) at Whydah, March 1850

<i>Goods</i>	<i>Price</i>	<i>Goods</i>	<i>Price</i>	<i>Goods</i>	<i>Price</i>
Turkey	4,000	Sheep	5,000	Yam	80
Guinea-fowl	1,000	Goat	2,500	Crab	10
Fowl	280	Beef, a pound	120	Fish, a pound	200
Pigeon	200	Pork, ditto	80	Vegetable, green, a pound	2
Chicken	200	Mutton, ditto	100	Rum, a bottle	240
Duck	600	Egg	10	Pitto (country beer), a gallon	40
Bullock	25,000	Orange	3	Palm wine, ditto	40

palm oil was squandered, as he was addicted to gambling. Fortunately for him, though,

Don Jose has a plantation on which he manufactures oil. His yard was filled with traders – some with only a gallon, others having slaves loaded with large calabashes of oil; while dozens of his own slaves were counting out cowries to pay for the produce.¹⁵⁵

Domingo Jose Martins, “the greatest slave-dealer in all Africa,” also made his fortune from the palm-oil trade.¹⁵⁶ On 10 June 1850, Martins “said he made 80,000 dollars last year by palm oil, that the slave and palm-oil trade helped each other, and that in connection he did not know which was the most profitable.”¹⁵⁷

Given the prosperity of the slave trade and the thriving palm oil business, it was no wonder that the king could afford to distribute so many heads of cowrie shells at all kinds of celebrations and ceremonies. Indeed, the sharing, presenting and dispersing of cowries by the king to his subjects on all kinds of occasions but especially for the Dahoman customary ceremonies, so vividly and exhaustively recorded by Frederick Forbes, were a crucial series of ways to manifest his royal power, wealth and kindness, thus enhancing his legitimacy.

On 18 October 1849, after presenting gifts to the king and his ministers, Frederick Forbes had an audience with the king. He read the commander-in-chief’s letter to the king: “His Majesty listened attentively . . . then dictated a letter to the commander-in-chief, in which he promised to give me an answer at the Customs” (Figure 7.2).¹⁵⁸ Upon hearing that Frederick Forbes was going to the market, the king generously “ordered ten heads of cowries to be sent with us to purchase articles with.”¹⁵⁹ The following day, Frederick Forbes and his group “received his Majesty’s present, consisting of, to each, a bullock, cloth, ten heads of cowries, one keg of rum, one jar of palm oil, one calabash of flour, one of country soap, one of peppers,” and the interpreter and followers also received gifts including one or two heads of cowries.¹⁶⁰



Figure 7.2 The King of Dahomey¹⁶¹

On 28 May 1850, Frederick Forbes received a letter in which he was ordered into the king's presence and the king "promised to consider well the question 'relative to the suppression of the slave trade in his dominions.'" ¹⁶² In the following six weeks, Frederick Forbes was "directed" to observe the customary ceremonies in which the king displayed his power and wealth.

In the custom of *Ee-que-ah-eh-bek* or Paying the Troubadours, the royal musicians, the keeper of records of the kingdom of Dahomey and the office, "which is hereditary," "take it in turn to sing the praises of the Dahoman monarch." ¹⁶³ On 29 May, "twenty-eight heads of cowries, twenty-eight pieces of cloth, four pieces of handkerchiefs and two gallons of rum were presented" to each person, "for the two sergeants and their bands, in all about thirty people." ¹⁶⁴ These gifts amounted to 1,698 dollars, as calculated by Frederick Forbes, who was astonished that the king "paid them so highly for remembering the glorious deeds of his ancestors." ¹⁶⁵ Indeed this was only a small part of the gifts the king distributed that day:

That the king had thrown away that morning 400 heads of cowries to the people, and 40 pieces of cloth, and intended to scramble that night 800 heads of cowries. That the whole of the day's expenses to the monarch were to the amount of 26,000 dollars! ¹⁶⁶

To Frederick Forbes, "These extraordinary exaggerations have been before too well believed, and hence it is that this monarch's wealth has been so much enhanced; I believe it is quoted at 300,000 dollars a year!" ¹⁶⁷

On 30 May, the day of the *Ek-bah-tong-ek-beh*, or Display of the King's Wealth, between 6,000 and 7,000 people marched in the procession, "1590 carried cowries," and "the amount of money displayed in cowries (the currency of Dahomey) was 5000 dollars." During the day, "Much rum was distributed to the various attendants, and about 800 dollars in cowries to the different groups." ¹⁶⁸

On 31 May, it was the custom of the *Ek-que-noo-ah-toh-meh* or Throwing the Presents. There were "three separate heaps, in different parts of the platform," consisting of "3000 heads of cowries, several heaps of cloths, rum in kegs, and rolls of tobacco"; and "the king labouring hard, throwing now cowries, cloth, tobacco, &c. The cowries appeared to be the property of the lucky ones who caught them." ¹⁶⁹ On the same occasion, the king also presented gifts to ministers and mobs, including a "basket containing ten heads of cowries and two pieces of cloth" to Frederick Forbes. ¹⁷⁰ At noon on the same day, "a boat on wheels put off to discharge her cargo of rum, tobacco and cowries, which were added to the heaps on the platform." ¹⁷¹ "By two o'clock, one of the heaps of 1000 heads of cowries had been thrown away, and part of another given to the higher classes." ¹⁷² Being accustomed to this extravagance, Frederick Forbes seems to have been rather surprised to find that "The expenses of the day to the king in all did not exceed 2,000 dollars, as heaps of cowries and other articles were still on the platform when we left." ¹⁷³

On the evening of 3 June, “The king sent us a present of four heads of cowries and, taking leave, we reached home at 10. His Majesty’s expenses in gifts would be about 300 dollars’ worth of cowries”; On 4 June, “In the yard were arranged 800 heads of cowries, about one pipe of rum; these, we were told, were to pay the parties employed yesterday, and about 200 heads were given away before we left.”¹⁷⁴ In the following days, almost on each occasion, various heads of cowries were given away by the king.

In mid-June, the custom of the *See-que-ah-bee*, or Watering the Graves of Ancestors, was conducted, and again an important part of this ceremony was to distribute cowrie shells. “On the neutral ground were piled 400 heads of cowries, besides several other smaller piles, and much rum”; “Soon after our arrival, the business of the day opened with a distribution of cowries to all the ministers, head officers and traders, in presents varying from ten heads to a head of cowries.”¹⁷⁵

On 4 July, Frederick Forbes had his diplomatic audience with the king. The British hoped the king would put a stop to

the slave-trade in his vast dominions; and in order to do that, we impressed upon him the methods pursued by neighbouring nations, who, by encouraging the growth of the palm-tree, had so well met the market, as now to have a far more advanced and lucrative trade than the Portuguese and Brazilians offered to Dahomey.¹⁷⁶

The king answered that he held “the belief that the English were the first of white men,” “but the Dahomans had never given up slave-dealing. His people were soldiers, his revenue the proceeds of the slave trade.”¹⁷⁷ The king surely understood the formula: slaves = cowries = wealth = power, and he was not ready to give up this power.

Counting cowries: local and global?

Forbes often mentioned the phrase “heads of cowries” in the Kingdom of Dahomey, and this denomination of cowrie money in West Africa should be discussed here. The ways to count cowrie money in West Africa varied from place to place and thus were complicated. There seemed to be a coexistence of a few systems, which suggests both local traditions and possibly global influence.

Preceding chapters have introduced the formula $4 \times 4 \times 5$ or $4 \times 5 \times 4$ which was widely shared in Bengal, Siam and Yunnan in counting cowrie money. This shared denomination system serves a piece of fundamental evidence to support that there existed an India-based cowrie monetary system across India, parts of Southeast Asia and Yunnan. Paul Pelliot when discussing cowrie money across the world highlights this common pattern of the reckoning system, but unfortunately, he leaves Africa out of the equation.¹⁷⁸ So what about West Africa? The reckoning system for cowrie money in West Africa was much more complicated than in India or elsewhere in Asia. In the northern zone, cowries were

Table 7.7 The Bambara Counting System

<i>The Bambara Number</i>	<i>The Decimal Equivalent</i>
$5 \times 16 = \text{"100"}$	80
$\text{"100"} (80) \times 10 = \text{"1,000"}$	800
$\text{"1,000"} (800) \times 10 = \text{"10,000"}$	8,000
$\text{"10,000"} (8,000) \times 8 = \text{"100,000"}$	64,000

counted in groups of five shells, and certain groups were piled into 60, 80 or 100 shells; each of such a pile, no matter whether it be 60, 80 or 100 shells, was locally known as one hundred.¹⁷⁹ One well-known way of counting was the so-called Bambara System, based on the pattern of 5–80 (Table 7.7). In 1796, in Bambara County in Mali, Mungo Parks was surprised to observe that “It is curious in counting the cowries, they call eighty a hundred; whilst in all other things, they calculate by the common hundred. Sixty is called a Manding hundred.”¹⁸⁰ He added that 20 cowries “are nearly equal to a penny, that 240 of them are equal to a shilling and 4800 to a pound, in the sterling money of this county.”¹⁸¹ In the 1860s, the French officer Mage thought that this system of numeration was decimal, while his following description refuted this:

They count by five cowries at a time . . . they have counted sixteen times five, they make a pile of them that is 100. When they have five of these piles they put them together, make five more, join them all together and that is 1000. Traders and women, to avoid mistakes, usually begin by making a lot of little piles of five cowries and put them together in eights to make a half-hundred.¹⁸²

Therefore, 100,000 in the Bambara System actually totalled 64,000 shells.

It seems that the local denomination system was based on the units of 5 and 80, which differs from the decimal system based on the unit of 10. If so, it is reasonable to argue for the existence of a universal denomination system of cowrie money, as the unit of 80 (expressed by $4 \times 4 \times 5$, or by $4 \times 5 \times 4$) was equally or more prevalent in Asia. However, the issues raised by the Bambara System are not so easily solved, as quite a few hypotheses exist.¹⁸³

The first hypothesis largely supports my view. There existed various local counting systems such as “the Mandingo hundred” of 60, “the Bambara hundred” of 80 and “the Muslim hundred” of 100 and gradually the Bambara System expanded and dominated.

The second theory simply argues that the reckoning of 80 as 100 was nothing other than a form of discount to favour petty trade. Under this discount system, a dealer paid 80 cowries for certain goods with a value of 100 cowries, and then sold them on for 100 cowries. He only needed to pay 64,000 cowries for what is valued as 100,000 cowries. As plausible as this sounds, this theory does

not explain why this method was only used for counting cowries. "Everything *but* cowries was counted by the normal hundred . . . This suggests that the Bambara hundred belonged to the cowrie system, and must be explained in terms of the cowrie currency," Jan Hogendorn and Marion Johnson have concluded.¹⁸⁴

In the southern zone, the situation was even more locally varied. In Lagos (coastal Nigeria), cowries were counted in the unit of strings of 40 and heads of 2,000 (the same as in Dahomey, as Forbes noted); in Hausaland (northern Nigeria and southern Niger), cowries were counted in tens or twenties and hundreds.¹⁸⁵ In Tasawa in present-day Niger, cowries were counted in fives, "and then, according to the amount of the sum, to form heaps of two hundred (or ten *háwiyas*) or a thousand each."¹⁸⁶ One *háwiya*, equal to 20 cowries, "seems originally to have been the highest sum reached by the indigenous arithmetic."¹⁸⁷ In this case, 20 might have been the base for this counting system.¹⁸⁸ In northern Nigeria, Baba of Karo Nigeria utilised another system based on five too, but it was slightly different:

To count cowrie shells they spread out on the floor; they counted in groups of five. Ten groups of five were 50. They collected the groups of 50 into groups of 200. Ten compounds of 200 were 2000 . . . One mat, 20,000 cowries; that was a man's load, and a strong man would soon get tired of carrying it.¹⁸⁹

An elaboration here of the numeration systems of the Igala people in north-central Nigeria and of the Yoruba people in southwest Nigeria may provide some answers.¹⁹⁰ Under the more influential Yoruba system, from one to ten, each term started with the double vowels "oo," "aa" or "ee"; these are a contracted form of the word *owo*, meaning cowries or money. From 11 to 14, each was reckoned as 10 plus 1, 10 plus 2 and so on; from 15 to 20, each was reckoned as 20 minus 5, 20 minus 4 and so on. From 20 up to 200, figures were reckoned as multiples of 20. From 200 up, figures were reckoned as multiples of 200 (Table 7.8). The Igala system is largely similar to the Yoruba, except for the figure from 11 to 19 (reckoned as 10 plus).

The table above illustrates the 20-based numeric system, of which there are numerous examples in West Africa (Table 7.9).¹⁹¹ Although seldom described, the figure 20 could be reckoned as 5×4 , and naturally as four times the five fingers of one hand. It seems that the pattern of (5)–20–(80)–200 was more or less shared by many local societies and peoples in West Africa. The basic units 20 (5×4) and to a lesser extent 80 (20×4) were evident in the Indian system as well. Consequently, one may ask an intriguing question, namely, whether or not this pattern of cowrie counting system in West Africa was linked to the Indian system that spanned from Bengal to Siam and Yunnan. Was it a legacy of the Indian connection along with the cowrie trade and cowrie money? Or was it simply nothing but a coincidence? There may have been two separate origins, of which the indigenous one was associated with the indigenous

Table 7.8 The Numeric Systems of the Egala and Yoruba¹⁹²

<i>Figure</i>	<i>Igala</i>	<i>Yoruba</i>
20	20 (ogwu)	20 (ogun)
30	20 + 10	30 (ogbon)
40	20 × 2	20 × 2
50	50	20 × 3–10
60	20 × 3	20 × 3
70	20 × 3 + 10	20 × 4–10
80	20 × 4	20 × 4
90	20 × 4 + 10	20 × 5–10
100	20 × 5	20 × 5
200	(20 × 5) × 2	200 (basic)
300	(20 × 5) × 3	300 (basic)
400	(20 × 5) × 4	400 (basic)
500	(20 × 5) × 5	(200 × 3) – 100
600	(20 × 5) × 6	200 × 3
700	(20 × 5) × 7	(200 × 4) – 100
800	(20 × 5) × 8	200 × 4
900	(20 × 5) × 9	(200 × 5) – 100
1,000	800 + 200	200 × 5

Table 7.9 Counting Patterns of Cowrie Money¹⁹³

<i>Area/People</i>	<i>Counting Pattern</i>
Bambara	5–80–400–800
Tasawa	5–20–200–1,000
Baba of Karo	5–50–200–2,000
Lagos	40–200–2,000
Igalaand Yoruba	20–200

hypothesis of cowrie money in Africa as supported by Philip Curtin, while I tend to support the other, the Indian connection theory. After all, as was highlighted by the colonial documents, the pattern of 5–20–200 was reserved for counting cowrie money and for no other purpose.

However, the discussion above has only focused on the spatial coverage in the cowrie money zone; its temporal evolution and its exchange rates with other forms of money such as gold and silver have not yet been thoroughly examined.¹⁹⁴ Ethnic and cultural landscapes in West Africa were far more complicated than has been described above. Certain possibilities, then, surely exist that the indigenous peoples in West Africa had had their own counting system(s), but that these had been gradually corrupted or influenced and somehow replaced by the

Indian system introduced along with cowrie money during the pre-fifteenth-century period. The domination of the Bambara System seems to support this argument,¹⁹⁵ and other systems for the counting of metal monies showed considerable influence from Europe during the post-sixteenth-century period. It seems that both local and global systems were mixed and combined in counting cowrie money in West Africa.

The Ebo (Igbo or Ibo) people of the lower Niger adopted a different counting system of 6–12–60–120–180–600–1,200.¹⁹⁶ M.D.W. Jeffreys found that while the Ibo people used the same decimal system for counting things, when counting cowries, their key system was based on units of six. In ancient Egypt, there existed a combined use of a sexagesimal and a decimal system, the former being used particularly for measurements. Hence, Jeffreys concluded, “Circumstantial evidence leaves no alternative but to accept diffusion of the cowry and its notation from Egypt.”¹⁹⁷ Jeffreys’ argument, evidence and conclusion are all tenuous. First of all, although Egypt provided almost the earliest evidence of the cultural use of cowrie shells in Africa, cowrie shells never played any prominent part in the lower Nile valley¹⁹⁸ and they were certainly not used as money. The area of Egypt or East Africa encompassed large expanses and various agents, but no other cultural adoption of the sexagesimal system has so far emerged. Finally, the east-to-west distribution of cowrie money has been long refuted as invalid. Having said that, Jeffreys did help us to understand the local numeric complexity of cowrie money, as West Africa had adopted many foreign/external cultural practices from the sixteenth century onwards.

Due to the tremendous quantities of cowrie shells, colonial officials found it a formidable task to count shells. Soon, they invented alternative methods instead of counting shells one by one. In the eighteenth century at Whydah and elsewhere along the coast, certain copper containers were used to measure cowries by weight, but this practice was not widely accepted elsewhere.¹⁹⁹ Merchants also invented their own ways to manage cumbersome numbers of cowrie shells. They did not handle actual cowries: instead, they only recorded the counts in terms of shells. Therefore, cowrie shells transferred themselves from a medium of exchange to a unit of account, quite a similar change as gold and silver coinage went through in mediaeval Bengal, cowries in West Africa being onerous to count and gold and silver in Bengal being too rare to be seen as serviceable.

Cowrie money in East Africa

It was during the nineteenth century that *Cypraea annulus* from the African eastern coast were shipped to West Africa and that cowrie money became accepted in some parts of East Africa. By the mid-nineteenth century, cowrie shells had been used as money in Ethiopia.²⁰⁰

In 1856, R.F. Burton, a British captain, set out from Zanzibar on his expedition to discover the sources of the River Nile and explore inland Africa. He gave an interesting account of the development of the cowrie trade, saying that

these cowries were collected “from various places in the coast region between Ras Hafun and the Mozambique.”²⁰¹ From Zanzibar, cowries spread in two directions: the first to the regions north of the “Land of the Moon,” where they were used as money and occasionally demanded as an ornament in Unyamwezi; the second and principal one to West Africa, where “the profits were estimated at 500 per cent.”²⁰²

In Uganda, cowries were a recognised form of money from as late as the end of the eighteenth century. John Roscoe John Roscoe, an Anglican missionary to East Africa, stayed in what became the Uganda Protectorate from 1884 to 1909, living there amongst several African tribes.²⁰³ He observed and recorded the evolution of cowrie money there and even listed the price in cowries for various items in the Gaganza. He told readers that in early times, an ivory disc had been used as money, followed by a blue bead and then by the cowrie shell. Either an ivory disc or a blue bead was reckoned at one hundred cowrie shells and during his stay, the “standard currency was set by the value of the cow. Ivory and slaves were indeed of more value than cows, but they were reckoned as worth a certain number of cows each.”²⁰⁴ Finally, he listed the prices of many goods in terms of cowrie money: a cow (as much as a male slave) for 2,500 cowries (and a female slave for four or five cows); a goat 500, a fowl for 25, a large cock for 50, an ivory tusk of 62 pounds for 1,000, a milk pot for 60–100, a tobacco pipe for 5–10 and a water pot for 40–50.²⁰⁵ John Roscoe even noted the devaluation of cowries over time after the introduction of the rupee: “When the cowry-shell was first introduced, which was probably in the reign of King Semakokiro two cowry-shells would purchase a woman.”²⁰⁶

Of course, cowries were also extensively used for decoration across African societies.²⁰⁷

The end of the cowrie trade

The end of the cowrie trade and the ban on cowrie money by colonial authorities did not immediately end cowrie money. Local resistance was popular and, in many cases, fairly successful in compromising colonial investments and disappointed colonial governments. Indeed, cowrie money died out slowly during and after the period when British silver coins had already replaced shells on the coastal areas, and francs were taking over the role of shells on the upper Niger and to the west of the river.²⁰⁸ At the dawn of the twentieth century, a small incident serves to show that vestiges of cowrie money still persisted in some areas. A native woman, accompanied by a girl named Wonza, came down the Niger River in a canoe and was stopped by two prisoners. They “robbed her of all her property, about £ 8 in cowrie shells.”²⁰⁹

Before World War I, various colonial authorities in West Africa attempted to fix the exchange rate of cowries and thus to stabilise their value. A crucial initiative was to refuse cowrie money as tax payment, supplemented with the ban on the importation and supply of abundant low-denomination coins.²¹⁰ This colonial harshness was met with local resistance. To everyone’s surprise, the

value of cowries fell only slightly in many areas in 1914 and in some areas its value even increased.²¹¹ During the 1920s and the 1930s, cowrie money disappeared even from its old zones such as Timbuktu, while its final demise was a long, slow and varied local process.²¹² In 1930, when M.D.W. Jeffreys was sent to the Ibo in Nigeria, he found that cowrie shells were “still the local currency.”²¹³

A local resistance against French colonial efforts to replace cowrie shells with their own monetary system of francs in West Africa remarkably lasted throughout the first half of the twentieth century,²¹⁴ a period usually assumed to be the technical end of cowrie money. From the military occupation in 1897 and routinisation around 1903 to its end in 1958, the French colonial government in the west Volta (now in Burkina Faso) first accepted cowrie money and then made continuous efforts to replace the local money with the franc. In 1907, the government issued the ban on the importation of cowries, which were no longer accepted by local treasuries for taxation. From 1907 to the 1920s, tax collection involved considerable violence, including plundering and raids. As a result, large quantities of cowries were confiscated and sold on the markets for francs to pay for governmental tax.²¹⁵ Meanwhile, older people became more willing to take their cowrie hoards to money changers, who acquired noticeable profits from the seasonal fluctuation of exchange rates between cowries and francs. Cowries were relatively cheaper during taxation time in January, but soon restored their value after the season.²¹⁶ Even Europeans continued to do business in cowries. In addition, colonial currency was not as convenient as cowries in many ways. The coins, for example, were too light and thus easy to drop. However, aside from economic reasons, the persistence of cowrie money had largely to do with local consciousness to maintain local culture, tradition and identity. Cowrie money became a symbol of independence and sovereignty, thus a way to resist colonial power.²¹⁷ As a result, women traders, merchants and lineage elders of the west Volta successfully maintained “some economic independence” by keeping “a greater proportion of the economic value that they produced” and thus “managed to lock this medium in a narrow loop between produce sales and administration coffers.”²¹⁸

To destroy the circulation of cowries in local markets, the administration in Bobo-Dioulasso in 1917 accepted cowries as tax payment, intending to collect and store these shells and thus to make them too scarce to circulate as money; cowries in markets were also publicly confiscated. These cowries were burned into lime or dumped into rivers. The result turned into an unexpected hit for the administration. The law of value worked, and cowries increased in value sharply against the franc. In 1925, in a revised law code, the colonial government made it an offence for anyone to refuse to accept the franc in the market.²¹⁹ Cowrie money continued into the 1940s in the region, but gradually disappeared after World War II, due to many reasons such as economic changes as well as the younger generation who were used to coins and notes. Many other cases of local resistance similarly occurred, but in general, cowrie shells lost their money status by the middle of the twentieth century. In a few isolated cases,

cowrie money continued until the 1950s or even the 1960s in areas such as the Igbo, northwestern Ghana and Whydah.²²⁰

Without their monetary function, cowrie shells became virtually useless, as they had even been ruled out as ballast. Some people buried them underground, hoping their gold would come back, others stacked them in a heap and still others crushed the shells for their lime content, which itself had a very low value.²²¹ Once gold, now trash, cowries were certainly heavy and difficult to dispose of. No longer part of local economies, cowrie shells still remain in African oral tradition, folklore and literature. And many handicrafts or artefacts for locals and tourists use cowries as decoration.

If Manning's estimate of cowrie proportions in the Bight of Benin can be applied to the whole of West African trade,²²² this means that one-fifth to one-third of West African exports were purchased with cowrie shells, and this amount of value in the form of cowries and remaining in the region forever, literally became utterly worthless. Piles of cowrie shells, discarded by Africans, useless and with no value, symbolise the suffering and loss of African peoples in the global trade invented, manipulated and dominated by the Europeans in colonial times. Cowrie shells hence serve as a metaphor of non-European peoples, materials and cultures during the European colonisation, in which these shells had initially been made valuable and desirable, but which were eventually abandoned, the losses being suffered by the local people.

Back in the Maldives, the sharp decline in cowrie exports was followed by a slow rise from the late nineteenth century when cowrie shells found their way to Indian markets as decoration, a raw material for ceramic manufacture and as medicine.²²³ In addition to their many other roles, cowrie shells have now claimed a new if rather low value as a decoration for tourist souvenirs.

Notes

- 1 Frederick E. Forbes, *Dahomey and the Dahomans; Being the Journals of Two Missions to the King of Dahomey, and Residence at His Capital, in the Year 1849 and 1850*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1851), vol. II, 94.
- 2 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986.
- 3 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 15; Jackson, 1917, 128–130. G. Elliot Smith acknowledged that while there are “almost the earliest evidence of the use of money-cowry in Egypt,” cowrie shells never played any prominent part in the lower Nile Valley. G. Elliot Smith, 1917, “Introduction,” in Jackson, 1917, xxi.
- 4 Dorothea Arnold, “An Egyptian Bestiary,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, New Series, vol. 52, no. 4 (Spring 1995): 36.
- 5 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 15.
- 6 Ibid., 15.
- 7 Cowrie Shell Girdle of Sithathoryunet. Date: c. 1887–1813 BCE; Medium: Gold, carnelian, feldspar, pellets of copper-silver alloy; Length of Griddle: 84.3 cm; Length of Cowrie: 4.7 cm, Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/545533.
- 8 Cite from Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 15.
- 9 Battuta, 2011, 242–243; Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 26.
- 10 Battuta, 2011, 243.

- 11 Ibid., 243.
- 12 Ibid., 110.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid., 235.
- 15 Ibid., 265.
- 16 Wang, 2000, 337.
- 17 Gray and Bell, 2010, "Early Notices of the Maldives," vol. II, 474.
- 18 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 26.
- 19 Ibid., 26–27.
- 20 Ibid., 27.
- 21 Wang, 2000, 364.
- 22 Ma, 2005, 91–92.
- 23 Ghislaine Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Nineteenth Century Western Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 74.
- 24 Shelomo Dov Goitein, *Letter of Medieval Jewish Traders* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 199–200; *A Mediterranean Society, The Jewish Communities of the World as Portrayed by the Cairo Geniza: Volume I, Economic Foundations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 373, 153–154.
- 25 Lydon, 2009, 76.
- 26 Ibid., 75.
- 27 Ibid., 75–76.
- 28 Jeffreys, 1948, 47, 52; Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 17.
- 29 Mervyn Hiskett, "Materials Relating to the Cowry Currency of the Western Sudan – II: Reflections on the Provenance and Diffusion of the Cowry in the Sahara and the Sudan," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, vol. 29, no. 2 (1966): 339–366; Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 17.
- 30 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 17.
- 31 David Abulafia, *A Mediterranean Emporium: The Catalan Kingdom of Majorca* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid., 117.
- 34 Ibid., 117, ft. 53.
- 35 Philip D. Curtin, "Africa and the Wider Monetary World, 1250–1850," in *Precious Metals in the Later Medieval and Early Modern Worlds*, ed. J.F. Richards (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1983), 252; Hiskett, 1966, II, 344; Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 18.
- 36 Mervyn Hiskett, "Materials Relating to the Cowry Currency of the Western Sudan – I: A Late Nineteenth Century Schedule of Inheritance from Kano," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, vol. 29, no. 1 (1966): 122–142; 1966, II.
- 37 Hiskett, 1966, II, 344.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 16.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Cite from *ibid.*
- 43 Battuta, 2011, 334.
- 44 Ibid., 381–382.
- 45 Alvise Cadamosto, *The Voyages of Cadamosto and Other Documents on Western Africa in the Second Half of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. G.R. Crone (Routledge, 2011. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libez-proxy.umac.mo/lib/umac/detail.action?docID=2004673>), 25–26.

- 46 Leo Africanus, *The History and Description of Africa* (London: Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1896), vol. II, 825.
- 47 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 18.
- 48 Ibid., 19, 106.
- 49 Curtin, 1983, 232.
- 50 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 102.
- 51 Curtin, 1983, 233.
- 52 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 104.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Ibid., 106.
- 55 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 106. Cowries might have been used as account money (unit of value) at Calabar and carried to the Cross River for re-exporting northwards. Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 106–107.
- 56 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 125–128.
- 57 Ibid., 107.
- 58 John Adams, *Remarks on the Country Extending from Cape Palmas to the River Congo* (London: G. & W.B. Whittaker, 1823), 263–264.
- 59 Andre Gunder Frank, *ReORIENT: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 73.
- 60 Karl Polanyi, *Dahomey and the Slave Trade: An Analysis of an Archaic Economy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), 49–50; Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 139.
- 61 Robin Law, “Computing Domestic Prices in Precolonial West Africa: A Methodological Exercise from the Slave Coast,” *History in Africa*, vol. 18 (1991): 239–257.
- 62 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 132.
- 63 Law, 1991, 241–242.
- 64 Ibid., 242.
- 65 Law, 1991, 244, 248.
- 66 Ibid., 245.
- 67 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 102.
- 68 Ibid., 102–104.
- 69 Gray and Bell, 2010, “Early Notices of the Maldives,” vol. II, 478. Cambay was located in the Gujarat Gulf, western India.
- 70 Gray and Bell, 2010, vol. I, 438.
- 71 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 30.
- 72 Gray and Bell, 2010, “Early Notices of the Maldives,” 484–485. One quintal was originally 108 and later 112.5 pounds. Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 30.
- 73 Curtin, 1983, 252–253; *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 143; Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 36.
- 74 Gray and Bell, 2010, “Early Notices of the Maldives,” 474–475.
- 75 Ibid., 475.
- 76 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 30.
- 77 Ibid., 39.
- 78 Ibid., 41.
- 79 Ibid., 42–43.
- 80 Heath, 2017, 59.
- 81 Heath, 2017, 59.
- 82 Heath, 2017, 60.
- 83 W.H. Pratt, “Shell Money and Other Primitive Currencies,” *Proceeding Davenport Academy of Natural Sciences*, vol. II (1876): 39.
- 84 Heimann, 1980, 52.
- 85 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 110.
- 86 Ibid., 57–58.

- 87 Ibid., 57.
- 88 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 58.
- 89 This is a duplicate of “Table 5.2 Cowries imports to West Africa (lbs. avoirdupois) by decades, 1700–1799”; for sources and more information, see their discussion below Table 5.2 in their book. Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 62. For annual imports, see Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 58–61.
- 90 Ibid., 112. About 400 shells weighed one pound. As to different prices in the same year, this was the result of totals from different locations. The third column is calculated by the author.
- 91 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 110.
- 92 Patrick Manning, *Slavery, Colonialism and Economic Growth in Dahomey, 1640–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 44; Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 110.
- 93 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 110.
- 94 Robin Law, “Jean Barbot as a Source for the Slave Coast of West Africa,” *History in Africa*, vol. 9 (1982): 155–173.
- 95 John Barbot, “A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea, A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea,” in Awnsham Churchill and John Churchill, eds., *A Collection of Voyages and Travels*, vol. 5, 338–339. This book was published in 1732, 19 years after Barbot’s death in 1713.
- 96 Phillips, 1732, 173–239. Ouidah, a coastal city historically also called Whydah, Juda and Juida by the French and Ajudá by the Portuguese, was formerly in the Kingdom of Whydah, located in the present-day Republic of Benin.
- 97 Ibid., 173–174.
- 98 Ibid., 193.
- 99 Ibid., 194, 195.
- 100 Ibid., 221.
- 101 Ibid., 216.
- 102 Ibid., 223.
- 103 Ibid.
- 104 Ibid., 227.
- 105 Ibid.
- 106 Ibid.
- 107 Ibid.
- 108 Ibid.
- 109 Ibid., 228.
- 110 Ibid., 227–228.
- 111 Ibid., 227. A *cappasheir* was a local official, the so-called captain of the slaves, whose duty was to secure slaves to the waterfront and see them all off ship. Any loss of a slave under his supervision would require him to pay the price of the slave.
- 112 Ibid., 227.
- 113 Ibid., 230.
- 114 Ibid., 219.
- 115 Ibid., 219.
- 116 Ibid., 236.
- 117 Ibid., 236.
- 118 Calculations are based on “Table 6.1 British cowrie exports to West Africa, 1800–1850”; the data for 1813 are unavailable, but the number is assumed to have been considerably smaller. Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 67.
- 119 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 67–69.
- 120 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 70.
- 121 Calculations are based on “Table 6.1 British cowrie exports to West Africa, 1800–1850.” Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 67.

- 122 Patrick Manning, "Slaves, Palm Oil, and Political Power on the West African Coast," *African Historical Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1969): 280. Patrick's figures were taken from the Annual Statements of Trade for the United Kingdom, published in the Parliamentary.
- 123 Ibid., 73–74.
- 124 Ibid., 71, 73.
- 125 Ibid., 69.
- 126 Ibid., 75.
- 127 Ibid.
- 128 Anthony Gerald Hopkins, "The Currency Revolution in South-West Nigeria in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, vol. 3, no. 3 (1966): 475; Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 78.
- 129 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 76.
- 130 Ibid., 77.
- 131 Ibid., 78–79.
- 132 Ibid., 16.
- 133 Ibid.
- 134 Ibid., 105.
- 135 Ibid.
- 136 Ibid., 131.
- 137 T. Edward Bowdich (Thomas Edward), *Mission From Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee, With a Statistical Account of that Kingdom and Geographical Notices of Other Parts of the Interior of Africa* (London: J. Murray, 1819).
- 138 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 107.
- 139 For history of Dahomey, see Melville J. Herskovits, *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom* (New York: J.J. Augustin Publisher, 1938); Manning, 1982.
- 140 For a discussion of cowrie money and its relation to the control of power in Benin, see Patrick Manning, "Coastal Society in the Republic of Bénin: Reproduction of a Regional System," *Cahiers D'études Africaines*, vol. 29, no. 114 (1989): 239–257.
- 141 Forbes, 1851, vol. I, 1–2.
- 142 Ibid., vol. I, 14–15.
- 143 Ibid., vol. I, 36.
- 144 Ibid., vol. I, 51.
- 145 Ibid., vol. I, 51–52.
- 146 Ibid., vol. I, 123.
- 147 Ibid., vol. II, 81–82.
- 148 Ibid., vol. I, 26.
- 149 Ibid., vol. I, 35.
- 150 Ibid., vol. I, 89.
- 151 Ibid., vol. II, 75.
- 152 Ibid., vol. I, 110.
- 153 Ibid., vol. I, 122.
- 154 Ibid., vol. I, 114.
- 155 Ibid.
- 156 Ibid., vol. II, 82.
- 157 Ibid., vol. II, 85.
- 158 Ibid., vol. I, 83. The commander-in-chief refers to a certain high-ranking British naval officer.
- 159 Ibid., vol. I, 83.
- 160 Ibid., vol. I, 86.
- 161 Ibid., vol. I, Inner Page.
- 162 Ibid., vol. II, 18.
- 163 Ibid., vol. II, 12–14.

- 164 Ibid., vol. II, 28.
- 165 Ibid., vol. II, 28–30.
- 166 Ibid., vol. II, 30–31.
- 167 Ibid., vol. II, 30.
- 168 Ibid., vol. II, 37, 41, and 43.
- 169 Ibid., vol. II, 46–47.
- 170 Ibid., vol. II, 47.
- 171 Ibid., vol. II, 48.
- 172 Ibid.
- 173 Ibid., vol. II, 49.
- 174 Ibid., vol. II, 68–69.
- 175 Ibid., vol. II, 135–136.
- 176 Ibid., vol. II, 185–186.
- 177 Ibid., vol. II, 187.
- 178 Pelliot, 1959, esp. 57–563. Other scholars such as James Heimann and Hans Ulrich Vogel also neglect the possible African connection. It is likely that Jan Hogendorn and Marion Johnson did not consider the Indian connection, either.
- 179 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 114.
- 180 Mungo Park, *Journal of a Mission to the Interior of Africa in 1805* (London: Printed for John Murray, by W. Bulmer and Co., 1815), 146.
- 181 Park, 1815, “Addenda,” *Journal of a Mission*, xiii.
- 182 Eugène Abdon Mage, *Voyage dans le Soudan occidental 1863–6* (Paris: L. Hachette et cie, 1868), 171, cite from Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 115. In Mage’s book, pages 191–192 instead of page 171 include the quotation by Hogendorn and Johnson.
- 183 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 115–118.
- 184 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 117.
- 185 Ibid., 117.
- 186 Heinrich Barth, *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa* (London and Gotha, 1857–1858), 256.
- 187 Ibid., footnote *.
- 188 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 118.
- 189 Mary F. Smith, *Baba of Karo* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), 80.
- 190 Adolphus Mann, “Notes on the Numeral System of the Yoruba Nation,” *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 16 (1887): 59–64; Claudia Zaslavsky, “Mathematics of the Yoruba People and of Their Neighbors in Southern Nigeria,” *The Two-Year College Mathematics Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1970): 76–99; Gideon S. Omachonu, “Comparative Analysis of the Numeral Systems of Igàlà, Yoruba, German and English,” *Linguistik Online*, vol. 55, no. 5/12 (2012): 57–73.
- 191 Zaslavsky, 1970, 78.
- 192 Omachonu, 2012, 65–66.
- 193 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 116–120.
- 194 For a brief introduction to the temporal changes in cowrie counting, see Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 122.
- 195 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 116–117.
- 196 Jeffreys, 1948, 45–53, esp. 50–51; Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 122.
- 197 Jeffreys, 1948, 52.
- 198 Jackson, 1917, xxi.
- 199 Law, 1991, 243; Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 121–122.
- 200 Jackson, 1917, 140.
- 201 Richard F. Burton, “The Lake Regions of Central Equatorial Africa,” *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London*, Vol. XXIX (1859): 448.
- 202 Ibid.

- 203 John Roscoe, *The Baganda; An Account of Their Native Customs and Beliefs* (London: Macmillan, 1911). The Baganda was a Bantu ethnic group native to Buganda, a subnational kingdom within Uganda.
- 204 Ibid., 456.
- 205 Ibid., 455–456.
- 206 Ibid., 457. The reign of King Semakokiro was 1780–1797.
- 207 Ibid., 457.
- 208 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 148.
- 209 Allen Upward, “In the Provincial Court: Note of Cases Tired in the Provincial Court of Kabba, Northern Nigeria,” *Journal of the Royal African Society*, vol. 3, no. 12 (1904): 406.
- 210 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 149–150.
- 211 Ibid., 151.
- 212 Ibid., 152.
- 213 Jeffreys, 1948, 46.
- 214 Mahir Saul, “Money in Colonial Transition: Cowries and Francs in West Africa,” *American Anthropologist*, vol. 106, no. 1 (2004): 71–84.
- 215 Ibid., 74–75.
- 216 Ibid., 76.
- 217 Ibid., 76.
- 218 Ibid., 81.
- 219 Ibid., 79.
- 220 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 152–153.
- 221 Ibid., 154.
- 222 Manning, 1982, 44.
- 223 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 156–157.

8 The Pacific Islands and North America

Out of the Bengali system

wampum is the source and the mother of the beaver trade, and for good only, without *wampum*, we cannot obtain beavers from the savages. If we receive no *wampum* from outside – we have none in our country.

– Petrus Stuyvesant (1610–1672), Governor of
New Netherland, 21 April, 1660¹

The preceding chapters have provided a holistic profile of cowrie money on the Afro-Eurasian continent, and arguably, these cowrie areas and societies at one time formed a single cowrie monetary world. This chapter turns to examining shell money (which was sometimes cowrie money) in various societies across the Pacific Islands and in North America; these societies were not connected with the cowrie money zone in Afro-Eurasia,² nor were these shell monies associated with or influenced by the Bengali system. No evidence has emerged to suggest that the use of cowrie money in these indigenous societies was linked to, modelled after or introduced from the Indian Ocean, or vice versa. However, while the use of shells as money might have been an indigenous invention in many societies rather than a result of diffusion, in North America, particularly in its northeastern portion, European contacts proved to be a critical force in the creating of shell money, and in Papua New Guinea, contacts proved to be the key actor in ending local shell money. Therefore, all these non-Afro-Eurasian cases provide a local and comparative opportunity to reflect on the creation of money. The phenomenon of the importing or acquiring of certain materials that were adopted as money under a similar environment with limited choices found in far-flung places across the world is a fascinating one. So is their collapse after the European contact.

This chapter begins by reviewing shell money (and cowrie money) in the Pacific Island societies, especially those in Papua New Guinea, followed by North American cases. These cases include the use of cowrie money in the Melpa, the Enga and the Kapauku in New Guinea and the *wampum* money in North America, all of which shed some light on the origins of money. The manipulation of cowrie money by the Dutch in New Amsterdam and cowrie money in Papua New Guinea during the European contact period present constructive

comparisons of cowrie shells for many issues, such as the devaluation and collapse of cowrie money, a topic that has been discussed in the preceding chapters. In addition, European and American merchants also shipped cowrie shells from Africa, intentionally or not, to the New World. These cowrie shells were used in the fur trade, for example, and probably also as a means of low-valuation exchange in some colonial commercial port centers.

Independent monetary origin

An example of early ethno-evidence of cowrie shells in the Pacific societies was left by Captain Cook. It seems that cowries were used as ornaments in Tongan society before the visit of Captain Cook in 1773–1774. An elaborate Tongan necklace from the Cook Collection on display in a Vienna museum, “probably from Cook’s third voyage,” “combines a large pearl shell with a waterworn pebble (often used for decorating graves of chiefs), groups of bird bones, pointed brown shells, cowrie shells, a shell called *pule’otu* (worn only by chiefs), and shell beads.”³ The necklace might have been worn by Paulaho, the thirty-sixth Tu’i Tonga, who assumedly descended directly from the god Tangaloa and was thus at the pinnacle of Tongan society.

Shells were and are valued in many societies, prehistoric or not, and Captain Cook’s necklace decorated with cowrie shells, although precious in Tonga, might not be surprising to many high-status individuals amongst the Pacific or Native American societies. In terms of cultural and religious implications, shell adornments in the Pacific or Native American societies were valued for their protection, luck and beauty, which, apart from certain locally specific cultural and religious variations, were not so very different from those in Afro-Eurasia.

At the same time, shell money and sometimes cowrie money were also employed in many societies in the Pacific Islands and North America, but their use of shells as money had little if *anything* to do with the cowrie money on the Afro-Eurasian continent. Their use of shell money was not spread from or influenced by Bengal or other parts of the old continent. Indeed, it seems that cowries and other kinds of shells, due to their physical attributes and the human labour invested in acquiring and processing them, became a natural and deliberate choice for those remote societies that needed a medium of exchange, driven not only by advances in trade and commerce, but also by the elitist efforts to maintain and reproduce their power and social structure.

Shell money in both New Guinea and North America was an independent monetary system. Firstly, most shells were locally derived, and not of Maldivian origin. The Sulu Islands were known to produce the two most famous cowrie shells, which might explain the source of cowrie shells in some Pacific Islands, but details concerning routes and agents remain unclear, at least for earlier times. Secondly, indigenous peoples in both New Guinea and North America were separated from the Afro-Eurasian world before modern times. In other words, cowrie money or shell money in their societies was not connected with the Bengali system. In addition, unlike in the Bengali system, where cowrie

shells were not processed except for hunting and shipping, in North America and amongst the Kapauku people in New Guinea, a labour-intensive process was used to change the physical form of the shells into valuables or money. In these societies, the intensive labour involved was inseparable from making these shells into money.

Cowrie use in New Guinea

Amongst the Pacific Islands, New Guinea was the major area where solid evidence of the use of cowries and cowrie money has been found. Its use of cowrie money was also the earliest and most concentrated. Archaeological evidence indicates that cowrie shells might have been used in the eastern highlands as early as 9,500 years ago.⁴ Many societies adopted shells and cowrie shells as money, and many more used them for ornamentation or in rituals.

In British New Guinea around the turn of the twentieth century, large built-up canoes (*waga*) in Southeastern British New Guinea were elaborately decorated. Large white cowrie shells, for example, were carved at the two ends of the *waga*.⁵ Over a dozen years later, it was still evident that cowrie shells were used in other adornments as well in New Guinea.⁶ A ceremonial mask collected by Mr Schreiber from the Sepik River, Dutch New Guinea and presented to the British Museum “resembles a shield, long oval in shape”; at the top of the mask is a human skull, “secured by cane lashings,” “ornamented with cowrie-shells, furnished with a long artificial ‘nose,’ similarly decorated”; “below the skull are semi-circular rows of shells and pig tusks, simulating a necklace.”⁷

R.F. Fortune, an anthropologist at Cambridge University, recalled that indigen-ous people in New Guinea traded tomatoes with his team for cowrie shell money on 30 June 1935. He noticed the use of the ovalis shell too and pointed out that “the cowrie shell was small change,” but he did not supply the rate of the ovalis shell in comparison to the cowrie shell.⁸

Pearl shells were used amongst the Melpa and the Enga, two neighbouring societies in the highlands of New Guinea.⁹ The two groups interacted closely with each other and probably shared a common origin. Both pig and pearl shells were taken as exchange items in these two societies, while the roles in their two exchange systems and societies were, interestingly, reversed. Amongst the Enga, domestic pigs enjoyed a high status, as their possession determined a member’s wealth, prestige and food supply. In Melpa society, the pearl shell was the dominant important exchange item and was even more valuable than a pig. The Enga people were familiar with pearl shells and used them in exchange for goods, but not very frequently nor were they as highly valued as a pig. The Melpa people also used pigs in exchanges, but pearl shells overwhelmingly dominated. The Enga therefore often mocked the Melpa, saying that “they have no pigs to exchange, only pearl shells.”¹⁰ Pearl shells were not harvested locally, but were imported from coastal areas, and the import and adoption of pearl shells as the dominant exchange item had a profound impact on Melpa society. To maintain their power, prestige and dominance, Melpa chiefs managed to

monopolise the importing of pearl shells and thus ensure that their economy would not be threatened by the arrival of cowrie shells from outside. The import of shells was of similar importance to the Kapauku elite.

Cowrie money in the Kapauku

Shells (and cowrie shells) and stones were important objects in interlacing trade contacts in the Central Highlands of New Guinea, and there existed a cowrie money and economy amongst the Kapauku people, located around the Wissle Lakes, far west of the Central Highlands.¹¹ Unlike other peoples, the Kapauku never wore cowries as ornaments, but did use them as money. The case of cowrie money in Kapauku society is intriguing, and illustrates how the import of large amounts of these shells posed a threat not only to the indigenous monetary system, but also to the whole of their society.¹² Indeed, in 1956, there was the Obano Uprising “directed against all foreign influence,” and one of the main points of contention was the import of cowries that challenged the authority of the *tonawi*, the chiefs of the Kapauku.¹³

The use of cowrie money amongst the Kapauku had diverse local features. Firstly, not all cowrie shells were accepted. Only *méré* (*Cypraea moneta*) were accepted, with their convex end cut off; *Cypraea annulus* was not accepted as a form of money. Secondly, it took years for a recently imported *méré* to develop into money. While a new *méré* shell was accepted by people without hesitation, it had to be polished, buried and treated in other ways until it had become as white as a genuinely old shell. Some people specialised in this processing, trading their products with tribes in the east for other goods including genuine shells. Therefore, amongst the Kapauku, there existed two kinds of *moneta* shells: the old ones, called *Tola-méré*, which had been circulated for many years, and the new ones, called *Ija-méré*, which had recently been imported. Those introduced around 1938, for example, were considered mature by the 1950s–1960s.¹⁴

Cowrie shells were widely and extensively used to purchase goods, pay for various services such as garden labour or medical treatment, or as credit in a system for shared pig breeding and participation in the culturally important pig feast. Cowries were also used to pay for bride-price. In terms of bride-price, the Kapauku divided it into two parts: *Oné* (including *Tola-méré*) for the wife’s mother, and *Kadé* (including both *Tola-méré* and *Ija-méré*) for the wife’s brothers and other relatives and creditors. In other words, cowrie shells functioned as a medium of exchange, a measure of value and a means of payment; at the same time, cowries were seldom kept as a form of savings, but this was partly because the Kapauku people disapproved of hoarding. Therefore, the use of cowrie money amongst the Kapauku was on the whole not so very different from that in the Afro-Eurasian sphere. Indeed, cowrie money served as the basis for an elaborate monetary and credit system, upon which the power of *tonawi* leaders in these communities was established.¹⁵

The arrival of the European expeditions in the early twentieth century, however, had a huge impact on the supply-demand chain of cowries. Cowrie

shells were introduced in “a quantity beyond control,” as unknown quantities were brought to the northeastern Highlands (probably after 1910), 6,000 shells to the Swart Valley in 1920–1921, 5,000 to Upper Rouffaer in 1926, 1,200 to Mappia and Tapiro in 1936, 10,000 to the West-Central Highlands in 1939, unknown quantities in 1938–1939 by the Archbold expedition, many boxes by the Dutch Government to the Wissle Lake area after 1938 and during the war against the Japanese, and a few hundred kilos by the Dutch Government to the Baliem Valley after 1956.¹⁶ A total of 400 cowrie shells amounted to one pound, so a few hundred kilos meant more than 160,000 cowries.

The large inflow of cowrie shells, logically, would devalue this money and probably soon cause the collapse of this cowrie monetary system. The devaluation did occur, but the *tonawi* quickly realised its potential and the far-reaching threat posed by the large number of new shells into their community, and thus adopted many means to minimise the effects of price changes and risks. They realised that it was the ordinary people, especially young men, who benefitted the most. Young men provided services and sold goods to these expedition teams, and as a result, most of the new shells (*Ija-méré*) were owned by these young men. New rules were made by the *tonawi* to contain the economic power held by young men.

To maintain their authority, the *tonawi* had to make a sharp distinction between *Tola-méré* (old cowrie money) and *Ija-méré* (new cowrie money). Pigs, the crucial asset for wealth and prestige, for example, could only be paid for by *Tola-méré*, thus ruling out young men in this significant transaction. *Ija-méré* was only admitted to the Kadé part of the bride-price (hence the recently imported cowrie money was collected by and distributed only amongst ordinary men) whereas *Tola-méré* was required for the *Oné* part. As a result, *Ija-méré* and their owners, the young men, were excluded from entering important economic activities and thus the elite sphere.

Furthermore, *Ija-méré* were used in the inter-tribal trade with peoples in the east in exchange for salt, stone, axes, bows and occasionally for ancient shells; thus, these new shells were exported out of Kapauku society. Such a policy helped to reduce the quantity of *Ija-méré* in the local society and hence decrease the threat and risk of the quantities of these new shells. In addition, most counterfeits were sold in the east.¹⁷ In so doing, the *tonawi* managed to contain the circulation of *Ija-méré* in the community, set up barriers for ordinary young men to realise their economic and therefore political power and thus maintain their dominance in terms of wealth and status. The challenge posed by young men and imported cowrie money had been minimised. The social hierarchy remained largely as stable as it ever had been.

Nevertheless, other factors, especially the interference of the government in the post-World War II period, weakened the authority of the *tonawi* and reinforced the devaluation of the *Tola-méré*. The first measure was the government's prohibition of capital punishment or physical violence, which greatly decreased the powers of the *tonawi* who, due to their violations of this prohibition, were occasionally put in prison for a few months. Second, the shells

imported before World War II aged and a large sum of ancient shells came into the hands of ordinary people. Furthermore, more people had the opportunity to travel further afield and they usually brought back with them pocketfuls of *Tola-méré*. The increased supply of cowrie money posed a new challenge to the traditional monetary system. Finally, new educational, economic and commercial opportunities proved to be unfavourable to the *tonawi* but benefitted young people. By the 1950s, cowrie money had noticeably devalued, both as a symbol and as a result of the decline of the old institution, which was exactly the social context for the Obano Uprising in 1956. This situation paralleled the incident of the 1817 Paik Rebellion in Odisha against the British East India Company, mentioned in Chapter Three.

The case of cowrie money in the Kapauku is illustrative. This cowrie money constituted an essential part of the social institution, on which its hierarchical structure was based. The control of *Tola-méré* not only provided wealth, but also legitimacy for the community leaders, as happened amongst the Melpa, where chiefs monopolised the import of cowries to establish their dominance. Therefore, money (cowrie money in these cases) in these small Pacific Island societies, as with the minting of copper coins in imperial China or the slave trade in the Dahomey Kingdom, was not just an economic policy or a way to accumulate wealth for the state and the elite, but was also a source of legitimacy, the foundation of the social hierarchy.

The case of the Kapauku also sheds light on the effect the supply-demand chain has on a form of money and the monetary system itself. An oversupply certainly causes devaluation and most likely the collapse of the monetary system. This was why both the Mongol Yuan and the *tonawi* made efforts to illegalise or diminish certain imported cowrie shells. At the same time, the collapse of cowrie money amongst the Kapauku largely was the result of the new context after World War II and was also partly due to its traditional political structure being changed under the enhanced interference from the formation of the Republic of Indonesia. Local, regional and global forces interplayed in the collapse of cowrie money and its power system amongst the Kapauku.

The case of shell money in the Kapauku society indeed was part of the colonial process in inland New Guinea and probably all Melanesian societies in general. It has illustrated how contacts caused the collapse of the shell money and consequently local societies, a global phenomenon since 1500.

Contact and collapse

The early exchanges between the indigenous peoples and foreigners in New Guinea, still little apprehended by the world until the end of the 1970s,¹⁸ indeed is essentially the same as that in New England and other Indian societies in North America. The European adoption of local shell money in the Pacific Islands and North America, put in a comparative and global context, in nature is nothing different from the European domination of the cowrie trade and cowrie money in Afro-Eurasia. Their control of supply and their dump of cowrie

shells in West Africa for local resources, facilitated European colonial extension and domination locally and globally, which could be conceptualised into the format of “(European) contact and (local) collapse.” The New Guinean experience, or the Melanesian experience as a whole, is of the same trajectory. Ian Hughes has summarised how the Europeans during the contact period before World War II started a traumatic effect in the Melanesian world and as a result, “previously self-sufficient Melanesian economies became of satellites of an overseas metropolitan economy,” together with “the loss of political autonomy.”¹⁹

A series of colonial projects were conducted by the Australian government, missionaries and a gold mining industry in the highlands of Papua New Guinea during the 1930s. Australian government officers and missionaries regarded their reaches as establishing spatial, administrative and spiritual control of the last frontier and gold miners saw their work as an economical exploitation. All of them underestimated or ignored the far-reaching influence of the colonial process. Their transactions “during the earliest years of the contact phase were arguably the key mechanism in the imperial process. The most potent single force was the adoption of the traditional medium of exchange, shell money, and its subsequent importation in large quantities.”²⁰

Before this contact, most separate communities were of self-sufficient independency, while an exchange system of “scarcer and discontinuously distributed resources” developed to overcome the barriers of geography and more importantly, language, culture and political fragmentation.²¹ Amongst the large range of utilitarian goods, stone axes, shells and pigs were of the most valuable and durable.

Various shells and axes functioned as local money. Hughes estimates that in terms of stone axe blades, averagely speaking, each family possessed no more than two; and as to shells, “only the most important men” “had good quality specimens of the high-value shells.”²² In the Chimbu area of the central highlands, each family probably possessed a hundred cowries, “together with twenty dogwhelks, two or three slivers of pearl shell and occasional small pieces of cone or gastropod shell.”²³ This shows that both axes and shells as well as pigs had been big money of great value, and thus their circulation had not been very frequent.

By the early 1930s, an Australian government base had been set up in the central highlands with a patrol officer present, mission stations had been established in the western highlands and gold mining operations at Edie Creek were well underway. Unprecedented contacts and exchanges occurred. Foreigners quickly followed local monetary practices. J.L. Taylor, assistant district officer of the recently established Kainantu Patrol Post recalled in 1930:

We were the first to realise the real nature of shell in the highlands. A Kukuku first taught me the secret by the way he examined a rope of *girigiri* (M[elanesian] P[iggin]; ring cowries and money cowries) that I had. I realised that it was *money* – he looked as I might have looked at a guinea as a child, first thinking that it was brass then realizing that it was real.

When Mick was going through Kainantu I gave him a few handfuls of Nassa (*tambu*) [dog-whelks] saying it might be useful and a week or so later got a note saying "send some more."²⁴

More shells were obtained and sent to New Guinea to buy local food, especially pigs for protein, labour and service, "to the great excitement of the local people."²⁵

A few remarkable sequential changes occurred during this contact and can be summarised as follows. First, the adoption of shell money by white colonists facilitated the circulation of shell money, in terms of quantity, frequency of exchange and scope. As a result, the status and role of shell money had been enhanced and made popular in relation to other forms of money such as pigs. Second, the new sources of shells re-structured not only the traditional geographical distribution of shell money, but also the distribution of wealth in terms of class, gender and culture. Before European contact, for example, pearl shells came from the south while during colonial times, they were traded from the western highlands bases and moved to the east and the south.²⁶ The beneficiaries of the new shells were largely young men or women, as was seen amongst the Kapauku, which consequently posed a challenge to the existing power relationships. Moreover, the increase in shell supply from outside found a continuous absorption in local societies due to the strong demands for shell money in local societies. However, very soon after, inflation began.²⁷ The inflation process, as much as the distribution of shell money, spread from the base areas to neighbouring societies. Furthermore, with the large increase of shell money, there appeared a shortage of and consequently competition for food, especially for pigs, the main sources of protein, which in turn caused the price of pigs to rise.²⁸ As a result, with so many shells in hands, the initial excitement and joy of local people turned into a sense of disappointment, loss and frustration. Vicedom, a Lutheran missionary, noticed that while the local people "had now earned so much goldlip pearl shell that they themselves were saying that they could no longer buy anything with it."²⁹

Although cowrie money did not disappear until the post-war period, the pre-war contact proved to be a turning point. It not only established and consolidated the governmental and missionary presence and influence in Papua New Guinea, but also invented a neo-tradition for the indigenes.³⁰ This contact irrevocably changed the local economy, culture and society, including the nature and distribution of wealth, trading relationships, kinship and power structures and the "post-contact situation had become the norm."³¹ While the Pacific War caused a pause in the contact tendency, the post-war decades witnessed an accelerated speed of change, as happened to the Kapauku people. In the post-war period, numerous shells were distributed to exploit local resources. Between September 1952 and February 1953, for instance, 6,770 *lbs* of dog-whelks, approximately more than twenty million shells of this species, were distributed to governmental outstations in the highlands to the west.³² This shell bubble, like the one in West Africa, burst at different rate in different places and with

differing local implications. In general, the oversupply of shells, combined with other political, economic and cultural factors, eventually ended shell money in Papua New Guinea.

The case of shell money in Papua New Guinea symbolises the transformation from its original independence and autonomy to its current periphery within a metropolitan economy. Such a transformation, whether in Papua New Guinea or West Africa or various Indian societies in North America, must be understood in terms of the colonial contact, whether Australian or European.

One question arises concerning the shell money (including cowrie money) in New Guinean societies as to when it began. While archaeological discoveries have proven the use of (cowrie) shells in prehistoric and early periods, the use of shell money early on cannot be reasonably argued. Colonial and anthropological descriptions both mentioned the existence of shell money in indigenous societies but did not ascertain when shell money started. Local folklore is similarly obscure, simply claiming its origin to have been a long, long time ago. In fact, the use of shell money in some societies was fairly recent, as the case of the *wampum* amongst many indigenous Indian societies in North America makes clear.

Shells and shell money in North America

From the end of the nineteenth century, American scholars were aware that native Indian peoples from New England in the east via the Mississippi Valley in the Middle West, to the Pacific coast in the west and from Virginia in the south to Canada in the north had once adopted shell money. The most popular shell money was the so-called *wampum*, a kind of processed shell bead. Early scholars tended to argue that the use of shell money amongst Indian societies began much earlier than European contact. Based on the use of money, some scholars thought relatively highly of the indigenous people, "since they possessed an aboriginal money of recognized value, although it had no sanction other than common customs."³³

Unlike cowrie money used in Afro-Eurasia that required little human labour except for its acquisition and transportation, shell money in North America was intensively manufactured. In addition to the effort of collecting these shells, much labour was involved to fashion the resulting bead, which then acted as a coin. It was observed that "an Indian's utmost manufacture amounted only to a few pence a day."³⁴ Due to the intensive human labour involved, "the purchasing power of a *wampum* bead was far in advance of that of a cowrie, the dentalium of the Pacific coast, or any other unwrought shell used as money."³⁵

From northern Virginia to New France, two types of *wampum* existed: the white one, being the most common and least valuable, and the black one (occasionally called purple or red), being darker and the most valuable.³⁶ The dark ones were made from the hard-shelled clam species *Mercenaria mercenaria* and were so named because of their use as a form of money, just as *Cypraea moneta* had been. The white ones were made from the whelk species *Busycon carica* and *B. canaliculatum*, with a relatively lower value. *Wampum* beads were



*Figure 8.1 Wampum, Eighteenth Century, New England*³⁷

tubular, standardised and small in size, on average 6.4–9.5 mm in length and 3.2 mm in diameter, with a drilled bore of less than 1mm in diameter.³⁸ As such, *wampum* was very good for decoration (Figure 8.1), and convenient as a medium of exchange due to their standardised size, form and weight. It was also very easy to carry and count them. The “minting” of *wampum*, however, was a time-consuming process, and only 36–48 pieces could be manufactured per day per person.³⁹

The wide use of *wampum* was mentioned extensively in colonial texts:

[*Wampum*] is the money with which you may buy skins, furs, slaves, or anything the Indians have; it being the mammon (as our money is to us) that entices and persuades them to do anything and part with everything they possess except their children for slaves. As for their wives, they are often sold and their daughter violated for it. With this they buy off murders; and whatsoever a man can do that is ill, this wampum will quit him of, and make him, in their opinion, good and virtuous, though never so black before.⁴⁰

With their tone of colonial arrogance, bias and misrepresentation, these comments might still help us to glean something of the monetary and religious roles of these shells in some Indian societies. In Delaware, *wampum* was paid by Indians for the expenditure of public affairs and for the employment of servants for feasts in which *wampum* was also thrown upon the ground for children to scramble for,⁴¹ a familiar amusement Ibn Battuta had observed in the Maldives many centuries before and thousands of miles distant.

Although the use of shell money by Native Americans before European contact was widely recorded by early scholars, from the mid-twentieth century onwards,

scholars have pointed out that the *wampum* money was a recent invention, largely promoted by the Europeans.⁴² Mary Herman points out that the tubular beads called *wampum* were known to be widely used by most tribes on the eastern coast of North America before European contact, but significant changes occurred in the available quantities of *wampum* and their use, being a result of European intervention.⁴³ Evidence from archaeological and earliest textual records has led to the conclusion that *wampum* was “generally scarce, valuable and used principally for ornamentation before the period of European contact,” and the introduction of metal tools by the Europeans caused a great increase in *wampum*, subsequently manufactured not only by the Indians but also by the Dutch and English.⁴⁴ Lynn Ceci also doubts that the finely drilled bores could have been done by the Indians before European machinery.⁴⁵ It seems that a sudden boom in *wampum* occurred in the last few decades of the sixteenth century, obviously a consequence of European contact.⁴⁶

Therefore, while the use of *wampum* was indigenous, its monetary function was a recent invention, deliberately promoted if not created by the Europeans. Because *wampum* was a highly valued commodity, European merchants immediately learnt to use *wampum* in exchange for local goods, although these processed shell beads were worthless back in Europe or elsewhere. Local traditions usually tamed foreigners, at least in the beginning, no matter whether they were the Mongols, the Chinese or the Europeans. Some time before 1627, the Dutch discovered the high value of *wampum* amongst the Indians and immediately adopted *wampum* for the medium of exchange, especially in the fur trade. Soon, *wampum* became a significant exchange commodity in the fur trade for the Europeans, who realised it was to their advantage to obtain and even make *wampum* themselves.⁴⁷ In the 1650s, the Dutch sent shells to Holland to be manufactured, but their *wampum* were not as fine as those made by the Indians. Soon the Dutch made New England their *wampum* “minting” base and other colonists there joined this industry, especially in Long Island, where oyster shells were abundant for the processing.⁴⁸ Different qualities of *wampum* were produced and accordingly graded in the exchange system. Previously, *wampum*, together with some other goods such as fur, functioned as a standard of value and were occasionally used as a medium of exchange; now *wampum* distinguished itself by taking on the role of a regular medium of exchange, that is, as actual money, similar to cowrie shells in Papua New Guinea, where shells began to dominate, thanks to new sources imported by the Europeans. This form of exchange was accepted both by various Indian groups, European merchants and colonial authorities. In New York and New Jersey, “They used it to buy peltries of the Indians. Thus, wampum quickly became a standard of values, the currency of the colonists to a great extent in their transactions with each other, and even a legal tender.”⁴⁹

Very soon, *wampum* was mixed with the Dutch coinage system, due to various reasons. Firstly, the Indians highly valued *wampum*, and the Dutch and other latecomers such as the English desired Indian products, especially fur. Hence, the Europeans faced a similar situation as when they reached Ming-Qing China,

where they had to pay hard cash (silver for Chinese goods such as tea and porcelain, and in America, *wampum* for Indian furs).⁵⁰ Consequently, *wampum* were regularly in circulation. Furthermore, the Dutch faced a shortage of coins, a long-term, unresolved problem that was shared by the English in the seventeenth century. Indeed, when it was adopted as a colonial currency, the *wampum* became “a legal tender.”⁵¹

More interestingly, the Dutch-English competition in northeastern America largely centred around the control of the *wampum* supply, in which the English gradually gained the upper hand. Through various campaigns, the English succeeded in obtaining more *wampum* by occupying new lands or by imposing tribute on conquered Indian tribes. From 1634 to 1664, at least 17,000 fathoms, or more than nine million *wampum*, were presented by the Indians as tribute, fines or gifts to the English.⁵² The Dutch were deeply impressed with the English attempt “to monopolize all the profits of the wampum trade to themselves,”⁵³ but they were unable to compete. By 1650, most of Long Island was under English control. The situation was so urgent that one Dutch official pessimistically admitted in 1652, “the English will retain all the *wampum* manufacturers to themselves and we shall be obliged to eat oats out of English trade.”⁵⁴

In addition to New Netherlands and the English colonies, *wampum* was also used in New France. In 1635, when the Jesuits had just arrived in the Huron area, they found that “the money with which they will buy their food, wood, bark house and other necessities, is little beads of tubes of glass, knives, awls, blankets, kettles, hatches and similar things.”⁵⁵ The Jesuits’ reckoning of *wampum* as money at that time might have been a misunderstanding, as *wampum* and other goods were often used in exchanges. Indeed, throughout the seventeenth century in the Huron area, *wampum* was mainly used in various ceremonies and occasions for gambling, curing, burials and gifts, which contributed to the urgent scarcity of *wampum* for exchanges. It was beaver fur that served as a regular medium of exchange and a standard of value.⁵⁶

Due to the large supply of *wampum*, along with many counterfeit ones, this tender money faced a universal problem: inflation. In 1652, the Massachusetts Colony began to mint its own metal coinage, which caused the one-way flow of *wampum* into the Dutch side, where rocketing prices for every other kind of goods except *wampum* were observed. Stuyvesant complained about “the abundant importation of *wampum* by the peoples of New England, who make their payments with it and take out of the country not only the best goods sent from here, but also many beavers and other furs.”⁵⁷ The demonetisation of *wampum* in the English colony made for a uni-directional flow to the Indians too, and *wampum* was poured into the fur trade. The success of the English in trade was at the expense of the Dutch and Indians, and the *wampum* trade in general declined. Delegitimised by the English and devalued in general, however, *wampum* money did not die so easily. As late as 1748, it was still accepted in colonial trade all along the coast and European merchants still made “a considerable profit” from it.⁵⁸ And it continued to be widely used as decorations (Figure 8.2).

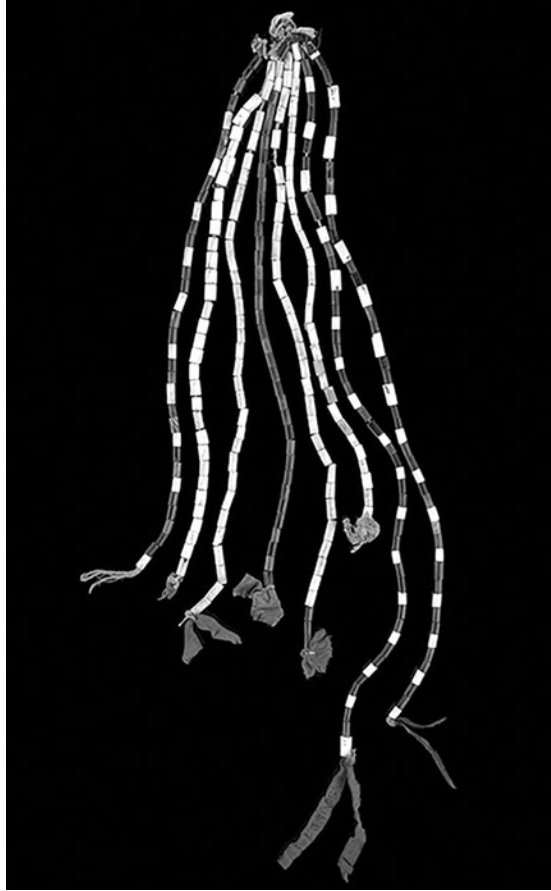


Figure 8.2 Oneida Wampum Strings, c. 1900⁵⁹

As a local form of money for a relatively short period, *wampum* money raises a few comparative and universal questions concerning money and cowrie money. A noticeable discovery was that “83 perforated Little Yellow cowry shell beads” were found in pre-contact New York, and they were suspected to be the influence “from southeastern cultures originating in Florida.”⁶⁰ Lynn Ceci rightly asserts that these cowrie shells must have dated from the post-contact period, and it is fascinating that Ceci suspects that the Spanish and French who were involved in the cowrie trade between Asia and Africa might have planned to “introduce an analogous change in the New World.”⁶¹ The fact that in the contemporary French, the term “porcelain” was used for *wampum* also suggests such a comparison.⁶²

In the process of *wampum* being transformed from a scarce and valuable commodity into money, its increase of supply served as a key. The Europeans, this time the Dutch (as with the Portuguese in the Old World), quickly realised the potential profits by utilising *wampum* to purchase goods from the Indians, with only two differences with their participation in the cowrie trade. Firstly, *wampum* was hardly an indigenous money, while cowrie shells had been used as money in West Africa before European contact. The second difference was spatial. The Europeans managed to process or obtain *wampum* locally, while cowries were mainly purchased from Asian markets before the nineteenth century.

The first difference deserves our further attention. In West Africa, the Europeans did not make cowries into a form of money, but in the New World, the Europeans were the leading force that made *wampum* into money. They first ensured a sufficient supply of processed shells to meet the demands of transactions. As a result, in terms of quantity and frequency, more *wampum* were exchanged and gradually ousted other exchange goods (money candidates), so becoming a regular medium of exchange, that is, money. Furthermore, due to the lack of European coinage, the *wampum* was soon upgraded into a legal tender acknowledged by European colonial authorities. Therefore, in both the Old and New Worlds, European colonialists skilfully adopted local money or money candidates that were not used in Europe, to join, penetrate and dominate local trade and economies in order to gain economic hegemony.

The issue of supply again calls our attention back to the invention of money. A comparison of *wampum* and cowrie shells in early China is illustrative for understanding the formation of money. Both shells (*wampum* before European contact and cowries in early China) were highly regarded, and both of them were presented in gift-exchange and other ceremonial rituals including funerals and also as decoration. While *wampum* became quantitatively accessible, cowrie shells in Shang-Zhou China had been always scarce, and thus could not meet the demands of trade there. This comparison indicates that the supply constitutes an indispensable factor in creating money.

The key role of supply in making or destroying a certain type of money is also illustrated by an episode in New Netherland, a kind of mini-rehearsal of what would happen to cowrie money in West Africa.

“An oyster crusade” in New Netherland

Willem Kieft (1597–1647), the Dutch governor of New Netherland from 1638 to 1647, noted the use of *wampum* as money, and quickly flooded “the colony with this Indian money.”⁶³ To obtain and monopolise the source of *wampum*, he even launched “an oyster crusade.”

According to Washington Irving (1783–1859), a renowned American writer and historian, Kieft

began by paying all the servants of the Company and all the debts of the government in strings of *wampum*. He sent emissaries to sweep the shores

of Long Island, which was the Ophir of this modern Solomon, and abounded in shell-fish. These were transported in loads to New Amsterdam, coined into Indian money and launched into circulation.⁶⁴

Kieft might have thought himself excessively brilliant in making profits from the Indians with little investment, but the nightmare began when a mass of other people followed his example:

Yankee traders poured into the province, buying everything they could lay their hands on, and paying the worthy Dutchmen their own price – in Indian money. If the latter, however, attempted to pay the Yankees in the same coin for their tin ware and wooden bowls, the case was altered; nothing would do but Dutch guilders and such like ‘metallic currency’. What was worse, the Yankees introduced an inferior kind of *wampum* made of oyster shells, with which they deluged the province, carrying off in exchange all the silver and gold, the Dutch herring and Dutch cheeses; thus early did the knowing men of the East manifest their skill in bargaining the New Amsterdammers out of the oyster, and leaving them the shell.⁶⁵

It was a long time before William the Testy was made sensible how completely his grand project of finance turned against him by his Eastern neighbors; nor would he probably have ever found it out had not tidings been brought him that the Yankees had made a descent upon Long Island, and had established a kind of mint at Oyster bay, where they were coining up all the oyster banks.⁶⁶

Washington Irving’s sharp, cynical and humorous tone continues, as shells now caused a “financial and gastronomical” disaster for the Dutch. Thence, “an oyster crusade was immediately set on foot against the Yankees”; their victory brought back a vast number of trophies including “great spoil of oyster and clams, coined and uncoined.”⁶⁷ “A great banquet was served in the Statehouse from the clams and oysters taken from the enemy; while the governor sent the shells privately to the mint and had them coined into Indian money with which he paid his troops.”⁶⁸

The Dutch incident served as a warning if anyone had heeded it for what would happen in West Africa. In the African case, indigenous people suffered losses when large amounts of cowrie shells poured in, while in New Netherland, the Yankees benefitted by pouring in shells and the Dutch suffered. Not surprisingly at all, shell money decreased in value and inflation took place. Then, in 1641, New Netherland, unaware that the Yuan Dynasty had issued a similar ban more than three centuries previously, passed a law “prohibiting the acceptance of anything but fine, polished strung *wampum*, except for five or one stiver, while the polished was worth four for a stiver.”⁶⁹ Connecticut and Massachusetts followed to issue a similar ban.⁷⁰

The major recipients of shell money were the Indians, whose hoarding had caused the scarcity of shell money in New Amsterdam. In 1673, the Dutch

issued an arbitrary edict by increasing the legal value of shell money by 25 per cent,⁷¹ causing a lot of trouble for the traders. Despite the devaluation, the use of shell money by both Indians and colonists continued along the east coast at least until the mid-eighteenth century.⁷²

***Wampum* in California: Ernest Ingersoll's account**

Shell beads also existed amongst the coastal tribes on the Pacific coast, in a variety of forms and utilised for multiple purposes. For 8,000 years, native Indian peoples in coastal California made various shell beads and ornaments from marine molluscs and gastropods and transported them as far as 800 km away to the Greater Basin (southeastern Oregon, Nevada and Utah) and the American Southwest.⁷³

Colonial observers such as the American naturalist Ernest Ingersoll (1852–1946) observed the wide use of *wampum* in transactions amongst the Indian tribes in California, and he assumed them to be an indigenous form of money.⁷⁴ Ingersoll detailed the use of *wampum* in various parts of California. The northern and most celebrated form was the *biqua*, consisting of strings of the shell of a mollusc (tusk shell). They were gathered from the sea bottom and were under two inches in length. The Indian tribes north of the Columbia River developed a unit of measurement for them, a string of about a fathom's length. Their value depended on the size of the shell: the larger, the more valuable. Forty pieces for a fathom was taken as the standard while fifty for a fathom was worth scarcely half of the former.⁷⁵ In this system, the size of the shell was crucial. If shells were not long enough to be valued at 25 cents, they were used by women as decoration.⁷⁶ In the early nineteenth century, a fathom could buy "ten beaver skins in dealing with the whites in Oregon," but with the arrival of "the Hudson Bay Company's traders, the *biqua* disappeared to a great extent, and values were reckoned in blankets," as late as the 1880s.⁷⁷

In northern California, the shell was called *allo-cochick*, "an alternation of estimate."⁷⁸ A string of five shells was the standard measurement, usually worth 10 dollars. To facilitate transactions amongst the Hupas, almost "every man had ten lines tattooed across the inside of his left arm about half way between the wrist and the elbow," and if a string could extend from the left thumb nail to the uppermost line of the tattoo, it was worth 25 dollars, or even more in gold, in 1873.⁷⁹ Such a large-sized shell was very rare.

Shell beads in all central and southern parts of California resembled eastern *wampum*. The two kinds of shells, *háwok* and *üllo*, were carefully processed involving much labour and time, but had a different shape and value. A bivalve was broken into pieces and these pieces were ground and polished into a circular disc or button (*háwok*) from a quarter to an inch in diameter; a hole was then drilled in the centre and thus a string of *háwok* was made, with the best price of 25 cents apiece in 1873.⁸⁰ The *üllo* were much more valuable. They were made from the shell of the abalone, especially the red abalone (*Haliotis rufescens*). They were cut into pieces of one to two inches in length, with two holes at

the two ends of each piece. Ten pieces made one string for 10 dollars.⁸¹ There was also a third shell money, the *kol-kol*, in the islands off the southern coast, which was “slightly esteemed.”⁸²

Coastal Indians seem to have monopolised the making of shell money, and they traded these shells with inland dwellers for skins, arms, animals, foods and other goods not available along the coast. Shells were used in ornaments, sacrifices or were hoarded and some shells were buried together with the deceased. It is interesting that Ernest Ingersoll concluded, “When Americans grew numerous and began to manufacture large quantities of the *hawok*, of course its value declined; moreover, with the partial civilization of the Indians, a new sentiment crept in, and some strange change in primitive social economy followed.”⁸³ What he meant was that during his era, the end of the nineteenth century, young Indians scarcely used shell money any more. He attributed the retreat of shell money from Indian societies and from Indian-colonist trade to the advance of American immigrants and their culture. It was the penetration of colonial power that first utilised, then created and finally destroyed this shell monetary system.

Was *wampum* used as money or not?

While Ernest Ingersoll described a vivid monetary role for the *wampum* beads, it might have been too simplistic to be true. It remains doubtful whether his use of the word “money” was understood in the same sense as it is used today. In most cases, if not all, what he depicted was the role of one of the most desired goods in the barter trade. Indeed, there has also emerged a debate as to whether it was before or after the arrival of the Spaniards that *wampum* or shell beads became a form of money in California.

In the 1970s, Chester King examined archaeological, ethnohistoric and ethnographic sources and proposed that the Chumash of the Santa Barbara Channel had used shell beads as money; his opinion has been gradually accepted by many scholars.⁸⁴ Many other researchers, however, while acknowledging the importance of shell beads in prehistoric California, have supported the argument that the intergroup exchange represented by shell beads was an adaptive response to the seasonal and spatial asymmetry of resources, especially food.⁸⁵

Napoleon Chagnon pointed out that shell money “primarily functions to overcome two conditions: periodic famines on the one hand, and seasonal shortages of food on the other. Famine stimulated trades between groups occupying dissimilar ecological zones while the development of subsistence specialization made local groups dependent.”⁸⁶ The spring arrival of salmon in the larger rivers coincided with the starvation period of the hill peoples who used shell beads and other valuables to trade and in the autumn, the hill peoples reciprocated with their acorns.⁸⁷ More importantly, shell money did not behave in the same way as modern money behaves, as the Indians never argued about the price when “selling” objects with a known value to a kinsman or fellow villager. No price was named and the “buyer” always

paid more to the “seller” than the value of the item.⁸⁸ When they came across shell bead trading amongst the Indians, the Europeans only saw what they were primed by their own culture to see, that is, the monetary function of the processed beads.⁸⁹ It was within this context that although Napoleon Chagnon still used the terms “shell money” and “primitive money” to refer to shell beads, he challenged the idea that shell money was actually money.⁹⁰ Robert F. Heizer went on to argue that the indigenous use of shell money by the Indian tribes was not accurately described in colonial records as has been believed, but was instead a recent development “in response to new and different conditions of availability resulting from the presence of the whites.”⁹¹

Recently, Thomas C. Patterson has argued that shell beads, together with cow hides, blankets or sea otter pelts, were equivalent forms of value that facilitated the circulation of goods.⁹² As a measure of value, they did not function as a type of general money. Therefore, shell beads in pre-contact California might have been the same as those in northeastern America, in both cases their being more of a symbol and measure of value, but not as actual money.

Although probably not as money before the colonial period, shell beads were regarded as a genuine tradition, and continued amongst Indian peoples to as late as the second half of the nineteenth century in central California, when their native societies were destroyed by the continuous occupation by Spain and other white immigrants. Native elders bought shell beads for their own or for the funerals of their friends and allied tribal chiefs.⁹³ Even in the early 1870s, part of the marriage payment amongst the Karok people demanded “shell money.”⁹⁴ Therefore, shell beads became symbolic and were used to maintain an original culture and identity.

To meet the demands of the surviving Indian groups, in the late nineteenth century, the Pomo people in central California produced a great quantity of shell beads. With the help of a pump drill and a foot-powered grindstone, they managed to produce sufficient quantities of shell beads for Indian groups in the Sacramento Valley and probably as far east as Sierra Nevada.⁹⁵ A Captain Jack “reported that the shrewdest of Pomo Chiefs, makes several journeys yearly to trade with the interior tribes.”⁹⁶

The making of shell beads seems to have been very profitable. In 1852, George Gibbs sent a few dentalium shells from Puget Sound to his brother Frank in Shanghai, along with a business proposal:

I have thought that your Chinese could imitate it in porcelain with exactness, and if so, a very profitable operation could be made, not only by selling it to miners and traders here in Oregon, but in purchasing directly from Indians skins and [gold] dust.⁹⁷

Indeed, European merchants not only made *wampum* but also shipped cowrie shells to the New World for local goods.

A means of exchange in colonial Virginia?: Cowrie shells from Africa

Previous scholars have claimed that cowrie shells sold to Africa were never shipped back to Europe, and certainly seldom crossed the Atlantic and arrived in the New World, although a small numbers of cowrie shells happened to be in the possession of crew members or enslaved Africans.⁹⁸ This conventional understanding of African cowries is in fact erroneous.

Cowrie shells have been widely found in archaeological sites in the New World from Canada to the Caribbean to Brazil, and their presence in these parts of the world is usually explained as either being due to African traditions left behind by slaves or as part of efforts by African diasporic communities to continue and create African-American identities.⁹⁹ Some American archeologists have even argued that cowrie shells were used as “trade tokens within plantation settings,” saved as foreign money by European travelers, first carried as ballast on their voyage to the New World and then dumped overboard by the slave traders on the ship’s departure for Europe, or that they could have been exchanged in small numbers by African seafarers in New York.¹⁰⁰ It seems that what happened is more than this understanding.

Barbara J. Heath has carefully scrutinised “English port books, advertisements for ships’ cargos seized in wartime, and more general notice of sales,” and found “the movement of cowries in bulk from Africa to mainland North America and the Caribbean, and back to Britain from the late 17th through the early 19th centuries.”¹⁰¹ She has concluded that the volume of cowries imported to North America was much larger than it had previously been estimated.¹⁰² Cowries were shipped to North America by European merchants for the fur trade, which began in “the Canadian Maritime Provinces, Newfoundland, and the St. Lawrence River Valley,” and gradually spread along “the Atlantic Coast, north and west to Hudson’s Bay, inland to the Great Lakes, and up the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers.”¹⁰³ Comprising only a minor role in the fur trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, cowrie shells increased their importance in the nineteenth century; and that is why they were found in Native American burials, as far inland as in Leavenworth, South Dakota.¹⁰⁴ The scale of the cowrie-fur trade yet remains unclear, though.

Extant records from after the Revolutionary War reveal that a large quantity of cowrie shells were shipped by American merchants to the Northeast and South Carolina.¹⁰⁵ A “Quantity of Cowries” from India reached Boston in 1795 and 1796, respectively; and “a few thousand cwt.” arrived in 1805.¹⁰⁶ From 1796 to 1797, 67 tonnes of cowries were offered for sale by two New York mercantile firms.¹⁰⁷ Eighty-three perforated cowries found in New York, mentioned earlier, might have served as archaeological evidence of such a transatlantic commerce linking the India Ocean, Europe, Africa and the New World. Most of these cowries were shipped to Africa after the American Revolution, as the transatlantic slave trade did not stop until 1808.

Colonial Virginia provides an excellent case for the discussion of cowrie shells in their global distribution, linkage and functions in the New World.¹⁰⁸ At least 354 cowrie shells have been discovered from 56 sites in Virginia (252 in Yorktown alone), 93 percent of which are dated before 1800, and 95 percent were found in commercial centers alone rivers.¹⁰⁹ Based on these findings, Barbara J. Heath has upturned “new evidence for the bulk transportation of cowries to mainland North American and the Caribbean via the transatlantic slave trade,” and she has interpreted “these findings to suggest the use of cowries as currency in colonial Virginia during the first three quarters of” the eighteenth century.¹¹⁰

Cowrie shells found in Virginia have their own special features. While the majority of shells shipped and consumed in West Africa were money cowries, 85 percent of shells in Virginia belong to the species *Moneta annulus*, and 75 percent are not modified.¹¹¹ This indicates that British merchants shipped but failed to sell these shells in West Africa at some time during the eighteenth century when the relatively larger size of ring cowries were not widely accepted there, and so decided to take these shells to Virginia en route to England,¹¹² the so-called Middle Passage.

It is reasonable to surmise that some enslaved Africans carried their own cowrie shells, together with some other objects such as beads, but it is unlikely that the ostensibly large number of cowrie shells circulating in colonial America were exclusively the property of slaves. As mentioned earlier, merchants accounted for the majority of cowrie import for the fur trade in the north, and in the south slave ship crew members might have carried cowries to Virginia.¹¹³ Within one decade from 1724 to 1734, over three tonnes of cowries returned to Bristol, England, from Africa via the West Indies and Virginia, based on the statistics from Bristol, and at least 55 percent of all shells, that is, 1.8 tonnes, passed though Yorktown.¹¹⁴ A great number of shells as unsold cargo must have been brought to (some offloaded in) Virginia during the eighteenth century for their return voyages to various ports in England such as London and Liverpool. And most likely, some crew members sold or presented shells to local Virginia merchants, which accounted for the presence of shells in many commercial sites.¹¹⁵ For instance, in the Lightfoot site (Yorktown) owned by Philip Lightfoot, one of the most successful merchants, more than 150 cowries were excavated, and thirteen cowries were discovered from the homes of Thomas Nelson and his son.¹¹⁶ Lightfoot and Nelson controlled much of local commerce and both “preferred trade with Bristol and Liverpool over London.”¹¹⁷ It seems that during the second and third decades of the eighteenth century, cowrie shells arrived at Virginia with certain regularity, and that local merchants played a key role in accepting and distributing them.¹¹⁸

Many intriguing questions have arisen concerning the cowrie shells in Virginia. First of all, what were the functions of these cowrie shells there? Almost all cowrie shells were either discovered in the homes or warehouse of merchants, or at commercial sites, and thus they “had economic value and likely functioned as an informal medium of exchange within the areas that cowries were imported.”¹¹⁹ And, did enslaved African people use cowries as a means of

exchange in their daily life? It is interesting that the period from the 1740s to the 1780s witnessed the rise of an informal economy in which local enslaved residents increasingly participated. With the tradition of cowrie money in Africa, cowrie shells in Virginia “may have gained value by its ability to store social capital and be reimagined for use in ritual.”¹²⁰ However, from the 1770s, the slave trade to Virginia came to an end, and no more shells arrived, resulting in a scarcity of cowrie shells in the following decades. Hence, it could be concluded that the use of cowrie shells was “not widely accepted in local trade,” especially when new slaves arrived whose original homes were not in areas of Africa that recognized cowries as valuable items.¹²¹

One may also wonder whether or not free people utilised cowrie shells in the colony. Generally speaking, there was a lack of coinage in Virginia, and in other colonial areas. And perhaps “people living along the James and York rivers” substituted cowries for currency in the small-scale transactions;¹²² however, no categorical sources can support this speculation. After all, *wampum* was widely used as a legal form of money in North America during the colonial period. Unfortunately, we are not sure whether or not some cowrie shells exported from Africa had been made into *wampum* beads. Due to the solid nature of cowries, I believe that other shells would have been preferred to for the making of *wampum*.

In sum, a systematic analysis of cowrie shells discovered in colonial Virginia has led to many fresh understandings of these cowrie shells, the transatlantic trade, and colonial America in the global context. First of all, contrary to previous thoughts, cowrie shells reached the New World not individually on the bodies of African peoples and crew members, but as one of the bulk goods associated with the slave trade. Secondly, cowrie shells, although not achieving the status of money, may have served “as an informal method of payment for services, for gambling debts, or for the small necessities of life that they purchased while in port.”¹²³ Finally, the monetary functions of cowrie shells in colonial Virginia have illustrated the influence of the Old World, while this colonial use of cowrie shells did not belong to the cowrie money system in the Old World.

Having looked at shell money in these Indian societies and amongst the Pacific Islanders, it is important to remember that all these colonial texts should be read with caution, since colonialists might somehow have misunderstood the role of shell money as a process. Probably in many transactions and at many stages for various native societies, these processed shells were not treated as actual money but rather as highly valued items in the barter trade, in the exchange of gifts and/or in local rituals, symbolising wealth and power and with aesthetic and religious connotations, as were the cowrie shells to the Chinese elites of the Shang-Zhou period. For instance, cowrie shells commonly served as an adornment for people and were perceived as precious objects in prehistoric times, so it is highly likely that this practice derived from their symbolic fertility significance. In prehistoric California, the ornamental use of *Cypraea* shells included inlaid work set into the rims of mortars and bowls, the receptacles themselves being strongly linked to the reproductive symbolism with which

cowrie shells were also endowed.¹²⁴ Chapter Nine hence follows to outline the non-monetary functions of cowrie shells on the Afro-Eurasian continent.

Notes

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- 3 Adrienne L. Kaeppler, “Eighteenth Century Tonga: New Interpretations of Tongan Society and Material Culture at the Time of Captain Cook,” *Man*, New Series, vol. 6, no. 2 (1971): 217.
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- 13 Ibid., 302.
- 14 Ibid., 293–295.
- 15 Ibid., 295–298.
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- 17 Ibid., 301–302.
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- 20 Ibid., 308.
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- 25 Hughes, 1978, 312.
- 26 Ibid., 312.
- 27 Ibid., 312, 314.
- 28 Ibid., 315.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Ibid., 316.
- 31 Ibid.

- 32 Ibid., 317.
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- 34 Ibid., 467–468.
- 35 Ibid., 468.
- 36 Ibid., 21; for the processing of *wampum*, see James D. Burggraf, "Some Notes on the Manufacture of Wampum Prior to 1654," *American Antiquity*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Jul. 1938): 53–58.
- 37 Gifts of Mendel L. Peterson and The Chase Manhattan Bank, *The National Museum of American History*. <http://americanhistory.si.edu/religion-in-early-america/new-england>.
- 38 Lynn Ceci, "The First Crisis in New York," *Economic Development and Cultural Changes*, vol. 28, no. 4 (Jul. 1980): 840.
- 39 Ibid., 844.
- 40 Ingersoll, 1883, 471.
- 41 Ibid., 471.
- 42 James Sydney Slotkin and Karl Schmitt, "Studies of Wampum," *American Anthropologist*, New Series, vol. 51, no. 2 (Apr.–Jun. 1949): 223–236; Mary W. Herman, "Wampum as a Money in Northeastern North America," *Ethnohistory*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Winter 1956): 21–33; Ceci, 1980, 839–848; "The Value of Wampum Among the New York Iroquois: A Case Study in Artifact Analysis," *Journal of Anthropological Research*, vol. 38, no. 1 (Spring 1982): 97–107.
- 43 Herman, 1956, 21. In terms of reasons why *wampum* was highly valued by the Indians, see Ceci, 1982.
- 44 Herman, 1956, 22.
- 45 Ceci, 1980, 840.
- 46 Ibid., 840–841.
- 47 For the role of *wampum* in the fur trade, see Ceci, 1980, 841–844.
- 48 Herman, 1956, 22. For *wampum* manufacture in Long Island, see Burggraf, 1938. James D. Burggraf rightly pointed out that the large scale of *wampum* manufacture in Long Island was a recent phenomenon.
- 49 Ingersoll, 1883, 472.
- 50 There existed one difference in this comparison. While European manufactured goods were not popular in Chinese markets, they were very much needed by the Indian people.
- 51 Herman, 1956, 26; Ceci, 1980, 844.
- 52 Ceci, 1980, 845.
- 53 O'Callaghan, vol. 1, 269.
- 54 Ibid., 459.
- 55 Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610–1791*; the original French, Latin and Italian texts, with English translations and notes (Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Company, Publisher, M DCCCXCVII, 1897), vol. 7, 225 (www.gutenberg.org/files/53138/53138-h/53138-h.htm).
- 56 Herman, 1956, 27–28.
- 57 O'Callaghan, vol. 14, 450.
- 58 Ingersoll, 1883, 475.
- 59 Oneida wampum strings, ca. 1900. New York. Whelk shell, quahog shell, hide, silk and wool fabric, cellulosic thread. Photo by Ernest Amoroso, NMAI. (20/1253), "Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations," September 21, 2014–2021, Washington, DC, The National Museum of the American Indian. <http://nmai.si.edu/explore/exhibitions/item/?id=934>.

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- 61 Ceci, 1982, 101.
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- 63 Ingersoll, 1883, 473.
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- 65 Ibid.
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- 67 Ibid., 474.
- 68 Cite from *ibid.*
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- 77 Ibid., 476–477.
- 78 Ibid., 477.
- 79 Ibid.
- 80 Ibid.
- 81 Ibid., 478.
- 82 Ibid.
- 83 Ibid., 479.
- 84 Chester King, "Chumash Inter-Village Economic Exchange," in *Native Californians: A Theoretical Perspective*, eds., L. Bean and T. Blackburn (Menlo Park: Ballena Press, 1976), 289–318; *Evolution of Chumash Society, A Comparative Study of Artifacts Used for Social System Maintenance in the Santa Barbara Channel Region Before A.D. 1894* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990). For a review of the shell money theory and his rebuttal of it, see Patterson, 2014, 112–127.
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- 87 Ibid., 10.
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- 104 Ibid., 67.
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- 106 Ibid.
- 107 Ibid., 65.
- 108 Heath, 2016; 2017, 65–66.
- 109 Heath, 2017, 65; 2016, 18, 23–28, 30.
- 110 Heath, 2016, 18.
- 111 Heath, 2017, 65.
- 112 Ibid.
- 113 Heath, 2016, 33
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- 115 Ibid.
- 116 Ibid., 35.
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- 118 Ibid., 36.
- 119 Ibid.
- 120 Ibid., 37.
- 121 Ibid.
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9 More than just money

The whole of the complex shell cult seems to have sprung out of the fanciful resemblance which a particular group of primitive men imagined they could detect between the cowry and the female organs of reproduction.

– G. Elliot Smith in 1917¹

Cowrie shells have long lived in various tropical and subtropical waters, and thus many coastal and inland societies had access to this marine species. While their monetary role in a cross-regional network has attracted much attention, cowrie shells had other social, cultural and religious functions for many peoples and across many centuries, some of which have continued until the present day.

This chapter examines these non-monetary functions across the world. It begins with a general summary of the social and cultural functions of cowrie shells, many of which will be familiar from the preceding chapters. Then it focuses on the colonial discussions concerning the meaning of cowrie shells during the 1930s and 1940s when cowrie money largely disappeared from the world. A great deal of correspondence appeared in eminent western periodicals such as *Man* during this chaotic period, perhaps indicating a final colonial orientalist effort at understanding the vast numbers of peoples and territories they had governed through the lens of an “oriental” material object, cowrie shells. Their observations and interpretations of cowrie use were largely confined within a western analytical framework in which the principal uses of cowries were understood to be as a protection against the evil eye or as a symbol of fertility. What has backed up the same or similar functions across the globe are different cultural or religious faiths adopted by various local peoples. Finally, this chapter concludes with a few cases illustrating the legacy of cowrie shells and cowrie money in contemporary societies, especially in West Africa and the African diaspora, thus glimpsing how the cowrie trade and cowrie money have created neo-traditions.

Aesthetics, wealth, fertility and protection

Cowrie shells originated from tropical and subtropical oceans, and thus were perceived as rare in inland areas. This very rarity made these shells precious in political, religious and economic activities and rituals. Cowries are the most

common shells found in archaeological sites, which indicates the extensive trading and cultural connections across regions. It is also widely believed that cowrie shells were seen as symbols of fertility, safety, protection, aesthetics and wealth, with one or several of these elements of significance being present in various cultures.

The beauty of these shells was highly appreciated by early peoples. The making of cowries into necklaces, bracelets, headdresses, head coverings, belts, pendants and decorations for clothing of all kinds was popular around the world. Cowrie decoration also manifested their protective value for such precious domestic animals as dogs and horses. Horse trappings decorated with cowrie shells have been found in China, Persia, Hungary and Norway, and in India, where they also adorned elephants' harnesses. In India, cowrie shells were inlaid in furniture to create rich, beautiful patterns. While many other cultural functions have declined or disappeared, cowries are still used as decorative features in today's world.

Early peoples understood that cowrie shells as a marine species came from far distant oceans, and a myth was created that this animal possessed the magic power to tame the waves, storms and dangerous waters. Early Egyptians believed in the possibility of animating ships and converting them into living beings by painting eyes on the bows of their ships, which might suggest a connection between bows (and thus ships) and cowrie shells as the animating power of eyes. Similar practices were done in "the Arabian littoral, the Far East and Oceania."² Whether or not these cowrie shells were painted as eyes remains uncertain, but it is evident that these shells were thought to possess the power of safety and protection over the sea.

Their economic value made cowries a popular gift or item for donations in numerous societies. This use was evident in India and the Tai world, but probably the most complicated and illustrative case is from early China. Numerous archaeological and textual discoveries in early China from prehistoric times to the late Shang-Zhou period have shown that cowrie shells were highly valued items used in gift-granting rituals by kings and nobles. The value of cowries lay in their multi-faceted significance: they were used as ornamentation and decoration, they provided a measure of value and they were buried with the corpses of people of noble birth, being placed in the mouth or hands or somewhere next to the body. All these indicate that cowrie shells symbolised wealth, social status and prestige. It was certainly the case with the Dian Kingdom in Yunnan. In Yunnan as well as in India and Siam, cowrie shells were often donated to monasteries, directly or indirectly. Cowrie shells were also given as part of a bridal dowry in Bengal, West Africa, New Guinea and amongst the native Indians in the New World (most often in the form of shell beads). Cowrie shells had many other purposes in daily life. They were used for gambling, divination and sacrifice. In some societies, cowries were present at certain blood-letting ceremonies such as circumcision and ear piercing.³

However, these aesthetic and economic functions of cowrie shells could not be separated from their cultural and religious role that had been evident in

pre-dynastic Egypt. G. Elliot Smith thought that the Red Sea and the Mediterranean World might well have been the original home of the worldwide cult of shells,⁴ whence they were being shipped northwestwards in prehistoric times. If so, early Egypt was crucial for the emergence of the cowrie culture. The core of the culture lay in that cowrie shells were universally seen to possess or symbolise the power of reproduction and thus fertility, mainly due to their perceived similarity to the female genitals. The magical ability of a fertility symbol was powerful for early peoples (and still is in many societies today), who frequently suffered from the lack or loss of a baby and thus, the lack of sufficient descendants to survive the harsh environment and continue their forefathers' legacy. Pregnancy and a smooth birth were greatly desired amongst all early peoples. However, when, where and why such a faith began remains vague.

In pre-dynastic Egypt, cowrie shells were used as amulets. Both *Cypraea moneta* and *Cypraea annulus* were discovered in graves in Egypt and Nubia.⁵ According to a most recent study of the cowrie use in early Egypt and the Near East, the symbolic meaning of cowries and their imitations "is linked with the appearance of its underside: the lengthwise, serrated opening resembling a female vulva or a squinting eye."⁶ The two kinds of resembling indeed have provided the basis for the commonly accepted theory that cowrie shells served as amulets to avoid sterility and to increase fertility, and/or to ward off the evil eye and any other evil or bad luck.

The fertility symbolism of cowries seems to be supported by discoveries in early Egypt and the Near East. From the Neolithic period, cowries, mostly from the Red Sea, are found in these regions, with their dorsa removed to facilitate their being strung as a pendant, belt, bracelet or sewn onto clothing. In the Bronze Age, cowries, more commonly discovered in the tombs, were usually associated with women and children in pre-dynastic Egypt.⁷ Very interestingly, in Egypt of the Middle Kingdom, girdles decorated with cowries were always placed around the pelvic area of female figurines, which suggests the role of cowries as being more than just decorative.⁸ Cowries were also used by the Egyptians to decorate cats, in addition to children and women. However, in a few cases, cowries were associated with males. The phenomenon of cowries strung around the pelvic areas of female figurines is interpreted as an association of cowries with fertility and pregnancy, while their association with women, children and cats is seen as their protective power which might have the potential to regenerate.⁹ From Egypt and the Near East, the use of cowries spread eastwards to the Fertile Crescent, as the Neo-Assyrian texts recorded these shells along with gold and silver; it also extended northwards to southern Europe as early as the first century CE.¹⁰

In addition to genuine cowries, imitation cowries made from precious metals, stones and siliceous materials have been unearthed in tombs (and tombs only) as early as the Neolithic period. In Egypt during the Middle Kingdom, cowrie imitations were made of precious materials such as gold and silver that were far more valuable than the shells themselves. In this case, the cultural and religious significance, or the symbolic power, expressed in the form of cowries by and

large outweighed the value of the shells themselves.¹¹ Furthermore, gold and silver possessed their own religious significance in early Egypt. Gold, associated with the sun, represented the flesh of the gods, while silver, associated with the moon, represented the bones of the gods.¹² These precious materials, simultaneously a symbol of wealth and social status, were thus believed to enhance the power delivered in the form of cowrie shells. Therefore, cowrie imitations were supposed to possess greater energy and power for the diseased to protect, ensure rebirth and rejuvenate them.¹³ It is therefore no wonder that imitation cowries made of precious materials were usually found in the tombs of higher status (usually male) individuals, while actual shells, shell beads or bone beads were often placed in the tombs of those of a lower status.¹⁴

In Africa as well as West Asia, cowrie shells (along with other shells) were frequently inserted into skulls in the place of human eyes, and were often attached to the trappings of camels, horses and other animals and sometimes to the headwear of children. Through this evidence, scholars have developed the theory that cowries served as a protective amulet against the evil eye. G. Elliot Smith explained that this practice must have been associated with “the ancient conception of the fertilising power of the eyes and to the crop of beliefs concerning the evil eye and the power of bringing good or bad luck.”¹⁵ This, again, needs further discussion on questions such as the origin and date of the evil eye set of beliefs. It is not clear whether the practice of cowrie use preceded the evil eye faith, or vice versa, nor is it clear whether or when cowries were given a protective function against bad luck or to ward off evil, aside from their decorative and aesthetic roles. Nevertheless, early and contemporary scholars have unanimously taken for granted that cowries were used as amulets against the evil eye.

The evil eye was believed to be a curse cast by a malevolent glare, usually given to a person who was unaware of it. Many European cultures still believe that a glance from the evil eye can cause a misfortune or an injury. This idea appears several times in translations of the Old Testament and was a widely extended belief amongst many Mediterranean and Asian societies. Various protective efforts and methods were invented in different communities.

Charms and decorations with eye-like symbols are still used to repel the evil eye in several countries today. Islamic peoples understood cowrie shells to have this purpose and have long used them as amulets against the evil eye. One Muslim scholar of the fourteenth century who disapproved of this belief quoted the practice when he stated that “He who hangs a necklace of cowries round his neck, God will not prosper him.”¹⁶ He also commented that “He (Muhammad) only forbade them because they used to use them in necklaces out of fear of the evil eye.”¹⁷ It is reasonable to suppose that cowries must have been in use amongst the Arabs during the lifetime of the Prophet and thus most likely during the pre-Islamic era.¹⁸ The Arab people might have learnt this practice from others. In the 1930s–1940s, there emerged a heated debate amongst European scholars on the use of cowries to ward off the evil eye.

In general, cowries as symbols of fertility and protection against evil may be accurate in the Mediterranean World, Europe, the Middle East and to some extent, India. This theory, however, is not so overarching as to explain cowrie use in many other parts in the world. In the case of early China, for instance, the cowrie's political and funereal ritual roles seem to have overshadowed that of its being a symbol of fertility or protection. What has backed up the same or similar functions across the globe are different cultural or religious faiths locally. The use of cowries is a global phenomenon, based on some universal cultural elements, while their local prominence largely relies on distinct local cultural and religious dimensions.

Were cowries used against the evil eye?

The late nineteenth century until the first part of the twentieth century was a golden age for colonial anthropology and ethnography. Cowrie shells used both as indigenous money and local cultural/religious faith were discovered and discussed by Europeans in their orientalising of other worlds, particularly the vast Asian world. During the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, when cowrie money disappeared from people's economic lives, western travellers, including scholars, explorers, merchants, doctors, officials and especially anthropologists, discovered the wide presence of cowrie shells amongst various peoples almost wherever they set foot. The very existence of this marine product over such a broad expanse of space and time hence raised many questions concerning its origin and ethnic functions, leading to many long-lasting discussions and debates. While a cross-cultural significance was realised,¹⁹ many comments and discussions were not without European cultural judgement and remained within a European framework of the study of ethnology.

This section introduces scholarly commentaries published in some of the most eminent anthropological and ethnographic journals such as *Man* and *Folklore* during the late 1930s and early 1940s, when Europe itself was stricken by the ravages of World War II. These articles were written by many well-trained or well-established European scholars, discussing and debating the role of cowrie shells in various parts of the world (mainly non-European). The key issue was whether or not cowries constituted a charm against the evil eye because they resembled a half-closed eye, or were a protection against infertility because of their resemblance to the female vulva. *Man*, a famous periodical on aboriginal human beings (the term "aboriginal" meaning non-western here) and their cultures published by the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, represents such a trend, pouring out papers mixed with ethnocultural and colonial flavours and not without the shadow of orientalism.

It seems that the discussion started with a letter from Evelyn F. Coote Lake in 1933. In May and June 1930, during his trip to Athens, Greece, Syria, Cyprus, Jerusalem, Cairo, Malta and Spain, Coote Lake noticed that some long necklaces sold by children on the way to Compostela (Spain) were made of cowrie shells; he believed that all these decorations illustrated a faith in such

talismans to protect the wearer from the evil eye.²⁰ Margaret Alice Murray (1863–1963), however, best elaborated the belief in cowries as protection against the evil eye.

Margaret Alice Murray was an Anglo-Indian Egyptologist, archaeologist, anthropologist, historian and folklorist.²¹ Born to a wealthy middle-class English family in Calcutta, British India, Murray divided her youth between India, Britain and Germany, trained as a nurse and working for a while as a social worker. She was the first woman to be appointed as a lecturer in archaeology in the United Kingdom. She worked at University College London (UCL) from 1898 to 1935, served as president of the Folklore Society from 1953 to 1955 and published widely over the course of her career. Perhaps because of her interest in witches, witchcraft and magic, she composed a few letters to *Man* on the uses of cowrie shells she had noticed during her travels in the Mediterranean World.

The similarity between the lower side of the cowrie shell and the human vulva has had a long association and cowrie shells were often seen as a female decoration and protective charm. In her letter to *Man*, Murray scoffed at such an interpretation.²² She pointed out that cowrie shells were and always had been “worn by men and [adorned] other male animals” as frequently as by women. Due to the resemblance, she believed that cowrie shells were a charm against the evil eye that could affect the reproductive forces of both sexes, and therefore, their powers as charms were not confined to sex or to just human beings. Bridles decorated with cowrie shells were used for stallions, mares and geldings and for many other animals such as camels, asses, mules, bulls and bullocks “in all parts of the East and Near East.” Cowrie shells were often found in ancient Egyptian tombs as charms against the evil eye:

The usual position to wear it is where it will catch the first glance of the Evil Eye, which is always supposed to constitute the chief danger. If the first glance falls on an inanimate object, especially if that object is in the likeness of an eye, the danger is averted.²³

Murray went on to explain the different meanings of cowrie ornaments for men and women. According to her, male genitalia were exposed, being external and thus were vulnerable to witchcraft and other evil influences. This was why men wore charms openly. Women’s genitalia were internal and hidden and thus they wore their charms secretly. However, sexual intercourse meant more to women than to men, who saw it more as quick pleasure, and therefore, women needed protection not only for that day, but for the months to come. The charms women wore had to be more powerful than those worn by men, and had to be hidden, “lest witchcraft and the Evil Eye should be more potent than the outward object.”²⁴ More interestingly, Murray believed that “there exists a feeling of repulsion among most Eastern and early peoples against touching a woman’s genitalia with the hand.” If cowrie shells were regarded as a form of female organ, they would not have been used as money, because

people would not have liked to touch them. In contrast, since cowrie shells were believed to be charms against the evil eye, this easily explains their wide acceptance as money.²⁵

In conclusion, Murray disputed the conventional hypothesis on the likeness between the female sexual organs and the cowrie shell's underside; instead, she argued that cowrie shells functioned as a protection against the evil eye. She also believed that because of their power to protect, cowrie shells could be used as money. Murray's opinion was not without references. In 1917, J.W. Jackson in his *Shells as Evidence of the Migration of Early Culture* believed that the cowrie was a charm against the evil eye, but in 1919, he changed his mind and supported the belief of the cowrie as a fertility charm, due to "its resemblance to the female genitalia."²⁶ These two interpretations of cowrie shell significance continue to be discussed until today.

Murray's letter was published in October 1939, and *Man* received many letters responding to her piece, some supplying more localised examples, others joining the theoretical discussion. Two months later, *Man* published a letter from Mr T. Sheppard of the Hull Municipal Museum. Sheppard stated that cowrie shells had been found amongst Anglo-Saxon remains in East Yorkshire. A long necklace in the Hull Museum contained over eighty amber and other beads with a female skeleton, including one cowrie. Sheppard pointed out that this cowrie was identified as "*Cyprea vinosa Gmel.*, which was restricted to the Red Sea," and he seemed to accept cowrie shells both as protection amulets and symbols of fertility.²⁷

In April 1940, *Man* published three essays on cowrie shells. Kurt Singer brought Japan into the discussion of early cowrie shells. A Neolithic Jomon figure wearing a shell, believed to be, but not conclusively, a cowrie shell, found in northeastern Japan, was exhibited in the archaeological collection of the Technological Department of Tokyo Imperial University. The clay figure was discovered with "a giant image of the cowrie shell, hanging from a cord which is attached to a neckband, and probably held in situ by a waistband."²⁸ Singer extended this case to draw a Graeco-Japanese parallel; nevertheless, since the shell discussed was not a true cowrie, but only somewhat resembling one, Singer's interpretation is not solid at all.

C.K. Meek turned to Nigeria where, as late as 1940, cowrie money was still in use, in addition to serving many other functions such as gifts, decorations, charms, cult symbols and counters in games.²⁹ Cowries were also placed into tombs with the dead by the Yergum and other tribes, as "merely money for the journey, or for use in the next world."³⁰ Meek shared an interesting story told to him by an Iddah chief

who had been deposed for digging up and appropriating the cowries – enough to fill three huts – which had been buried with his father, the previous chief. The son excused himself on the ground that his father had been greedy in attempting to take to the next world the whole of his wealth in this.³¹

Meek also recorded a seemingly odd ritual:

In some Yoruba groups it is said that if a bridegroom finds that his bride is not *virgo intacta* he sends some pure white cowries to her mother, but otherwise some old discoloured ones. There is possibly here an association between the cowry and the human *vulva*.³²

When cowries were worn as charms in Nigeria, the usual explanation was that they averted evil. Amongst some Ibo groups, when a child cut its first tooth, he or she was taken to a priest who tied bands of cowries round the waist, presumably as a protective amulet. Amongst the Jukun group, parents might tie a few cowries around a child's neck, and Meek's interpretation combined the traditional belief with recent societal changes, that being the slave trade, in which cowrie shells became drastically devalued. Meek explained that a few cowries around a child's neck might deceive evil spirits into thinking that the child was a slave and was therefore unworthy of attention.³³

Meek then cited from N.W. Thomas' letter to support Murray against the fertility significance of cowrie shells in local societies. According to Thomas in 1922, amongst the Edo of Iyawa, when a woman found that she was pregnant, she took a cowrie, washed it with medicine and tied it around her waist. Meek believed that the cowrie in this case was less likely to be a fertility charm than a protection against evil and stated that across West Africa, pregnant women wore amulets of various kinds to safeguard themselves from witchcraft (including the evil eye) that could cause a miscarriage.³⁴

Therefore, according to Meek, cowrie shells in Nigeria were not really related to the belief in their power to promote fertility:

Thus, though the cowry may be an emblem of fertility in many parts of the world, including Nigeria, there is strong support from Nigeria for the view of Miss Murray that it is an emblem of the human eye. As such, it would not only be a suitable charm against the evil eye, as Miss Murray suggests, but also a means of detecting and so warding off numerous forms of witchcraft and of discovering other things which are normally invisible.³⁵

In the third essay, Mervyn David Waldegrave Jeffreys disagreed with many points made by Murray.³⁶ For over twenty-five years, Jeffreys worked in Nigeria, with a population that "exceeds twenty million." He observed cowrie shells still being extensively used as currency and as charms in Nigeria and he did not find that cowrie shells were worn by men as often as women, as Murray had stated. Jeffery found that many women were adorned with cowrie shells, but few men were. He refuted Murray's assertion that women kept sex charms hidden while men did not, by pointing out that most women were naked whereas men were not in the many areas he observed. Finally, Jeffreys stated that cowrie shells as charms against the evil eye might be true in many societies mentioned by Murray,

but it was not truly a case amongst “the millions of people in Southern Nigeria where the Evil Eye is practically unheard of.”³⁷ Meanwhile, Jeffreys supported the fertility symbol by tracing the scholarship in the early twentieth century and argued that the fertility symbol of cowries was widely supported.³⁸ Jeffreys’ point that many peoples had never heard of the evil eye so that the use of cowries as protection against the evil eye could not be applied to these societies was insightful and daring for his time, as he was criticising a European-based interpretation for non-European cultures, whether concisely or not.

In the May 1940 issue, M.E. Durham found that in the Balkans, cowries were worn by both women and children in Albania and in Bosnia, but not by men.³⁹ Their purpose was to protect from the evil eye and in general were viewed as lucky charms. In the same issue, Mr. Huttons responded to Dr. Jeffreys’ letter, pointing out “that in the Naga Hills of Assam the cowry is commonly worn by males. In some tribes females also use it.”⁴⁰

In October 1940, two essays on cowrie shells appeared in *Man*. The first one was contributed by Murray, who had seen a battle helmet of a Taiwanese warrior, now owned by the Cambridge Museum of Ethnology and Archaeology, decorated with boar’s tusks and cowrie shells. She used this helmet to support the evil eye argument, as she believed that “no warrior would go into battle wearing the representation of the female genitalia.”⁴¹ This, again, was an orientalist explanation of the indigenous society in Taiwan.

The second one, by Wilfrid Vernon Grigson, brought India into this hot debate.⁴² Grigson noticed that the Hill Maria men in Bastar State wore cloth with a girdle of cowrie shells as observed from the late nineteenth century. By the 1930s, cowrie shells had “ceased to be the local currency, and the wearing of the cowrie girdle is dying out, though old girdles are jealously preserved.”⁴³ Because new cowries were unobtainable, extra folds of *pagri* cloths replaced them. Grigson explained that the reason cowrie shells were used for the cloth decoration was because they used to be the “only form” of currency in local society. Grigson’s explanation is surely not correct, as cowrie shells had been used for decoration long before they were used as money.

Grigson did not see local women wearing cowrie adornments, but saw many Korku women in the Betul District “wearing necklaces of cowrie shells arranged in clusters of three, with red and blue glass beads at the centre of the clusters, making them resemble flowers.”⁴⁴ What interested Grigson more in the Korku village was the use of cowries in a ritual before the sowing of the rain crops. One might suppose the use of cowries was as a crop fertility symbol, but actually, “the Korku and the Gond regard it as an amulet for averting the Evil Eye.”⁴⁵ Grigson’s opinion was soon refuted by Verrier Elwin.

Responding to Murray’s essay in *Man* in 1939, Jack Herbert Driberg, in his November 1940 letter to *Man*, summarised the debate into four questions:

- (1) Is the cowrie a female charm, the efficacy of which is based on the supposed likeness to the human vulva?
- (2) Alternatively, is it a specific against the Evil Eye rather than a charm conferring fertility on women?
- (3) If it is

a specific against the Evil Eye, is its supposed efficacy not rather to be derived from a similarity to the eye than to the vulva? (4) Would not a reference to the vulva deprive the cowrie of its known monetary value?⁴⁶

He argued that cowries were a representation of the life force, “as typified in the vulva, and not the vulva itself,” and thus as a symbol of power, cowries were “not associated with the vulva in a sexual sense,” nor were they excluded from economic (monetary) activities.⁴⁷

In the forty-first volume of *Man* (Mar.–Apr. 1941), scholars continued to discuss the meaning of cowrie shells in various areas. Charles Kingsley Meek’s letter aimed to refute Jeffreys’ statement that “in Southern Nigeria the Evil Eye is practically unheard of,” and thus to support Murray.⁴⁸ He pointed out that in the northern provinces of Nigeria, the evil eye was very much feared:

Pregnant women are afraid of ‘being overlooked’, parents are afraid of the evil eye on their children, and farmers on their crops. The food of chiefs and priests is often prepared and eaten in secret, as a precaution against witchcraft projected from the eyes of sorcerers; and the Nigerian custom, by which chiefs used to speak from behind curtains, is explained by some Nigerians as a defence against the Evil Eye of subjects, though others would say that it protects the subjects from the ‘magical eye’ of the chief.⁴⁹

The local customs or practices in Nigeria, again, were fairly common in many other societies, and the belief system behind these practices was not necessarily associated with the evil eye.

Thomas Charles Lethbridge from Cambridge, England shared his comments on cowrie shells from such far-flung places as Fiji, Egypt and Saxon England.⁵⁰ At the end of the nineteenth century, cowrie shells in Fiji were of great value, as one piece “actually represented the price of a ‘wife.’” Lethbridge noticed that there were orange cowrie shells (*Cypraea aurantium*) in the Ridgeway Collection of Currency in the University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge. For the nature and value of these cowrie shells, according to Sir William Ridgeway, one piece was worth many whales’ teeth, and in the “old days” one of these cowries could buy a girl; nevertheless, “it was hard to say if these cowries were actually currency, though they were occasionally so used.”⁵¹ In ancient Egypt, Lethbridge confirmed Murray’s view that a cowrie was a charm against the evil eye, and was probably used as such in ancient England.

Lethbridge went on to share his own experience with cowrie shells. He had excavated three cowrie shells (*Cypraea pantherina*) from a female burial in an Anglo-Saxon grave site. He found that with “female skeletons,” beads made from small pieces of the toothed rim of the cowrie shells were worn as “part of a necklace,” and he deduced that these cowrie shells represented eyes to ward off the evil eye.⁵²

In December 1942, Verrier Elwin, an ethnographer, in his letter to Murray,⁵³ provided details on the use of cowries in Bastar State, India, where “the cowrie is still

extensively used for decoration, as a charm, for ritual purposes and in gambling,” and where old people “remember the days when the cowrie was used as currency and was accepted for the payment of taxes.”⁵⁴ Elwin found that local people used cowrie necklaces as charms for babies and animals, but no one had the idea that cowries represented or resembled the human eye. In addition to being charms, cowrie shells might be “effective in preventing or even curing diseases.”⁵⁵ At Mokhpal (Dentewara Tehsil), local people “offered cowries to any *Rau* which troubled them,” “when a man was very ill and unable to eat, the local magician waved a cowrie round his head seven times.”⁵⁶

In the Durwa country I found a custom of offering five cowries at the village boundary, with rice and flowers in a small bamboo litter, at the end of a smallpox epidemic in order to purify the village of whatever evil spirits were troubling it. Sometimes a cowrie is tied to a shoe and hung up on a tree outside the village with the same purpose.⁵⁷

Elwin concluded that cowries were used for medical purposes, but not especially relating to the evil eye, which concurred with what Jeffreys had pointed out. Nor were cowries seen as symbols of fertility in the central provinces, as Elwin found that none of the local peoples related cowries to the female genitalia.⁵⁸ In Bastar, cowries were chiefly used as adornments and the practice did not seem to be dying out.⁵⁹ Banjara women purchased cowries from the Maria and made beautiful headdresses for sale. The headdress was usually “worn at wedding dances and the cowries may serve some additional magic purpose.”⁶⁰ In addition to headdresses, cowries were used to adorn jackets, necklaces, bracelets, belts and armlets. In general, men wore cowrie adornments more often than women.

Nevertheless, the use of cowries in many important rituals such as weddings and funerals was greater because of their representation of wealth. “To the Hindus of Bastar, and no doubt elsewhere, the cowrie is associated with the goddess of wealth, Mahalakshmi,” and a “cowrie is often printed at the foot of picture of this goddess.”⁶¹ At an engagement party or during a wedding, certain numbers of cowries were presented to a Maria girl’s parents to be placed in the Pot of the Departed, indicating that the girl now was leaving her clan and joining that of her husband; and in “the old days, the bridegroom used to give a handful of cowries to the village dormitory” where his bride used to live.⁶² This practice illustrates the role of cowries as wealth. Elwin concluded that in Bastar, cowries were not a representation of the vulva or a fertility charm, nor a charm against the evil eye. Their wide use as adornment was related to their previously being used as money, and were therefore more of a symbol of the old times, as magical charms or simply as aesthetically attractive decorations. Elwin’s local-based approach to the uses of cowries in India is commendable.

Walter Leo Hildburgh shared his own study of cowrie shells as amulets in Europe.⁶³ He argued that the European use of cowries was due to their being seen as a symbol of the vulva, with intended purposes including “both the

safeguarding of its carriers from the effects of the evil eye and its analogues, and matters connected with the birth of children.”⁶⁴ He first analysed the physical factors that made shells a favourite material for adornment: their attractiveness, durability and accessibility, followed by three additional factors for cowries as amulets: they were easy to make a hole in and thus could be strung together, as well as their resemblance with the vulva and the human eye. His studies seemed to conclude the significance of cowrie use in Europe.

World War II apparently brought the discussion to a halt for more than three and half years. In August 1946, Margaret Portia Mickey pointed out that in mountainous southwestern China, the indigenous Miao people had used cowrie shells for many ages.⁶⁵ She lived amongst the Cowrie Shell Miao in Lungli County, Guizhou Province for a few months during 1940–1942. One group of the Miao people were spread across the three counties of Lungli (Longli), Kweiting (Guiding) and Tingfan (Dingfan) in Guizhou and were known as the Cowrie Shell Miao because of the prominent place these shells occupied, along with silver, as decoration on their women’s dresses.⁶⁶ In 1948, M.D.W. Jeffreys was finally provided with a chance to share his 1930 observation from Nigeria.⁶⁷ In 1930, Jeffreys was dispatched by the Nigerian Government to investigate the magico-religious beliefs amongst the Ibo in the Awka Division of Onitsha Province, and he observed that cowrie shells were still used as local money.⁶⁸ This article seemed to end the more than decade-long dialogue.

The colonial observations, debates and discussions given above were the last wave of interest (professional and amateur) in the non-monetary roles of cowrie shells across Afro-Eurasia before professional anthropologists and ethnologists began their fieldwork in the Pacific Islands. In 1951, Ernest-Gustave Gobert summarised the earlier debate and concluded that behind the magical and life-giving properties attributed to the cowrie lay the age-old concept of *le pudendum magique*,⁶⁹ emphasising the magical power of the female vulva that cowrie shells were thought to resemble. Gobert’s opinion, however, is questionable, as has been discussed above.

A few clues are fairly evident amongst these commentaries. The first and foremost is that the European perspective and stance have dominated the analysis of the use of cowrie shells in both the Mediterranean World and in non-European societies such as India. It was difficult to refute that certain functions of amulets and protections in India were related to or influenced by the idea of the evil eye, but generally speaking, the use of cowrie shells in India, the Pacific Islands and East Asia had little to do with such a belief system. In contrast, cowrie shells as symbols of wealth and social status were prominent in China, for instance. Their presence in tombs and bronze inscriptions in Shang-Zhou China provide evidence of this multiple economic, cultural and religious role. Secondly, while it might be true that cowrie shells were universally regarded as symbols of fertility, such a function was not so homogenously prominent. To the Chinese, cowrie shells looked more like teeth than a vulva, and that is why cowrie shells were called tooth shells (*chibei*; 齿贝) or shells with teeth (*beichi*; 贝齿). They were highly valued or regarded mostly because they were exotic to the inland

Chinese. Finally, the fact that a few scholars such as Mervyn David Waldegrave Jeffreys and Verrier Elwin began to question the orientalist tendency, stance and perspective for understanding cowrie cultures in non-European societies was remarkable. Their relatively local approach to a global phenomenon of cowrie culture distinguished them as independent thinkers.

The cowrie culture in the Yoruba

The cowrie trade and, to a large extent, cowrie money in West Africa, were part of the European colonisation of the world. Although the cowrie trade ended in the nineteenth century and cowrie money no longer existed by the mid-twentieth century, cowrie shells and cowrie money were deeply imprinted on local cultures and collective memories and also across the African diaspora in the New World. The significance of cowrie money behind which lay the slave trade and European colonisation in Africa cannot and will not be reduced into studies of numbers of cargos, peoples or dollars. A long-lasting cultural, psychological and institutional impact on African societies and diaspora has been created. Unfortunately, these cultural clues have somehow often been ignored.

By critically analysing social memory and metaphor, documents, archaeological evidence and material culture, Akinwande Ogundiran's study of the symbolic meanings and social valuation of cowries (and beads) offers a fresh way to understand the cultural history in the Yorubaland, a vast area of West Africa spanning present-day Nigeria, Togo and Benin.⁷⁰ Concerning cowrie shells, Akinwande Ogundiran argues that "the pre-Atlantic practices of social distinction shaped the demands, reception and recontextualisation of cowries, and that the post-fifteenth century social valuations of cowries developed from the prior of beads as objects of political capital."⁷¹

Cowrie use in pre-fifteenth century Yorubaland was limited to the ritual, religious and aesthetic areas, and its significance was by no means comparable to that of beads. From the early seventeenth century, however, cowries were by far the most dominant of all the imports to the Bight of Benin during the 1650–1880 period. Incomplete inferences indicate that at least thirty billion cowries must have been shipped to the Bight of Benin from the early 1500s to the third quarter of the nineteenth century. The dramatic expansion and penetration of cowrie money in the Bight (Benin, Dahomey and Old Oyo) during the eighteenth century inspired the creation of new cultural practices in both coastal and inland areas, in which the role of cowries became important and elaborate.⁷²

An official oral narrative in Benin links the cowrie prosperity in the eighteenth century with the Reign of Oba Eresoyen (1735–1737), but it was also said to be associated with the peace made between Oba and Olokun, the deity of the ocean in the Yoruba-Edo region who lavishly provided a great many cowries.⁷³ Local folklore has the following story about the king of the land and the god of sea:

Oba Eresoyen once quarrelled with Olokun, the god of the sea, and closed the way so Olokun could not get water. Through the mediation of a palm

wine tapper, Eresoyen agreed to release the water. As a reward, Olokun heaped up cowries to the sky for Eresoyen and they were packed to the palace.⁷⁴

In this way, complicated and multilayered factors leading to the prosperity have been oversimplified into the binary relationship between land and sea, in which cowries symbolised wealth and embodied fertility, abundance and self-realisation. Consequently, the sea itself, the source from which cowries were obtained “assumed a central image in the discourse of material accumulation and wealth.”⁷⁵ Long before the arrival of the Europeans, Olokun the sea god wielded enormous power by extending his rule over the earth’s water mass, the source of all life, wealth and prosperity.⁷⁶

When the social meaning of cowries and the god of the oceans changed, the origin of cowries also changed, because this money became heavily used in the slave trade. While the elitist narrative accredited cowries to Olokun, the god of the oceans, a new satirical version of the story, held by the common people and thus more popular, took shape, telling of the “cowries as shells fished from the Atlantic Ocean using slave corpses as bait,” which “explains the convertibility of human life into cowries and evokes a sensibility of wealth accumulation by capture, servitude and enslavement.”⁷⁷ The tensions between the elites and commerce indicate the different views about the sources and price paid for the accumulation of wealth (namely cowries), while both versions fail to identify the true origin of cowries: the Indian Ocean.

In addition, some more pointed narratives emerged, for example, in the Dahomey Kingdom, which directly accused the king and elites of obtaining wealth in the human cowrie conversion, a vivid and powerful metaphor revealing the relationship between slave trading and wealth accumulation (by selling slaves for cowries):

In the beginning of the world we had the forge and we forged things, we had weaving looms and we wove our clothes, we had oracle huts where we consulted the oracle, and we had boats from which we caught fish. We had no guns. We had no cowrie money (*akwá*). If you went to the market you took beans in order to exchange them for sweet potatoes. You exchanged something specific for something else. Then the king brought the cowrie money. What did the king do in order to bring the cowrie money? He caught people and broke their legs and their arms. Then he built a hut in a banana plantation, put the people in it, and fed them bananas until they became big and fat. The king killed the people and he gave orders to his servants to attach strings to their bodies and to throw them into the sea where the cowrie shells (*akwá*) lived. When the cowrie shells started to eat the corpses, they pulled them in, collected the shells, and put the live cowries in hot water to kill them. That is how cowrie money came to exist.⁷⁸

Gradually, cowries were associated with wealth, markets and a newly formed social relationship in which the old political elite found they had insufficient cowries to support themselves. The old political system now faced changes posed by the new men and women who gained wealth through their access to cowries, a similar situation that was to be faced by the local chiefs in the Kapauku society in mid-twentieth-century New Guinea.

In the context of the Yoruba, cowries became central to the “objectification of human bodies and labor in monetary” terms, and thus key to an individual’s self-realisation during the period of transatlantic commerce.⁷⁹ Such a trend can be illustrated by the new ritual of *Orí*, the spiritual head and protector of one’s fortune and destiny. Adult peoples, both men and women, used cowries to make their *Orí* altars. One altar might have cost as many as 12,000 cowries to decorate, and the same number of cowries as the wage for the manufacturer.⁸⁰ While the *Orí* altar was provided with an abundant and steady supply of cowries from the common people, beads continued to dominate the *Orí* shrines of monarchs.⁸¹ By the late nineteenth century, *Orí* had been upgraded as the most universal and, next to *Ifa* (the deity of divination and wisdom), “the most portable of all Yoruba deities.”⁸²

The role of cowries as wealth was further illustrated by the distribution of the enshrined cowries of a deceased individual to his or her relatives, and to avoid inflation, these shells were stored in hoardings, especially between the 1830s and 1888, in the hope that they could be used when their exchange value increased.⁸³

Cowries in the Atlantic trade also shaped the social constructs of gender and gender relationships, as is illustrated in the area of divination. There were two most popular and important forms of divination in Yorubaland: the use of the sacred divination chain and cowrie divination. Men used both, but women only the latter. The role of cowries in divination was controlled by a female deity, *Osun*, who “was the first to practice cowry divination and she taught it to other divinities including *Obatala*, one of the oldest deities in the Yoruba.”⁸⁴ The legend that the junior and female *Osun* taught other deities the knowledge of cowrie divination reveals a pan-regional restructuring of the Yoruba pantheon, and especially indicates the changing gender relationship in local society caused by cowrie wealth in the age of Atlantic commerce. *Osun*, the seventeenth and the only female member in the Yoruba principal deities, due to her being associated with cowries and thus the Atlantic trade, has been “in Yoruba myth as the provider of nourishment of wealth, fame and honour to all the other divinities and to all her adherents.”⁸⁵ Such a change of ranking and gender structure in the pantheon reflects the feminisation of cowries and deities due to the increased participation of women in the vast redistribution of cowrie wealth. Specifically, *Osun* is associated with cloth, beads, brass and cowries, all of these items being imported goods from the Atlantic trade and the most important objects of social distinction.

In summary, while beads as objects with a political and economic significance predominantly narrated pre-sixteenth-century Yoruba society, cowries appropriated

the historical context, structure and pattern to reinterpret the economic, political and cultural institutions from the post-sixteenth century onwards. A neo-tradition was invented, which was intricately associated with cowries brought in with the Atlantic trade. The cultural biography of beads and cowries certainly provides a rich opportunity to write a cultural history for the Yoruba, providing historical contexts and meanings for many of those institutions and practices that have so far been falsely consigned to “timeless tradition.” What has been derived from cowrie trade and cowrie money, I contend, is by no means confined just to the Yoruba. More anthropological and sociological studies are needed to explore this field.

Cowrie money remembered

Cowrie money in the slave trade impacted various cultures in the African diaspora in several ways. One of these cases is the cowrie divination originating with the Yoruba and popularly practised in Afro-Cuban culture. Such a cultural legacy illustrates the role of cowries in shaping the African diaspora and life on the other side of the Atlantic.

It is very interesting that this divination of sixteen cowries, originally in the Yoruba, later became more important, popular and frequent by their descendants in the New World,⁸⁶ “probably the most important” divination system in the Afro-Cuban cult.⁸⁷ Compared with the dominant system of Ifa divination in Africa (confined to men), the sixteen-cowrie divination was simple, associated with multiple and various gods and could be used by both men and women, which probably accounts for why it has been more popular in the Americas than in its original African home.⁸⁸

In the case of contemporary Afro-Brazilian literature, cowrie money has taken root in the memory of the African diaspora in the New World, as has become a part of its culture to educate, continue tradition and probably enhance this ethnic identification and consciousness.⁸⁹ Mestre Didi, for example, created a short story which provides a glimpse of cowrie money. The story goes as follows.

A girl sold oil in the market and a fairy bought her oil with some cowries. One shell was broken and she begged the fairy to replace it with a whole one instead. “I will go wherever you go and will only return when I have my cowrie,” the girl insisted.⁹⁰ And despite the discouragement of the fairy, she followed the fairy until they arrived at the land of the Eguns (the dead). The fairy tested the girl a few times, and eventually gave her three little gourds. Following the instructions from the fairy, the girl returned home. “Suddenly, the house became filled in every corner with cowries.”⁹¹

A greedy woman who was the first wife of this girl’s father heard the story and sent her own daughter to sell oil to the fairy. The fairy paid with cowries and the daughter quickly hid one piece, asking for another. The fairy did not have any more cowries, so the daughter followed the fairy home. Eventually, the daughter was killed by fierce animals. “And thus it happens with people who are envious.”⁹²

While the moral of this story revolves around the virtues of honesty and persistence, it touches many aspects of cowrie money culture in West Africa. First of all, cowries were money, and cowrie money was used to buy palm oil, which reflects the social memory of the cowrie-palm oil trade in the nineteenth century. Furthermore, it is understood that a cowrie, once broken, loses its function as money, which again, is historically accurate. Finally, cowries represent wealth: the more cowries a person has, the richer he/she is. In words, while honesty and persistence as virtues provide access to wealth, this story is framed within the memories and cultural legacies of the cowries used for the transatlantic slave and palm oil trades.

Generally speaking, the cowrie cultural phenomenon was global, widely extant in the Afro-Eurasia and thence spread to the New World. Some attributes and dimensions of cowrie culture, such as aesthetics, uses as amulets and symbols of wealth, were also global, while in each society, the local belief system that adopted and incorporated cowrie shells tended to vary. The belief in the evil eye might have been popular and even dominant in the Mediterranean World, but it was not found in most other societies. Nowadays, in the Maldives, India and West Africa, tourists may find various handcrafts or artefacts are made from or adorned with cowrie shells. Their aesthetic beauty is globally appreciated, while the local cultural and religious dimensions of cowrie shells, together with their hidden histories, are closely connected, yet vary tremendously. The cowrie culture was both global and local; to employ a recently coined term, cowries were “glocal.”

Notes

- 1 G. Elliot Smith, “Introduction,” in Jackson, 1917, xii–xiii.
- 2 Ibid., xx–xxi.
- 3 Ibid., xx.
- 4 Ibid., xxi.
- 5 Jackson, 1917, 128.
- 6 Amir Goalni, “Cowrie Shells and their Imitations as Ornamental Amulets in Egypt and the Near East,” *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean*, Special Studies: Beyond Ornamentation, vol. 23, no. 2 (2014): 75.
- 7 Ibid., 73–74.
- 8 Ibid., 74.
- 9 Ibid., 75–76.
- 10 Ibid., 75.
- 11 Ibid., 76–78.
- 12 Ibid., 77–78.
- 13 Ibid., 79.
- 14 Ibid., 78.
- 15 Smith, “Introduction,” Jackson, 1917, xix.
- 16 Cite from Hiskett, 1966, II, 341.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid., 341–342.
- 19 Jackson, 1917. Jackson’s book covered all kinds of shells, but his last chapter examined cowrie shells used as currency, amulets and charms.
- 20 Evelyn F. Coote Lake, “Some Notes on the Evil Eye Round the Mediterranean Basin,” *Folklore*, vol. 44, no. 1 (Mar. 1933): 93–98.

- 21 Margaret Murray, <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/england/englishness-Margaret-Murray.html>, Pitt Rivers Museum.
- 22 Margaret Alice Murray, "The Meaning of the Cowrie-Shell," *Man*, vol. 39 (Oct. 1939): 167.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Jackson, 1917, 216–221.
- 27 T. Sheppard, "The Meaning of the Cowrie-Shell," *Man*, vol. 39 (Dec. 1939): 200.
- 28 Kurt Singer, "Cowrie and Baubo in Early Japan," *Man*, vol. 40 (Apr. 1940): 51.
- 29 Charles Kingsley Meek, "The Meaning of the Cowrie-Shell in Nigeria," *Man*, vol. 40 (Apr. 1940): 62–63.
- 30 Ibid., 22.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Ibid., 62–63.
- 34 Ibid., 63.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Mervyn David Waldegrave Jeffreys, "The Cowrie Shell in British Cameroons," *Man*, vol. 40 (Apr. 1940): 63.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 M.E. Durham, "Cowries in the Balkans," *Man*, vol. 40 (May 1940): 79.
- 40 John Henry Hutton, "Cowries in the Naga Hills," *Man*, vol. 40 (May 1940): 79.
- 41 Margaret Alice Murray, "The Cowrie Shell in Formosa," *Man*, vol. 40 (Oct. 1940): 160.
- 42 Wilfrid Vernon Grigson, "Cowrie Shells in the Central Provinces of India," *Man*, vol. 40 (Oct. 1940): 159–160.
- 43 Ibid., 159.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Jack Herbert Driberg, "The Meaning of the Cowrie," *Man*, vol. 40 (Nov. 1940): 175.
- 47 Ibid., 175–176.
- 48 Charles Kingsley Meek, "The Meaning of the Cowrie: The Evil Eye in Nigeria," *Man*, vol. 41 (Mar.–Apr. 1941): 47–48.
- 49 Ibid., 48.
- 50 Thomas Charles Lethbridge, "The Meaning of the Cowrie: Fiji, Egypt, and Saxon England," *Man*, vol. 41. (Mar.–Apr. 1941): 48.
- 51 Ibid., 48.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Verrier Elwin, "The Use of Cowries in Bastar State, India," *Man*, vol. 42 (Nov.–Dec. 1942): 121–124.
- 54 Ibid., 121.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Ibid.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Elwin, 1942, 122.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 Ibid., 123.
- 62 Ibid., 122.
- 63 Walter Leo Hildburgh, "Cowrie Shells as Amulets in Europe," *Folklore*, vol. 53, No. 4 (Dec. 1942): 178–195.

- 64 Ibid., 178.
- 65 Margaret Portia Mickey, "Cowrie Shell Miao of Kweicow," *Far Eastern Survey*, vol. 15, no. 16 (Aug. 1946): 251–253.
- 66 Ibid., 251–253.
- 67 Jeffreys, 1948, 45–53.
- 68 Ibid., 46.
- 69 Ernest-Gustave Gobert, "Le pudendum magique," *Revue Africaine*, vol. xcv (1951): 426–427. Cite from. Hiskett, 1966, II, 340. Ernest-Gustave Gobert's paper was also mentioned by Hegendorn and Johnson; however, I have not managed to get access to this paper.
- 70 Akinwumi Ogundiran, "Of Small Things Remembered: Beads, Cowries, and Cultural Translations of the Atlantic Experience in Yorubaland," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 35, no. 2/3 (2002): 427–457.
- 71 Ibid., 429.
- 72 Ibid., 441.
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 Paula G. Ben-Amos, *Art, Innovation, and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Benin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 103–104; cited from Ogundiran, 2002, 441.
- 75 Ogundiran, 2002, 442.
- 76 Ibid., 442.
- 77 Ibid.
- 78 Christopher A. Gregory, "Cowries and Conquest: Towards a Subaltern Quality Theory of Money," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 38, no. 2 (1996): 195.
- 79 Ogundiran, 2002, 447.
- 80 Ibid., 448.
- 81 Ibid., 447–448.
- 82 Ibid., 449.
- 83 Ibid., 450.
- 84 Ibid., 453–454.
- 85 Ibid., 454–455.
- 86 William Bascom, *Sixteen Cowries: Yoruba Divination From Africa to the New World* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 3. While Bascom claims that the cowries used in divination were not the ones "that were formerly used as money," but instead a smaller kind of cowry, I believe the picture of divination cowries in the book shows that these divination cowries are none other than *Cypraea moneta*. Perhaps Bascom is referring to indigenous cowries in the Yoruba before the import of cowries from the Maldives. See Bascom, 1993, 5.
- 87 Ibid., 4.
- 88 Ibid., 3–5.
- 89 Mestre Didi, trans. Phyllis Peres, "Story of the Woman Whose Daughter Made Palm Oil," *Callaloo*, vol. 18, no. 4, African-Brazilian Literature: A Special Issue (Autumn 1995): 797–798.
- 90 Ibid., 797.
- 91 Ibid., 798.
- 92 Ibid.

10 The cowrie money world

Money went around the world and made the world go round.

– Andre Gunder Frank, *The ReORIENT*¹

Originating in the sea, especially in the waters surrounding the Maldives, cowrie shells moved between and transcended cultures and societies, symbolising a diverse but closely connected hybrid of economy long before and during European colonisation and dominance across Africa, Asia and the New World. The history of cowrie money has raised many questions about our understanding of monetary and economic history, ethnic and cultural dynamics, global interactions and world history.

This chapter summarises and theorises the discussions and discoveries presented in this book. It argues and illustrates that cowrie money was not an insignificant, let alone primitive form of money, but the first global money in human history. Indeed, cowrie money was paradoxically neither traditional nor modern. Secondly, cowrie shells as the first global money provide a case to be studied and an opportunity to reflect on what makes or prevents certain objects being used as money. Local cases of cowrie money have indicated the crucial role of supply in the process of making or failing certain monetary candidates, which in turn demonstrates how the roles of market and state were intimately intertwined. Thirdly, the global nature of the cowrie trade and cowrie money that linked Asia, Africa, Europe and the New World sheds some light on Asian interactions and one hot issue in world history, namely, the rise of the west. Theoretical reflections are hence shared on the significance of cowrie shells for the European appropriation of the Afro-Eurasian network and the making of the modern European world system, especially in a comparative context with other precious materials and metals such as spices, silver, tea, porcelain, cotton and opium. Furthermore, this chapter outlines the wax and wane of cowrie money in Afro-Eurasia, and thus defines the term “the cowrie money world.” My conceptualisation of “the cowrie money world” may create a constructive dialogue with some other historical and analytical frameworks, namely, recognised world regions such as South Asia, Southeast Asia, China, maritime Asia and the more recent paradigm of Zomia. My argument here is that the cowrie money world serves

not only as a historical space and thus a research subject, but also as a paradigm being tested for world history.

Put simply, this concluding chapter highlights and confirms cowrie money as the first global money, discusses its use (and disuse) from a global perspective and raises two issues that arise when conceptualising the cowrie money world: one being its role in the making of the European world system and the other proposing the cowrie money world as a fresh paradigm.

The first global money: global practice vs local realisations

This book, bringing together scholarship from many other researchers, has illustrated that cowrie money was a general kind of money, in the sense that it was used for all kinds of monetary purposes and functions. Historically speaking, cowrie money, instead of copper coinage, silver coinage or glass beads, was the first global money and lasted longer than any other kind of money in human history, probably for about 1,500 years.² It existed across an extensive geographical span of our globe and was used by a great variety of peoples at various but largely overlapping periods.

Before the 1980s, scholars tended to see cowries as small (of lower denomination) or primitive money, a view simply biased by cultural paradigms, be they European or Chinese.³ To early scholars, small value means low, traditional or primitive, and cowrie shells as small money thus could not be comparable with other high-value money such as gold, silver and copper coinage, in terms of the monetary, economic and social significance. This point of view, however, is elitist, and could not bear scrutiny. Gold and silver coinages were utilised in India earlier than cowrie money. We may wonder, if these metal monies served the market well, why would cowrie shells be adopted as money side by side with them? The key lies in the fact that these big-denomination monies only remained in circulation among elites, and they were rarely utilised among daily dealings by common people. Because they did not frequently function as media of exchange, they should not be regarded as general monies, or, at least, not as popular monies. It was under such a historical background and an economic niche that cowrie money squeezed itself in to meet the demand of trading routine created by common people, and lubricated local markets. It is exactly because they were “small” that made cowrie money popular and later the first global money.

From as late as the 1980s, scholars such as James Heimann, Jan Hogendorn, Marion Johnson, Hans Ulrich Vogel, Frank Perlin and Peter Boomgaard have challenged such a conventional statement of cowrie money being small and primitive with their empirical and theoretical research. Heimann points out that cowrie money in India predated or was concurrent with its first coins, and “functioned as money in all modern senses of the word – sensitive to changes, liquidity demands, supply, transaction and production costs and gross national product.”⁴ Perlin criticises the dichotomy between the economy of

gold and silver and that of copper and cowries: the former were seen as urban, coastal, trans-local and luxurious, while the latter were considered rural, local, substantivist and changeless.⁵ He highlights that in seventeenth and eighteenth century India, cowries became the medium of economic transactions for urban people.⁶ Despite all this scholarly analysis, to be fair, these researchers have only reached the same conclusion in a way no better or more powerful than the definition given by Robert Lindsay, the British officer in Sylhet who succinctly concluded in 1778–1779 that cowrie shells “answer all the purposes of commerce.” Lindsay’s conclusion was also true beyond India during his era. In the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, merchants with cowrie shells could travel across a large part of southern Afro-Eurasia in which cowrie shells functioned as money. Perhaps, Peter Boomgaard has been the first scholar to globally conceptualise cowrie money, arguing that cowrie money and the cowrie trade from the ninth century onwards “constitute early examples of globalization.”⁷

Cowries served as money in broad territories and through diverse agents (governments and peoples; indigenous and colonial; Asians, Africans and Europeans), from the east to the Tai world, north to Bihar and west to Benin. They were found in the non-Chinese Nanzhao and Dali kingdoms, the Mongol Empire of the Yuan Dynasty, the Chinese empires of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the Tai world, coastal Burma, Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic and British India, the West African sultanates and colonial West and East Africa. They were not confined to any territory of any kingdom, empire, ethnic people or the like, nor were they blocked by any governmental ban, or religious restriction. The Afro-Eurasian experience may cause us to conclude that cowrie money was “the most important, the most interesting, and the most modern.”⁸ In other words, its large temporal and spatial span, rich dimensions and comprehensive monetary functions lead to the conclusion that cowrie money was the first global money. As such, it should be considered that cowrie money enables an approach that “goes beyond [the] comparison of discrete regional economies and beyond explaining the world economy in terms of dominance by a single pole.”⁹

As the first global money, the spread of cowries can be vividly illustrated by a linguistic analysis. The term *cury*, or *kauri*, as they were known in Bengal (observed by Tomè Pires) suggests that Bengal was the source of cowries in Yunnan. The cowrie shell in Chinese was originally called *bei*, *haibei* (sea shell) or *beichi* (shell teeth),¹⁰ but never *kaoli*, a new term with specially created characters that was not invented until the Yuan-Ming transition (late thirteenth century to early fifteenth century) to refer to cowries. In the early fifteenth century, Ma Huan, Gong Zhen and Fei Xin all recorded the word *kaoli* for the first time. From its pronunciation, *kaoli* clearly refers to the transliteration of *cury* or *kauri*, suggesting the origin of cowries in Yunnan to be Bengal and therefore, ultimately, the Maldives. It seems that both the Chinese term *kaoli* and the English term cowrie should be regarded as Indian dialectal terms akin to *kaudi* in Hindi, *kavari* in Martha and *kabtaj* in Maldivian languages.¹¹

Another Chinese character, *ba*, also invented in the Yuan-Ming transition, deserves our attention. Wang Dayuan used the term *bazi*.¹² Ma Huan, Gong Zhen and Fei Xin also used the term *haiba* (sea shells). The character *ba* is the combination of two Chinese radicals, “shell” and “ba.” The radical “shell” refers to its origin, nature and feature, while the radical “*ba*” is used for its pronunciation. The radical “pa” or “ba,” in all likelihood is the transliteral abbreviation of the Sanskrit term *kaparda*, or the Hindustani derivation *kapari*.¹³ The pronunciation of “ba” or “pa” resembles the Cham *bior*, the Khmer *bier*, the Siamese *bia*, the Lao *bia* and *boi* in Thai.¹⁴ Pelliot has also brought the Malay *biya* to our attention, cautiously suggesting that the Thai probably borrowed the word from the Malays.¹⁵ Whether or not this is so, the linguistic connections lead to some speculation, not only on the trading routes of cowries, but also about the intimacy of the relationship between coastal mainland Southeast Asia and Yunnan (upper mainland Southeast Asia).

Besides being the first global money, cowrie money is simultaneously local, as is illustrated by its localised names and indigenous texts. In all areas where these shells were used as money, they constituted part of various multiple monetary systems in all the circulation zones.¹⁶ Frequently, and together with other local or global moneys such as gold, silver, copper coinage, shillings, francs and the like, they created complicated monetary landscapes. In Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, Pegu, Siam, Lan Na, Nanzhao-Dali-Yunnan and West Africa, where the same source for cowrie shells was shared, the global expression of this cowrie money essentially and simultaneously was locally realised. In early China, while cowries did not develop into money, the idea or conceptualisation of cowries as money existed for a long time, and was realised by bronze cowries, arguably another local expression of global cowrie money.

In addition to its monetary and economic significance, cowrie money proved to be crucial in politics, gender, religion, culture and the power structure of family and society. As Patrick Manning has highlighted in his “Foreword” for the current monograph, both Buddhism and Islam played significant roles in spreading the cowrie culture and cowrie money. In many cases discussed, we observe that women and young men, being marginal in their own societies, gained their economic and social power by participating in the cowrie trade or possessing cowrie money. And although cowrie money had been a recent creation in some West African societies (and elsewhere), it later became a symbol of local tradition and autonomy during and after their fights against European colonisation.

Questions remain to challenge the argument for a global cowrie money. For instance, were cowrie shells taken as money or goods when they were shipped from Bengal to Pegu and Siam, or from Chiang Mai to Yunnan? It is true that they were goods and sometimes doubled up as ballast on journeys from the Indian Ocean through Europe to West Africa. At the same time, they were seen as money being circulated across a vast area, spanning from Orissa to Bengal and Bihar, at least during most times and in most cases. As for their shipment from Bengal to Southeast Asia (and the Yangzi Delta), it seems that

they were goods, but perhaps they might have been money from Lan Na to Yunnan, or a kind of money goods?

Making or failing cowrie money: market and state

The emergence, globalisation and collapse of cowrie money may throw some light on the making and failing of certain form of money. The case of cowrie money has indicated that the supply of a certain money candidate (being both scarce and sufficient simultaneously, in addition to other key monetary features such as being rare) was crucial during its process of monetisation (or not). Both market and state play their roles in the process of supply, and the degrees of their roles are up to various circumstances.

Many societies in New Guinea selected cowrie shells as one of their local monies. While they were not part of the Indian Ocean-based economy, and their cowries were not from the Maldives, they had similar environments and social contexts, with limited choices of monetary candidates. In North America, processed shell beads had been highly valued in native Indian societies before the arrival of European merchants who immediately exploited the opportunity to supply these locally favoured beads in exchange for local goods, especially furs. The enlarged supply facilitated this kind of bead to outrule other similar valuables in the process of making a popular form of money. A contrasting case was in early China, where cowrie shells, a strong money candidate, could not compete to become China's first form of money, due to the paucity of supply, which was in turn due to the long distance of sources and the cost of transportation. By the same token, an oversupply constituted a global factor for the devaluation and failure of cowrie money, causing popular distress in many societies. Its decline also served as a key factor in uprisings and unrest, such as in New Netherland in the late 1630s, the 1817 Paik Rebellion in Odisha and the 1956 Obano Uprising in New Guinea, not forgetting the mess brought about in West Africa by the dumping of cowries at the end of the nineteenth century, which technically ended the monetary function of cowrie shells there. That is why cowrie money in African group memory has been closely associated with blood, violence, killing and suffering. As such, the case of cowrie/shell money sheds some light on our understanding of the formation of money, as its history highlights the crucial role of supply in selecting, making and rejecting certain forms of money.

One key factor that caused the emergence and globalisation of cowrie money for such a long time span and across such diverse cultures, peoples and societies lay in the continuous but manipulated supply of cowrie shells from the Maldives. Cowrie shells as a commodity had been shipped to meet the demands for money from various markets. An oversupply would lead to the devaluation of cowrie money, while an insufficient quantity would lead to a high exchange rate of cowries against precious metals and other forms of money. Overall, the balance between the supply and demand were maintained with a range that facilitated cowrie money to spread even as far as the inland societies of Yunnan, a

mountainous area far from the ocean and abutting the giant monetary empire of China that had established its own long tradition of metal money: silver, but also and especially copper coins.

The European arrival altered this situation. They not only linked the Indian Ocean with Europe, but also West Africa with the New World. Very soon, they connected the Indian Ocean world with the transatlantic trade, particularly the slave trade. Hundreds of tonnes of cowrie shells were shipped as ballast to Europe where they were sold in London and Amsterdam and then shipped to West Africa. In West Africa, cowrie shells were used as money to buy local goods, especially slaves for colonial plantations in the New World and palm oil for European industrialisation. The increase of cowrie supply in the beginning helped to monetise local societies in West Africa, enhance both the African-Atlantic and the Indian-European trade, lubricate the Industrial Revolution in Europe, globalise cowrie money and facilitate European encroachment and penetration into Asia, Africa and the New World – until the moment when the cowrie supply exceeded local demand and accommodation in West Africa. This sufficient supply turned into oversupply that in turn drowned and discredited West African markets, eventually destroying cowrie money and the business they had come to symbolise.

While the supply and demand of markets was a global invisible hand making and failing cowrie money, the state, a common institution that either shared or differed in monetary policies amongst various local societies, was simultaneously global and local. The global-local feature was especially expressed in the state control and monopoly of this shell money. Colonial policies resembled one another, no matter whether they were the English, the Mongols, the Chinese of the Ming Dynasty or the Dutch, concerning the exploitation, containment, abolishment and replacement of cowrie money.

As long as the Mongols held control of the Dali Kingdom in 1254, the local cowrie money system caught the eyes of their government. The Mongol Yuan did not like the existence of cowrie money and did not like to receive cowrie money in taxes, as these shells were not circulating in other areas of the empire. Nevertheless, due to the local tradition and resistance, the Mongol Yuan government reluctantly allowed and acknowledged cowrie shells, allowing 30 per cent of taxes to be paid in cowrie shells. Thus, during the Yuan governance (1254–1384), a multiple cowrie-copper-silver-paper monetary system was adopted in Yunnan. Meanwhile, many efforts were made by the Yuan government, both centrally and locally, to restrict the inflow of cowrie shells into Yunnan and to weaken the circulation of cowrie shells in Yunnan. The existence of *siba* (illegal cowrie shells) illustrated such restriction measures.

Likewise, Ming China followed the Yuan policies and practices by reluctantly tolerating while containing the use of shells, with a cowrie-silver-copper coin monetary system in Yunnan. Indeed, the Ming state was more active in providing copper coins for local people in Yunnan (both Han and non-Han ethnic residents). Yunnan launched the minting project to produce more copper cash three times, but little was achieved, partially due to the dynamics of the transregional monetary

system. It was not until the middle of the seventeenth century during the Ming-Qing transition period that cowrie money gradually disappeared, a result more of the global changes in cowrie supply than through local Chinese efforts.

A similar but a slightly later case was British India. While the British did not like cowrie shells when they established authority in India, they had to acknowledge and accept cowrie money just like the Mongols and the Ming in Yunnan. Initially, the British colonial government allowed the payment of revenue in cowries, at least in part. In 1807, it declared that "revenue would be received in the public treasuries only in Calcutta sicca rupees, and the rate of exchange was fixed at" four *kahans* of cowries (5,120 pieces) to the rupee.¹⁷ Soon, the rate was decreased to seven *kahans*, due to many reasons, including the great drainage of silver from Orissa. Not surprisingly, the British did the same thing as the Ming had done in Yunnan, that is, to introduce metal coins to replace cowries. However, as late as the second decade of the nineteenth century, there were still insufficient copper coins in circulation.¹⁸ Consequently, within the global economy, the ultimate demonetisation of cowrie shells in India had a great deal to do with the British stance. While cowrie shells were accepted as "part of the local revenue and probably for local payments," what the British essentially wanted was long-distance trade and the remittance of tribute back home to Britain.¹⁹ Gradually, cowrie money lost its official and legal status, although this painful downgrading lasted more than a century.

This quantity theory, applied to the analysis of the decline and cowrie money in West Africa and other societies, however, has been criticised by Christopher A. Gregory for being purely economic and elitist.²⁰ Gregory adopts a native point of view, introduces the theory of power to examine cowrie money and argues for a political economy of the subaltern quality theory of money.²¹ He starts with the statement that "[w]e had no cowrie money"²² in the myth told by Cece, "a member of the Ayizo people, who were at one time sold as slaves and who were, in another period, forced to serve in the king's slave-raiding army."²³ According to the native folklore, it was the king who introduced cowrie money, which symbolised political power, economic exploitation and societal suffering. However, the statement of "we had no cowrie money" is not so historically accurate. It is true that colonial conquest facilitated the expansion and penetration of cowrie money into inland and poor people's lives, but it was not the European colonists who invented cowrie money in West Africa, or in India for that matter. It was true that cowries symbolised the power of the elites, which was why the king of Dahomey turned down the British proposal to end the slave trade. And it is also true that cowrie money was associated with violence, brutality and suffering, as was illustrated by many other folk tales from African communities.

No wonder Gregory emphasises the role of political power in creating money and fixing the price. And it might be true in the case of the southern part of West Africa that "the king brought the cowrie," to cite Cece's myth.²⁴ But in other parts of the cowrie money world, it was the market rather than the state or king that seemed to be more fundamental in creating and globalising this

shell money. Last but not least, the containment, replacement and dumping of cowries that directly affected the supply of cowrie money, elaborated in the quantity analysis, all have to do with political power, whether Chinese, Australian, British or other European nations.

Therefore, it is unfair to conclude that the quantity theory is purely economic. Political economy is always correct in understanding human society, historically or currently, but Gregory might have distorted the case of cowrie money. The formation and expansion of cowrie money seem to be more attributable to markets, as neither a single giant polity nor multiple major centres existed in the making of cowrie money, a global money that started much earlier than colonial times, while it is similarly true that its globalisation and collapse were essentially and primarily related to colonial power.

Cowries and the rise of the west²⁵

The most interesting question in this story is how much of a role cowrie shells played in the making of our modern world, or to put it simply, what the relationship is between Asia, symbolised by cowrie shells, and the rise of the west. Scholars of the Atlantic trade have examined the significance of silver and gold in the New World in relation to the rise of European powers. Andre Gunder Frank, for example, points out that these precious metals provided a ticket for Europe to take the Asian Express.²⁶ Although his conceptualisation of the world system seems too expansive for many scholars, no one would deny the role of New World silver and gold in the dramatic rise and expansion of the modern European world. Such a perception has been shared amongst experts on late imperial China (the Ming and Qing period, 1368–1911), who have analysed the positive and negative legacy of the silver inflow into China introduced by diverse European merchants.

Silver, on the one hand, accelerated commercialisation and monetisation on China from the late Ming, and drew China into the world economy to an unprecedented degree. On the other hand, being a vital element of the imperial economy, the later outflow of silver during the opium trade period was disastrous. It cannot be denied that silver from the New World contributed to the globalisation of Europe, the New World, China, Southeast Asia and India, but what role did cowrie shells, another form of money, another global commodity and indeed the first global money, play in this globalisation process? Few world historians have paid attention to this first global money or to its significance as one of the crucial Asian goods traversing Asia, Europe and Africa, participating in the Indian-Atlantic trade as early as, if not earlier than, gold and silver from the New World.²⁷

Cowries played a similar role as did silver in the European world system. Statistical data by Hogendorn and Johnson reveal that during the period between 1700 and 1790, some 11,436 metric tonnes of shells were shipped to West Africa by the Dutch and English. This is equivalent to the staggering figure of ten billion individual shells.²⁸ These turned into African exports, including slaves and palm oil, to facilitate the Europeans entering and penetrating local markets in Asia,

Africa and the New World, that is, the rise of the west. The similarity between cowries and silver and between cowries and opium is striking, because all these products served to enhance European accumulation and dominance. Silver from the New World and later opium produced in Bengal were utilised by Europeans to open the Chinese markets, exchanging them for Chinese tea, silk and porcelain. Similarly, cowries from the Indian Ocean were shipped to open African markets in exchange for slaves, who in turn were exploited in plantations in the New World. While the degree to which the Indian Ocean trade has shaped the modern world system remains a question, cowries undoubtedly contributed in important ways to the rise of Europe and global dynamics.

Another relevant question is the relationship between cowrie money and metal money, such as gold and silver. Perlin has emphasised the historical developments that conditioned and facilitated the European maritime invasion of China.²⁹ Responding to the role of New World silver as the pre-condition for international commercial development, he comments that

it was the broad-based, *varied and massive demand for the instruments of monetarization* [italics in original], together with the simultaneous long-run developments in production and supply of monetary medium that was the pre-condition for flows of American silver and for Euro-Asian trade.³⁰

Cowrie money seems to have played a key role in these pre-condition infrastructures. While Europe seemed not dissimilar to other world regions as late as the 1750s,³¹ its relative proximity to the New World and its navigation capacity enabled Europeans to utilise all the Asian pre-conditions (resources, networks and infrastructures) for their own ends.

Peter Boomgaard has noticed the flow of the money metals of gold, silver and copper as well as bulk goods such as cowries.³² While silver was largely moved from Europe to Asia, cowries followed the reverse direction. However, one must understand that silver and other precious metals were popular goods and their flows followed profits, whereas the flow of cowrie shells went just one way: Europeans only bought and sold but never re-bought or used them in their homelands. It must be noticed that cowrie money in terms of a cross-regional flow was essentially inconvertible.³³ When shells were shipped by Europeans from the Indian Ocean to West Africa, they could not be purchased back to Asia. As a result, while the Europeans gained African valuables with their cowrie shells, cowries, with their final destination in Africa and India, lost all their original value and turned into worthless items. The once “fair” trade, accepted by both parties, turned into a trap for Asians and Africans, unexpectedly. Such a one-way trade helped to marginalise Africans and Asians from world trade as a whole.³⁴

An examination of the cowrie monetary system also leads one to rethink the world-system debates, especially when considering the world “before European hegemony” and the restructuring of the world system following the arrival of the Europeans. Braudel argues that between 1500 and 1800, there existed three world economies in the “Far East,” namely, Islam, India and China, all in the clutches of the European world economy.³⁵ Wallerstein deduces that the Indian

Ocean was an “external arena” outside the early modern world economy, and that the incorporation of the Indian subcontinent and other areas into the European world economy occurred between 1750 and 1850.³⁶ Their ignorance of cowrie money and the cowrie trade linking the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic Ocean reflects their Euro-centric conceptualisation of the modern world, which they both have made efforts to debunk.

Compared with Wallerstein’s modern world system, Janet Abu-Lughod’s thirteenth-century world system (essentially an international trade economy), a forerunner of the modern world system elaborated by Wallerstein, is more Asian-oriented.³⁷ She has divided her 1250–1350 world system into eight interlinked subsystems and three large circuits: the western European, the Middle Eastern and the Far Eastern. Neither the beginning nor the end point of Abu-Lughod’s world system is supported by cowrie money. Certain evidence indicates the use of cowrie money in West Africa before 1250; unfortunately, Abu-Lughod has not spared any lines in her book to discuss northwest Africa in the European subsystem, nor in the trans-Mediterranean subsystem.³⁸ The cowrie money zone in West Africa simply does not feature in her 1250–1350 world system. The end point of 1350 for her world system seems similarly arbitrary, because, if the use of cowrie money in early thirteenth-century West Africa is not supported with solid evidence, cowrie money was clearly being circulated in the region by the fourteenth century, as was witnessed by Ibn Battuta, who was also very informed about the trans-Mediterranean movements of cowrie shells from the Indian Ocean to West Africa.

In contrast with Abu-Lughod, who sees the middle of the fourteenth century as the collapse of her version of the trade network, the cowrie trade and cowrie money were in fact just about to enter their heyday, in which the cowrie money zone gradually expanded southwards. Therefore, evidence of cowrie money and the cowrie zone challenges her thirteenth-century world system. If there were a thirteenth-century world system, it might have started earlier, with a broader scope and it might have continued after 1350, which invites us to reconsider Asian interactions.

Asian interactions reconsidered

Cowrie money poses a challenge to spatial and temporal thresholds established in conventional conceptualisations of Asian interactions. First of all, it deconstructs South Asia, Southeast East Asia, East India, the Indian Ocean and Asia and promotes Afro-Eurasia. Takeshi Hamashita has pointed out that the emphasis on localisation under globalisation indeed has greatly changed the meaning of Asia.³⁹ Tansen Sen has inspiringly commented that Asian connections and connectivities indeed “went beyond the Asian continent,” and “must be conceived within the larger context of [the] Afro-Eurasian network.”⁴⁰ The cowrie trade and cowrie money constitute a powerful case to discuss the limits created by the paradigms of Asia and Asian interactions, and advocate a broad Afro-Eurasia as the playground for a whole variety of connections and networks, in my phrase, a global approach. This money

traversed and transcended regional, continental and maritime boundaries. At the same time, regional and sub-regional links are rendered with new dimensions under the global perspective. While cowrie money was global, it was not universally adopted, nor was this cowrie monetary system internally homogenous.

Secondly, temporal milestones or marks such as the thirteenth century or pre-modern period (regardless of whether it be pre-thirteenth, pre-fourteenth or pre-fifteenth century) are embarrassing and somehow meaningless in the face of solid evidence relating to cowrie money. My studies of cowrie money have not only resonated with the recent trend in Asia studies that adopts either a maritime perspective or a long-term historical one,⁴¹ but also challenged some temporal divides. Tansen Sen has described the eleventh to the twelfth century as one of the most vibrant periods in the history of pre-modern interactions in Asia, by outlining commercial Muslim trade, the Chola and Srivijaya kingdoms in maritime Asia and the Uighurs, Khitans and Jurchen kingdoms in overland Asia, as well as the unprecedented commercialisation of Song China.⁴² In discussing the Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce (1450–1680) period raised by Anthony Reid, Geoff Wade instead proposes that “the period from 900 to 1300 [should] be considered the Early Age of Commerce in Southeast Asia.”⁴³ Victor Lieberman begins with c. 800 CE when discussing mainland Southeast Asia in a global context, which accords with the date when cowrie money entered the Nanzhao Kingdom. Nevertheless, he fails to place Nanzhao (and Dali) in his mainland Southeast Asia, nor does he provide any justification or explanation as to why c. 800 CE was the starting point for his analysis.⁴⁴ In addition, some world historians have proposed that a watershed in inter-regional contacts, or globalisation, occurred about 1000 CE, as the post-1000 world history “becomes the story of convergence rather than separation.”⁴⁵ All these efforts to reshuffle periodisation, albeit with different geographical foci, and presenting alternatives to understanding the so-called Asian connections, are commendable,⁴⁶ while cowrie money may trace regional or global commercialisation to an earlier period.

Somehow, intra-Asian interactions have often been simplified into a Sino-Indian relationship,⁴⁷ whereas inter-Asian interactions have been simplified as the eastern versus the western world,⁴⁸ leaving out the influence of many other regions and intermediary agents. For example, it might be correct to argue that cowrie money in Yunnan was the furthest Indian monetary influence in the east. However, such a statement might downplay the subjectivity, dynamics and contribution of various intermediate peoples, such as the Siamese and the Peguese, who first adopted Bengali system cowrie money and from these regions; it then spread to Nanzhao (and Dali) during the ninth or tenth century. Other Southeast Asian agents, including the Ryukyu people, also played a role (if not so significant) in the cowrie trade, and they were crucial and active participants rather than just acting as brokers in Asian interactions.⁴⁹

Likewise, cowrie money challenges political boundaries and units in analysing Asian interactions. It is important to observe that cowrie money and its use across Afro-Eurasia was not controlled by any single empire or large kingdom;

rather, it seems that the role of the market was the primary force behind its global monetisation. Thus, the case of cowrie money resonates with what Sanjay Subrahmanyam has shared, when he warns us to avoid the conventional trap that “stems from a use of purely political units to study economic interlinkages.”⁵⁰ After all, the market as an economic institution emerged much earlier than the nation or the state, and it has in fact always been in tension with political boundaries or impositions.

Cowrie money also sheds some light on maritime Asia and the Indian Ocean. Cowrie shells were ocean products but played crucial roles in inland societies and kingdoms such as the Shang Dynasty, Orissa, Lan Na, Nanzhao (and Dali) and inland West Africa, whether as holding a ritual value, as precious items or money. As such, cowries demonstrated the far-reaching and long-lasting influence of the ocean on the land mass, symbolising the land-ocean connections and interactions. A few pioneering scholars such as George Coedès once highlighted the role of the sea in Asia’s history.⁵¹ James Heimann has examined the cowrie trade to illustrate the integration of the Indian Ocean “world economy.”⁵² Rila Mukherjee has produced an inspiring work that elaborates this watery region, describing it as “an arena of littoral societies, hybrid polities, religious/commercial practices or connected societies.”⁵³ Their approaches have been recently elaborated by Barbara Watson Andaya, who warns us of the risk of looking from a purely land-based perspective and who calls our attention to the “oceans unbounded.”⁵⁴ While promoting a maritime view of history, Jerry Bentley has not only conceptualised the “sea and ocean basins as frameworks of historical analysis” and discussed the advantages of this approach (for commercial, biological and cultural exchanges), but has also pointed out the limits and problems (the spatial and temporal boundaries and relations amongst maritime regions and with the larger world).⁵⁵ Therefore, cowrie money provides yet another opportunity for us to ponder the units of historical research, a puzzling issue that has been attended by many great scholars, including Arnold Toynbee.

Following their theoretical and empirical analyses, I would like to propose the term “the cowrie money world” that could serve as an alternative to purely land-based regional studies or ocean-based analysis, since this world crossed both boundaries and connected lands with the oceans.

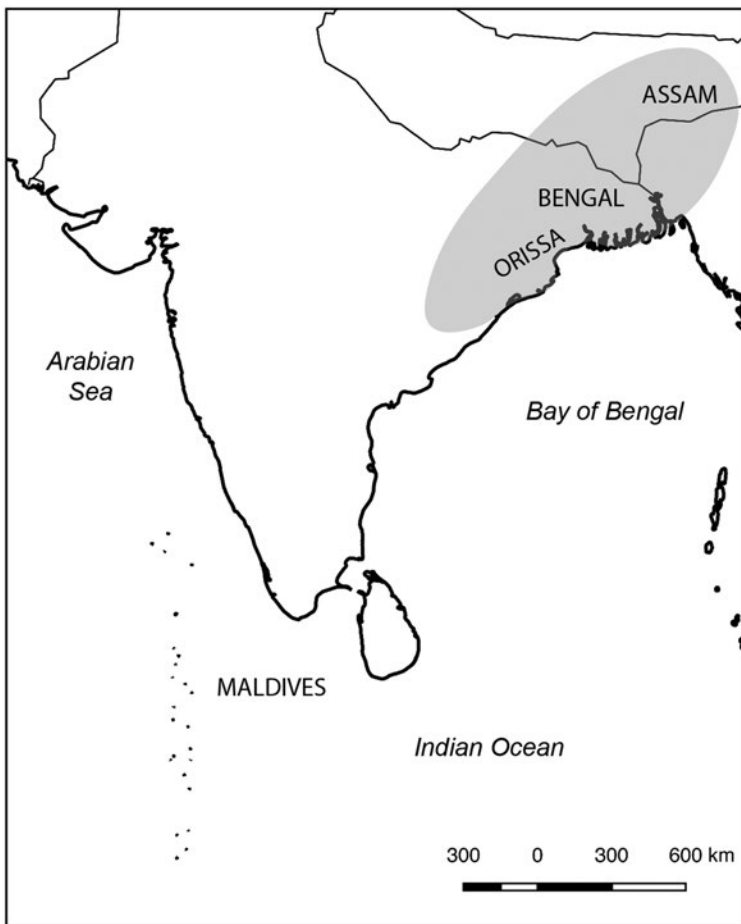
The cowrie money world

The cowrie money world consisted of the large land masses and vast bodies of water that cowrie money linked, lubricated and combined into a commercially and culturally intertwined world. This world crossed, traversed and transcended various boundaries of topography, people, culture, religion and society.

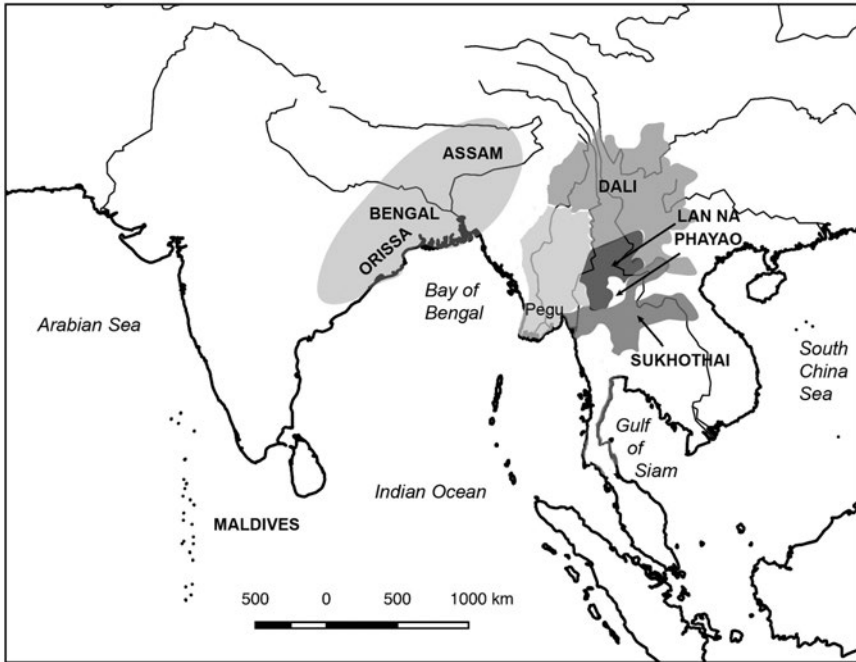
As the first global money, cowrie money lasted for over 1,500 years, but the cowrie trade began much earlier and lasted even longer. The frequency of findings and references in texts, as well as the multiple purposes that cowrie shells had in the late Shang period indicate that the cowrie trade (transit trade) was already fairly developed over 3,000 years ago. Unfortunately, the link

between India and early China (as well as the link in upper mainland Southeast Asia) remains vague.⁵⁶

The cowrie culture across pre-historical Afro-Eurasia preceded but provided a base for the cowrie money world that emerged in India. The definitive feature of the cowrie money world was the use of cowries as money. Some time in the early first millennium, cowrie shells were first used as money in India.⁵⁷ The earliest textual record by the Chinese monk Faxian refers to north India in the fourth to fifth century transition, but the use of cowrie money might have been invented in Bengal or Orissa at some point earlier than the age of Faxian. Thus, in its early stage, the cowrie money world started in Bengal and Orissa, from whence it expanded. By the seventh century, cowrie money had spread to Assam (Map 10.1), and by the tenth century, to the Nanzhao Kingdom located



Map 10.1 The Cowrie Money World I: Pre-Ninth Century

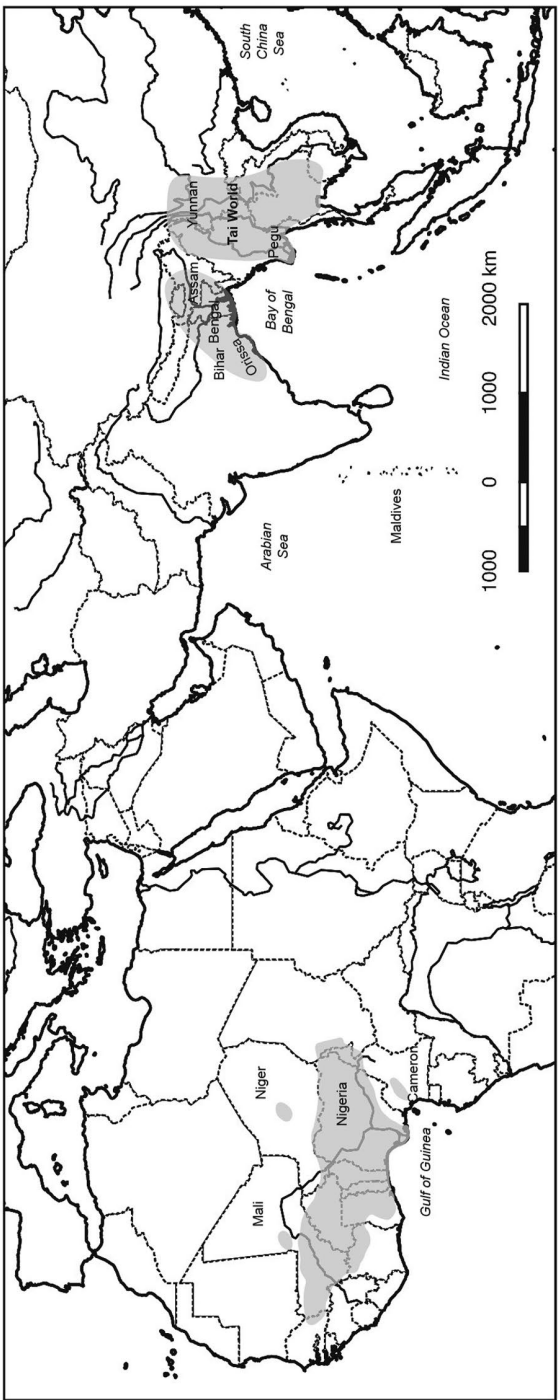


Map 10.2 The Cowrie Money World II: Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries

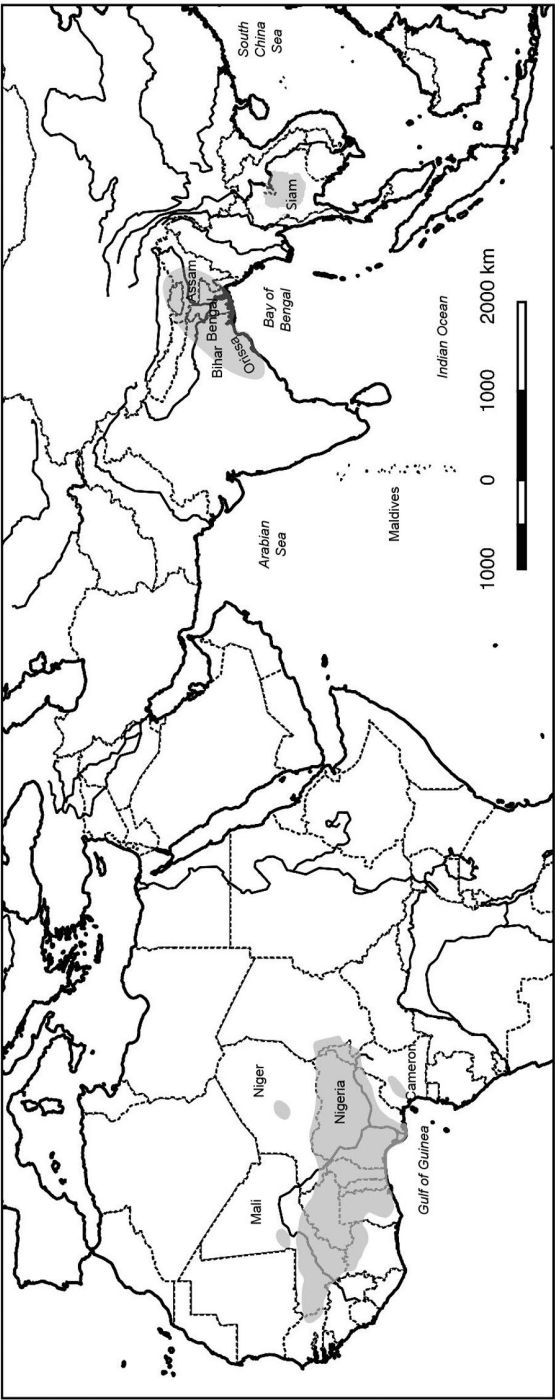
in present-day Yunnan through Lower Burma and the Tai world. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that by the tenth century, a large part of India (Orissa and Bengal), Assam, coastal Southeast Asia and upper mainland Southeast Asia had adopted cowrie shells as money, along with gold or silver coinage. This was the second stage of the cowrie money world (Map 10.2).

The third stage might have started some time before the fourteenth century, when West Africa began to use cowrie money. By this time, the India-based cowrie money world had encompassed an African enclave more than 5,000 km away, linking East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, the Mediterranean World and West Africa (Map 10.3). This stage indicates the furthest reach of Afro-Eurasian interactions before modern times.

The last stage of the cowrie money world started when the Portuguese and other Europeans shipped cowrie shells from India via Europe to West Africa (Map 10.4). Literally, cowrie shells bridged the Indian and Atlantic oceans, simultaneously connecting the two worlds, the old and the new. Asian goods served as West African money for the Europeans to buy African slaves, who then worked on American plantations and produced New World goods such as sugar and cotton for European and Asian markets. In its later phase, cowrie



Map 10.3 The Cowrie Money World III: Fourteenth to Mid-Seventeenth Centuries



Map 10.4 The Cowrie Money World IV: Late Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries

shells were used to buy African palm oil to power European machines that produced manufactured goods for the world. At the same time, cowrie money continued its circulation in India, but gradually retreated from Yunnan and Southeast Asia, partially due to the high price caused by African demands. The insatiable pursuit of profit from the cowrie trade finally led to the use of substitute shells from the East African coast and the dumping of these shells into West Africa at the end of the nineteenth century. At this point, the cowrie money system began to collapse and the cowrie money world died out, although the use of cowrie money in some African and Indian localities continued well into the first half of the twentieth century.

My conceptualisation of the cowrie money world above provides a balanced perspective, avoiding risks caused either by an ocean-based or a predominantly land-based perspective. It also breaks conventional boundaries that have been derived from political centres or the occidental-oriental (or any ethnocentric) divide. Indeed, the cowrie money world challenges any conventional or unconventional national, regional or civilisational conceptualisation such as South Asia, Southeast Asia, China, the Indian Ocean and other divisions besides.⁵⁸ And it transcends the so-called temporal divide between the traditional and modern.

Please allow me to share with you the world that was conceptualised by the local people of Yunnan at latest in the Ming period (1368–1644), who saw themselves as descendants of Nanzhao. Although the work *Nanzhao Yeshi* (Wild History of Nanzhao) was compiled in the Ming period, it may have retained some of the Nanzhao-Dali documents or information, and it records a tenacious local legend that not only suggests intimate ties with its various neighbours, but also provides glimpses of the local conceptualisations of that world.⁵⁹

According to this legend, the founder of Nanzhao was a great-grandson of Asoka of Magadha in the West (*Xitian Mojiemo*; 西天摩竭国). He had nine brothers, the eldest of whom was the ancestor of Mahajanapadas (*Shilunguo*; 十六国), the sixteen states in ancient India; the second, the ancestor of Tibet (*Tufanguo*; 吐蕃国); the third, the ancestor of the Han people (*hanren*; 汉人) in China; the fourth, the ancestor of the eastern barbarians (*Dongman*; 东蛮; probably referring to the ethnic groups in modern Guizhou); the fifth, namely, his own clan, the ancestor of the Mengshezhao (later Nanzhao); the sixth, the ancestor of the Lion Kingdom (*Shiziguo*; 狮子国; referring to Ceylon); the seventh, the ancestor of North Vietnam (*Jiaozhiguo*; 交趾国); the eighth, the ancestor of the Bai Kingdom (*Baiguo*; 白国; a local kingdom conquered by Nanzhao); and the ninth, the ancestor of the White Barbarians (*Baiyi*; 白夷; the Tai people). Therefore, Nanzhao recognised not only the local peoples like the Bai, the Tai and the eastern barbarians, but also China, Tibet, Vietnam, Ceylon and India as fraternal states, revealing a cross-boundary world view that comprised all these various peoples and states, both near and far.

Nanzhao's conceptualisation of its world reveals both a cultural/religious mindset and an economic basis. This hierarchal ranking starting from India, followed by Tibet and China, indicating the influence of Buddhism, a state

religion in Nanzhao and Dali. This world view also reflects the close economic relationship between Yunnan and the Indian Ocean, as was illustrated by the cowrie money system. Therefore, somehow the cowrie money world was associated with, and to some extent overlapped, the Buddhist world. Both the Buddhist world and the cowrie money world help us to understand various cross-regional interactions and networks. The cowrie money world can also be seen as a similarly feasible construct when it is being compared with other paradigms such as the world system and Zomia, all of which cross over and traverse conventional units of South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia.

Certain distinctive differences exist between the cowrie money world and various world systems, the former largely created by the market, while the state played a more important role for the latter. There hardly existed a centre-periphery structure in the cowrie money world, as the law of value lubricated and adjusted all operations, while a hierarchical system was created in and defined world systems, especially in that of Wallerstein. The cowrie money world started earlier but paralleled Wallerstein's modern world system from 1450 onwards, and from around 1600, the modern world system extended into the Indian Ocean, utilising the institutions, practices and networks of the cowrie money world. The European world system managed to use the cowrie money world to link its West African and American periphery and thus gradually strengthened and expanded itself. With its incorporation of the cowrie money world and many other Asian intuitions, Wallerstein's European world system transformed into his modern world system.

Like the cowrie money world, the conceptualisation of Zomia has been somewhat iconoclastic. To cite James Scott, Zomia, geographically known as the Southeast Asian mainland massif,

is a new name for virtually all the lands at altitudes above roughly three hundred metres all the way from the Central Highlands of Vietnam to northeastern India and traversing five Southeast Asian nations (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Burma) and four provinces of China (Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi and parts of Sichuan) . . . Since this huge area is at the periphery of nine states and at the centre of none, since it also bestrides the usual regional designations (Southeast Asia, East Asia, South Asia) and since what makes it interesting is its ecological variety as well as its relations to states, it represents a novel object of study, a kind of transnational Appalachia and a new way to think of area studies.⁶⁰

James Scott argues that "hill peoples are best understood as runaway, fugitive, maroon communities who have, over the course of two millennia, been fleeing the oppressions of state-making projects in the valleys – slavery, conscription, taxes, corvée labor, epidemics and warfare."⁶¹ Therefore, the concept of Zomia has made attempts to deconstruct civilisational discourses about the hill peoples as barbarian, raw and primitive, while they may have been simply "deliberate and reactive" stateless people.⁶²

It seems that the cowrie money world and Zomia share some common themes but also differ from one another. First of all, geographically and ethnically speaking, they overlap to some extent. Indeed, quite a part of the Nanzhao world was within the terrains of both the cowrie money world and Zomia. Secondly, Zomia, like the cowrie money world, was also global, and global trade linked this massif internally and also with the outside world.⁶³ Furthermore, Scott in his Zomia has highlighted the hill peoples' remoteness and desire to escape from the state, and this assertion has received heavy criticism. Bengt G. Karlsson argues that rather than "just trying to escape from the state, people in the hills also hope for another, different, state" in Northeast India.⁶⁴ Elsewhere, hill people were reactive, active and sometimes central participants in state-making, and occasionally some of them wanted to secure relations with neighbouring states such as Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and China.⁶⁵ Chinese historical documents, although with a Sino-centric tone, have illustrated how adept native chieftains on the borderland manipulated both Chinese and non-Chinese states for their own benefit. Just because these people lived in the hills, whether by force or not, does not indicate that they are or were the least state-involved or state-averse. Therefore, in Zomia (whether as zones of refugees or shatter zones), states were visible and sometimes decisive, while in the cowrie money world, essentially a monetary and commercial network, the market seems to have been the most important feature in its creation, duration and globalisation. Finally, Zomia encompassed hill societies above three hundred metres in altitude (rather an arbitrary height), while the cowrie money world transcended water and land, mountain and plain, valley and plateau, temperate and tropical and thus was more all-encompassing.

To conclude, cowrie shells, a local marine product, have been a key to opening up a fascinating global history. Utilised as money by diverse peoples and societies for over 1,500 years, cowrie shells created a commercially and culturally intertwined world, that is, the cowrie money world. This world, consisting of the large land mass and global oceans, crossed various boundaries of topography, people, culture, religion and society, real or imagined, and have been a significant contributor to our global past, which, unfortunately, few of us have ever formerly appreciated.

Notes

- 1 Frank, 1998, 131.
- 2 In this chapter, unless specified, cowrie money refers to the Afro-Eurasian one.
- 3 Paul Einzig, for example, in his studies of so-called primitive money has documented the use of cowrie shell money in many places of the world, including India, China, the Solomon Islands, the Trobriand Islands and New Guinea. See Einzig, 1966, second edition.
- 4 Heimann, 1980, 55, 57.
- 5 Frank Perlin, "Money-Use in Late Pre-Colonial India and the International Trade in Currency Media," in *Imperial Monetary System of Mughal India*, ed. John F. Richards (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 233.

- 6 Perlin, 1987, 237.
- 7 Peter Boomgaard, "Early Globalization Cowries as Money: 600 BCE–1900," in *Linking Destinies: Trade, Towns, and Kin in Asian History*, ed. Peter Boomgaard, Dick Kooiman and Henk Schulte Nordholt (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2008), 15. The term "globalization," according to Boomgaard, refers to "phenomena of economic integration and connectedness that can be observed in earlier periods."
- 8 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 1.
- 9 Patrick Manning, "Asia and Europe in the World Economy: Introduction," AHR Forum: Asia and Europe in the World Economy, *The American Historical Review*, vol. 107, no. 2 (2002): 419.
- 10 *Beichi*, as it is so named, because of the marks inside the edge of the shell that resemble teeth. See James Legge, *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms*, 43 and 43, footnote 2.
- 11 Egami, 1974, 36.
- 12 Wang, 2000, 264.
- 13 Egami Namio states that it is "apparently." See Egami, 1974, 34.
- 14 Pelliot, 1959, 554; Egami, 1974, 32.
- 15 Pelliot, 1959, 554.
- 16 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 2.
- 17 Amiya Kumar Bagchi, "Transition from Indian to British Indian Systems of Money and Banking 1800–1850," *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3 (1985): 504.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 505.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Gregory, 1996, 195–217.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 208.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 195, 206.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 203.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 207.
- 25 This section is largely based on Yang, 2011, 317–342.
- 26 Frank, 1998.
- 27 Apart from a few Africa-based world historians such as Philip Curtin and Patrick Manning, Andre Gunder Frank was the only one who noticed the role of cowrie shells as one of the key monies that oiled the European colonist wheels. Frank, 1998, 73, 102–103.
- 28 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 58; Gregory, 1996, 198.
- 29 Frank Perlin, "Monetary Revolution and Societal Change in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Times: A Review Article," *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 45, no. 5 (1986): 1046.
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000); also see Patrick Manning, Bin Wong, Kenneth Pomeranz and David Ludden, AHR Forum, "Asia and Europe in the World Economy," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 107, no. 2 (Apr. 2002): 419–480.
- 32 Boomgaard, 2014, 25.
- 33 Hogendorn and Johnson, 1986, 2.
- 34 Frank, 1998, 73.
- 35 Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th Century: Volume 2, The Perspective of the World* (Berkeley: University of Berkeley Press, 1992), 484–488, 523.
- 36 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System* (New York: Academic Press, 1974–1989), 3 vols., I, 39–46, 301–302, II, 47, 50, 273–274.
- 37 Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

- 38 Abu-Lughod, 1991, 34–36.
- 39 Hamashita, 2004.
- 40 Tansen Sen, “The Intricacies of Pre-Modern Asian Connections,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 69, no. 4 (2010): 991, 998 and 999.
- 41 Hamashita, 2004.
- 42 Sen, 2010, 995–996.
- 43 Reid, 1990, 1–30; *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce, 1450–1680*, 2 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988 and 1993); Geoff Wade, “An Early Age of Commerce in Southeast Asia, 900–1300 CE,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2 (2009): 221–265.
- 44 Lieberman, 2003, *Strange Parallels*, vol. 1; *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830: Volume 2, Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- 45 Peter N. Sterns, *Globalization in World History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 29.
- 46 Sen, 2010, 991, 998.
- 47 Ibid., 991, 998.
- 48 Hamashita, 2004.
- 49 Sen, 2010, 992–993.
- 50 Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “‘World-Economies’ and South Asia, 1600–1750: A Skeptical Note,” *Review* (Fernand Braudel Center), vol. 12, no. 1 (1989): 146.
- 51 Coedès, citing Sylvain Levi, emphasised the role of the Indian Ocean, “the pattern of currents and the pattern of periodic winds that govern navigation have long fostered a system of trade in which the African coast, Arabia, the Persian Gulf, India, Indochina and China continually contributed and received their share”; he also pointed out the significance of the China Sea in Southeast Asia as the sea “has always been a unifying factor rather than an obstacle for the peoples along the rivers.” George Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, ed. Walter F. Vella and trans. Susan Brown Cowing (Kuala Lumpur and Singapore: University of Malaya Press, 1968), 3–4.
- 52 Heimann, 1980, 48–69.
- 53 Rila Mukherjee, “The Neglected Sea: The Eastern Indian Ocean in History,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, vol. xix, no. 3 (2007): 1–48; and no. 4 (2007): 18–49.
- 54 Barbara Watson Andaya, “Oceans Unbounded: Transversing Asia across ‘Area Studies’,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 65, no. 4 (2006): 669–690.
- 55 Jerry Bentley, “Sea and Ocean Basins as Frameworks of Historical Analysis,” *Geographical Review*, vol. 89, no. 2 (1999): 215–225.
- 56 Boomgaard, 2014, 25.
- 57 Peter Boomgaars concludes that the use of cowrie money lasted 2,500 years, but this conclusion lacks evidence. Boomgaard, 2014, 24.
- 58 Lewis and Wigen, 1997.
- 59 Ni Lu, compil., *Nanzhao Yeshi Huizheng* (Wild History of Nanzhao: Proofreading and Annotation), compiled by Ni Lu, proofread by Wang Song, revised by Hu Wei, and annotated by Mu Xin (Kunming: Yunnan Renminchubanshe, 1990), 17–19; 21.
- 60 James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), ix. For a review on the literature of Zomia, see Jean Michaud, “Editorial: Zomia and Beyond,” *Journal of Global History* 5 (2010): 187–188; 199–203. I would like to point out here that Jean Michaud’s criticism of my book *Between Winds and Clouds: The Making of Yunnan* (particularly Chapter Seven) being “devoid of local voices” is unfounded, as Chapter Seven moves from the local to the central, discussing how the central

state manipulated ethnic classification. In Chapter Seven, ethnic people's words and opinions are utilised to criticise the arbitrary decisions made by the Chinese state. See Michaud, 2010, 190; Bin Yang, 2009; "Central State, Local Governments, Ethnic Groups and the Minzu Identification in Yunnan, 1950s–1980s," *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 43, Part 3 (2009): 735–770.

61 Scott, 2009, ix.

62 Ibid., x.

63 Michaud, 2010, 194–195.

64 Bengt G. Karlsson, "Evading the State Ethnicity in Northeast India Through the Lens of James Scott," *Asian Ethnology*, vol. 72, no. 2, Performing Identity Politics and Culture in Northeast India and Beyond (2013): 321.

65 Michaud, 2010, 207–208; Bernard Formoso, "Zomian or Zombies? What Future Exists for the Peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif?" *Journal of Global History* 5 (2010): 313–332; Victor Lieberman, "A Zone of Refuge in Southeast Asia?" *Journal of Global History* 5 (2010): 333–346. As I have said elsewhere, Nanzhao and Dali, based in Yunnan and part of so-called Zomia, were two of the most powerful states in Southeast and East Asia. To a large extent, Zomia was created by state.

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