

Once As Money: Cowrie Shells that Made Our World

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In the early Western Zhou dynasty (1046 BCE–771 BCE), China, “the Lord Zhi of Yan paid his first court visit to Ancestral Zhou; the Zhou king bestowed upon Zhi twenty strings of cowry shells.”

In the year of 399 CE, Faxian, a Buddhist pilgrim, at the age of sixty, traveled from China to India, and in northern India, he noticed that “transactions used cowries.”

At the end of the thirteenth century, Marco Polo traveled to Southwest China and mainland Southeast Asia, where he found that “all these provinces that I have been speaking of ... employ for currency porcelain shells and gold.”

A few years later, there arose a dispute among three kings in the Tai world. King Ru ang of Sukhothai had an affair with one of King Ngan Müang’s wives, and under the mediation of King Mangrai from Chiang Mai, King Ru ang made a formal apology and paid Ngan Müang 990,000 cowrie shells as compensation. As a result, the two kings “were friendlier than before.”

In 1694, Thomas Phillips, captain of the notorious *Hannibal*, stated that in West Africa “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.”

These cowries mentioned in the extracts above were prevalent across a wide area, consisting of India, China, Southeast Asia, and West Africa, and over the long course of more than three thousand years. Surprisingly, these cowries primarily belonged to the species *Monetaria moneta* and to a much less common extent to *Monetaria annulus*. More interestingly, these species were mainly found in the shallow waters around the Maldives in the Indian Ocean. Their popularity for monetary value over other species was due to their distinctive small size and the unique geographic location of the islands of the Maldives within the maritime trade, although cowrie populations have lived widely in the Indian and Pacific Ocean historically and contemporarily. From as early as the fourth century up to the beginning of the twentieth century, cowrie shells shipped to various parts of the Afro-Eurasian continent were utilized as money in India, Southeast Asia, Southwest China, and West Africa.

Few scholars, let alone college students, have realized the fact that cowrie shells rather than gold, silver, or copper coins were the first global money. Hardly anyone who may have read the various texts cited above has fitted this jigsaw puzzle of the cowrie story together. The scope and importance of cowrie money simply goes beyond the knowledge or imagination of most people living today. So, when I introduce the story of monetary cowrie shells to my students in the classroom, it is not surprising that many misunderstandings and questions arise.

First of all, most people can’t tell the difference between cowrie shells and other seashells commonly known to people or picked up on the beach. In other words, few understand that the term cowrie refers biologically to a group of small to large sea snails, or marine gastropod mollusks. Various shells or bones (whether processed or natural) from animals, especially other marine or land molluscs, have been often mistaken for cowrie shells. This confusion is extremely true of Chinese students, as the Chinese term for a cowrie shell and any other seashell are the same.

The diminutive size of the *Monetaria moneta* hasn’t impressed students, either. The white cowrie shell is usually less than two centimeters long and less than one centimeter wide or tall, and thus pales in comparison with the wonders of the giant size, rich colors and luminous qualities of other shells. But its very smallness did in fact favor *Monetaria moneta* to be monetized, as it was easily portable and countable.



Figure 1. Cowrie Shells Unearthed in Shandong, China (c. 11th Century BCE-Eighth Century BCE)

Weight matters when something has to be transported, especially for hundreds of miles, both over land and across the ocean. Four hundred cowries roughly amounted to one pound in weight. When students place a single cowrie in the palm of their hand, they immediately appreciate how very light the shell of this small marine creature really is. Physical observation and access to cowrie shells in class deliver incomparable advantages to students for their understanding of how and why this tiny shell was picked from among various candidate tokens of monetary value.

The Maldives might be very familiar to newlywed couples, but it seems an extremely remote place for students. While geographical proximity might have accounted for the abundant existence of cowries in India, students wonder how nearly 7,000 cowrie shells came to be buried in the tomb of Lady Hao, a wife of a king of Shang China at the end of the thirteenth century BCE. The Shang Dynasty was centered in the middle Yellow River Region and the aero distance (thus the shortest) between this area and the Maldives amounts to more than 3,000 land miles. It is hard for contemporary students who are so used to the speed of modern life to grasp that it might have taken years or ages for a cowrie shell to reach Bihar in North India, Kashmir, or a region as far away as the Yellow River. Time

makes up space, thanks to various agents in the transition trade that connected goods and peoples in far flung parts of the globe.

This little creature contributed significantly to the rise of Europe and its colonization of the world. It is the Europeans who first shipped cowrie shells from the Indian Ocean to Europe where they were auctioned and re-shipped to West Africa. In West Africa, cowrie shells were exchanged for slaves who were then shipped to plantations in the New World. Thus, cowrie shells for the first-time connected Asia, Europe, Africa, and the New World, and facilitated European expansion into and domination over these regions. No sooner had the slave trade been banned than Europeans began to abandon the use of these shells for palm oil from West Africa. Palm oil then went on literally to lubricate Europe's Industrial Revolution that really distinguished itself from other giant economies such as Qing China. With the rise and fall of cowrie money across the Afro-Eurasian Continent, the modern world in which the West has dominated was created and has remained so at the present-day.

Quite by accident, cowrie shells from the Maldives became money in Bengal some 1,600 years ago, and these little shells were actively involved in the making of our world today.

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