

# SOME REMARKABLE SNAKES IN SHANGHAI ZOO



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In November 1998 I went to China to visit the 'Anhui Research Centre of Chinese Alligator Reproduction'. This is a farm where Chinese alligators (*Alligator sinensis*) are bred. I visited the Centre together with some members of the AG Krokodile of the DGHT (the crocodile working group of a German herpetological society) to collect some newborn alligators.

We also visited the Shanghai Zoo. They also keep a number of Chinese alligators and have bred them a couple of times at a special breeding station outside the Zoo

The alligators were housed in a special aquarium and terrarium building inside the Zoo, which you had to pay extra to visit (approx. 45 cents). Inside this building there were a lot of fish, amphibians, tortoises, crocodiles and lizards to be seen but especially many snakes.

Apart from a single reticulated python (*Python reticulatus*) most of the snake species on display were endemic to China. Most snakes were housed in very bare enclosures and were in poor and lean condition. There were terraria with several Natrix species, with *Elaphe mandarina* and *Elaphe moelendorffi*, cobra's and several *Agkistrodon* species. I had expected something like that, in a country where snakes are more often found on a menu than in a suitable terrarium.



*Agkistrodon blomhoffi siniticus*. Photo by Eddy Even

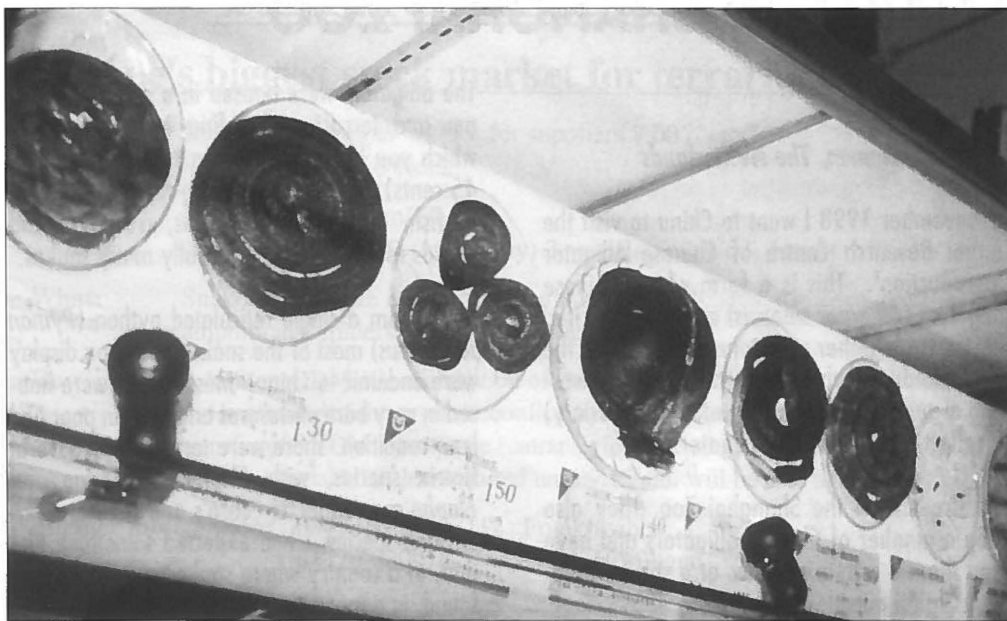


Photo by Eddy Even

Still there were some remarkable snakes to be seen and these were also better housed. There was an albino/amelanistic Red Chain Snake (*Dinodon rufozonatum*) to be seen, a beautiful white animal with red spots. The normal red-coloured Red Chain Snake is regularly imported from China and can be found in the normal reptile shops.

Next to this animal a large and healthy looking stink snake (*Elaphe carinata*), also an albino/amelanistic specimen. This animal was approximately 1.5 meters long and very beautifully white/cream coloured. It was housed alone. Later we talked to the nutrition expert of the Zoo and the animals' manager who told us that this particular snake had arrived in the Zoo in March 1998 more than

half a year before. They did not know whether it was male or female and there were no plans for any breeding attempts. The snake had been caught as an adult in a province in the South of China and presented as a gift of the local authorities to the city of Shanghai. The reason for this was that every year in March, a festival is held in Shanghai that is based on a love story about a green and a white snake. The white snake fitted perfectly in the festival.

I found it remarkable that such a conspicuous animal had grown so large in the wild, without becoming the victim of predators or snake catchers. More so because the latter are especially interested in larger species like *Elaphe carinata*.



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To my knowledge no albino *Elaphe carinata* are known yet. S. Borghammer in his book "*Albinos*" (1998) does not mention the species, nor could I find it on breeding lists from the US where albinos of many snake species are offered.

Another remarkable species on display was the Fea's vipers (*Azemiops feae*). There were two healthy looking animals in a rather plain looking terrarium. This beautiful species is considered rare and is seldomly kept. In a small chapter in his book "*Living snakes of the world*", J. Mehrtens gives some information on this species: it occurs in mountainous regions (over 700 meters) in the North of Burma and the South of China. It is one of the most primitive vipers and has smooth scales.

This species was described in 1888 but until 1935 only five specimens were known to science. In 1985 a small number of living animals were on offer which were collected in the North of Burma. A few of these ended up with some American snake breeders but none of these animals survived for long. One of these animals apparently ate a small dead mouse. The natural diet of the species is unknown.

*Azemiops* resembles a colubrid snake with its round head, large head scalation, long tail and round pupils. The largest known specimen was 70 cm long. Regarding its reproduction, it is only known that it is egg laying (Mehrtens, 1987; Grzimek, 1973; Engelman and Obst, 1981). Its venom and its mode of action is also



*Elaphe taeniura taeniura*. Photo by Eddy Even

unknown. It is known that they possess relatively short fangs. The number of ventral scales is only seventeen (Inger and Smidt, 1958).

There were some illegal salesmen who offered their goods on the edge of the market directly from sports bags. Again many tortoises, large animals this time, so suitable for consumption. Initially they refused to show us what was inside the bags but after a small payment the bags opened up and we could even take pictures. Among other things we saw a number of *Manouria impressa*, a very beautiful and rare species.

We found a man who sold snakes directly from a bag. After giving him some money we were allowed to have a look inside the bag. However, suddenly after a sign from an accomplice the

bag closed quickly and the man fled. Apparently some kind of surveillance had been seen. Later on we encountered the same man on another spot and the snakes could then be seen and photographed. Each species was separately packed in a kind of tough net curtain through which the snakes, mainly small venomous snakes, could be seen. There were several *Agkistrodon*, *Dinodon*, *Natrix* species and some cobra's (*Naja naja atra*). These were not large snakes meant for consumption but probably animals destined for use in traditional medicine. In a large store we saw several dried snakes that were sold as a cure for different illnesses. The pieces of snake were ground before the eyes of the buyer so one could be sure of the right species and buying some real snake!!



*Elaphe carinata*. Photo by Eddy Even





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Real snakes for consumption were offered in rather more expensive restaurants, sometimes linked to a hotel, so apparently it was not completely forbidden. In these restaurants one can find complete pet stores with tens of tanks containing shrimps, lobsters, fish, tortoises (*Trionyx sinensis*), frogs (*Rana catesbeiana*) and snakes. Per restaurant only one species was offered, either *Elaphe taeniura taeniura* or *Elaphe carinata*. These were all rather large specimens. One fully prepared snake would cost about Dfl. 40 (£ 12) so such a meal would only be for the wealthy Chinese!!

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*Azemiops feae*. Photo by Eddy Even