The Greco-Chinese Origins of Inuyasha's Fire Rat Robe

By Jim R. McClanahan

The manga-anime *Inuyasha* (犬夜叉, Dog Yaksha) follows the exploits of the titular character, a half-human-half-dog demon, in his quest to collect the shards of a magic jewel that will enable him to become a full-fledged demon. His father, Inu no Taishō (犬の大将, Dog General), a powerful demon lord and cardinal protector of Japan's western regions, bequeathed to him two pieces of armament that he would later use in this quest. The first is a giant sword forged from one of his canine teeth called *Tessaiga* (鉄砕牙, Iron-Breaking Fang). The second is a red robe made from the fur of a "fire rat" (火鼠, *hou shu*) (fig. 1). The latter provides Inuyasha total protection from the heat and flame from even the strongest fire, as well as protection from mortal weapons. [1] Such a robe was first made famous in a Japanese folktale over a thousand years ago. In this paper, I trace the origins of the robe to ancient Chinese and Greek misconceptions about asbestos, a fireproof mineral with white, silky fibers (fig. 2) and salamanders, an amphibious creature with a lizard-like body plan. I rely heavily on the past research of Berthold Laufer (1915), for his history of asbestos mythology is without equal.

I. Greece to the Middle East: Asbestos cloth and fireproof animals

Starting around the 1st-century of the Common Era, Greek and Roman intellectuals began to write about the fireproof material's use in making napkins, candle wicks, and pyre shrouds. It was originally understood to be a mineral comprised of hair-like fibers that could be spun into a thread to make such products (fig. 3). Strabo (63 BCE-24 CE) mentioned that it was mined near Carystus [2] and that when the napkins made from it became dirty from use they were "thrown into the fire, and whitened and cleaned, in the same manner as linen is washed" (Laufer, 1915, p. 302). Pliny the Elder (23-79) stated that it could be found in Arcadia [3] and India, and even echoed Strabo's story about the napkin. He describes the Indian variety as deriving its ability to "live in the blaze" from baking in the hot desert sun. The term asbestos can be traced to Pliny, for he first wrote that the Greeks called the material *asbestinon* (unquenchable) (Laufer, 1915, p. 305). Among other writers, Dioscorides (40-90) gave the mineral an additional name, *amiantos* (that which cannot be soiled), and also cited Cyprus [4] as a location where it could be found (Laufer, 1915, p. 303).

A common motif appearing in Greco-Roman, Judeo-Islamic, and European lore is that the salamander (fig. 4) had fireproof properties similar to asbestos (fig. 5), or even that some form of the animal was the source of asbestos. Aristotle's student Theophrastus (371-287 BCE) wrote of how the icy goo secreted by the lizard-like creature gave it the ability to douse a flame comparable to its size. This had already become a popularly held belief in Rome by the time of Pliny, which necessitated him to write of the legend's false nature (Laufer, 1915, pp. 315-316). Writing hundreds of years later, Arabs combined this legend with the story of the Phoenix, a magical bird said to be born from fire. The earliest mention of this amalgamation appears in a noted collection of "sailors' tales" published in 953. The story refers to a fire-proof bird known as a *Samandal*, an Arabic rendering of the Greek *Salamandra*. [5] One 12th-century source considered the plumage of such a bird to be the source of asbestos. Qazwini (1203-1283) considered the Samandal to be a type of creature that resembled one of the five kinds of rats (Laufer, 1915, pp. 319 and 322-323). This too appears to have been a long held belief in the Middle East, for even the Jewish *Talmud*, compiled around 500 CE, mentions the salamander is a mouse-like creature that spontaneously generates from burning wood (Laufer, 1915, p. 323; see also Blau, n.d.). The Arabized legend probably spread into Europe sometime in the 10th or 11th-century. The belief that "salamander hair" was the source of asbestos cloth became so common that Marco Polo (1254-1324), like Pliny, felt the need to write about its true mineral nature in his widely published travel journal (Laufer, 1915, pp. 325-326).
II. China: Fur of the fire rat

The earliest Chinese descriptions of asbestos predate those of Judeo-Islamic sources by a few hundred years. The source of these legends is most likely a text of Greek origin associating asbestos with salamanders (Laufer, 1915, pp. 339-340). The Chinese also confused legends of these amphibians and the hair-like asbestos fibers to derive stories of fireproof rodents. This shows that such an idea was discovered independently by both the Chinese and their Arab counterparts.

The noted Chinese alchemist Ge Hong (葛洪, 283-343) was the first to discuss the mythical animal origins of asbestos as related to the Greek-inspired legends. [6] His Master Who Embraces Simplicity (抱朴子, Baopuzi, c. 317-318), a treatise on Daoist cultivation, lists three kinds of asbestos. The first two are respectively made from the flowers and bark of a tree native to a burning landmass located in the ocean. He goes on to say, "Moreover, there are white rodents (bai shu 白鼠) covered with hair, each three inches long, and living in hollow trees. They may enter fire without being burnt, and their hair can be woven into cloth, which is the third kind of fire-proof cloth [火浣布, huo huan bu]" (Laufer, 1915, pp. 332-333).

In his commentary on the Classic of Mountains and Seas (山海經, Shan Hai Jing), a Chinese bestiary, Ge Hong's contemporary Guo Pu (郭璞, 276-324) later provided a natural history for the rodent species:

Ten thousand li to the east of Fu-nan is the kingdom of She-po (闍婆, Java). [7] More than five thousand li farther east is the burning mountain kingdom, where, although there may be long-continued rain on the mountain, the fire constantly burns. There is a white rat in the fire, which sometimes comes out to the side of the mountain, in order to seek food, when the people catch it and make cloth from the hair, which is what is now called fire-proof cloth (Laufer, 1915, pp. 334-335).

Cui Bao (崔豹) describes the rat as a massive creature in his Notes on Things Old and New (古今注, Gujinzhu, c. mid-4th cent.):

In the southern regions there is a volcano forty li in length, and from four to five li in width. In the midst of this volcanic fire grow trees unconsumable by fire, and day and night exposed to a scorching heat, over which neither wind nor rain has any power. In the fire lives also a rodent, a hundred catties [132 lbs/60 kg] in weight, and covered with hair over two feet in length, as fine as silk, and white in color. Sometimes it comes out; and by sprinkling water over it, it is put to death. Its hair is then removed and woven into cloth, which is known under the name "fire-proof cloth" (Laufer, 1915, pp. 336-337).

The idea that such animal-derived material could be used as fireproof armor may come from The Book of Song (Song Shu, 宋書, c. 492-493), which details the history of the Liu Song Dynasty (420-479). A passage therein reads: "Blazing Island (Yan zhou 炎洲) is situated in the southern ocean, and harbors the animalki (or kie)-ku 狜掘. When it is caught by people, it cannot be wounded by chopping or piercing. They gather fuel, build a fire, bind the animal and throw it into the fire, and yet it will remain unscorched" (Laufer, 1915, p. 342). The passage implies this sturdy animal is a large mammal of sorts, yet the term Kiku is believed to be a variant of the Malay "Gecko", a type of lizard (Laufer, 1915, pp. 342-343). So again we see allusions to a salamander-like creature.

There are many more mentions of rat and tree-based fire proof cloth in Chinese records, but the provided examples are sufficient enough to set the foundations for the following Japanese legend.
III. Japan: The fire rat robe

The legend of the fire rat (fig. 6) was immortalized in a late 9th or early 10th-century Japanese story titled the "Tale of the Bamboo Cutter" (竹取物語, Taketori Monogatari). It tells of how an elderly bamboo cutter finds a thumb-sized girl imprisoned within a stalk of bamboo. He gives her the name Kaguya Hime (赫映姫, Princess Kaguya) and raises her as his own daughter. She soon grows to normal height to become the most beautiful woman in Japan, causing men from all over the realm to seek her hand in marriage. She stubbornly rejects their offers, but is forced to send the most smitten and powerful of the suitors on impossible missions in order to avoid accepting their offers. They are each charged with respectively procuring the Buddha’s begging bowl from India, [8] a golden and bejeweled tree branch from Mt. Horai in the Eastern Sea, [9] the blue robe of fire rat fur from China, and the jewel from a dragon’s head and a magic charm from a swallow’s nest, both from lands unspecified.

Three of the men use their great wealth to make forgeries of the bowl, the branch, and the jewel, but Kaguya Hime sees through their deception. The remaining two do not succeed in their quests either. The man sent to retrieve the robe of the fire rat uses a Chinese middleman in order to procure the robe from a Buddhist priest who had supposedly brought it to China from India. However, he soon learns the robe is a fake when Kaguya Hime throws it into flames and it burns like a normal fur. The man sent to retrieve the swallow’s charm dies from a fatal fall. Following this tragedy, she turns down the Japanese Emperor’s offer of marriage, even after he gives her father a high government post.

In the end, Kaguya Hime reveals to her parents that she is really a celestial being from the capital of the moon and must return since her karmic debt for a past offence has been repaid. The Emperor attempts to forestall this by positioning an army of 2,000 soldiers around her home. However, the magic of the moon envoy proves to be too mighty for them to resist. She is given some elixir to return her immortality and a feather robe to wipe her memories of her time on earth. But before leaving, she sends some of the elixir to the emperor along with a heartfelt note of sorrow. He has one of his courtiers burn the letter and the elixir on Mt. Fuji (Keene, 1956).

IV. How the fire rat legend possibly came to Japan

The Buddhist dictionary of Soothill and Hodous (1937/2006) has a listing for an asbestos cassock (火浣布袈裟, huo huan bu jiasha) or "a non-inflammable robe said to be made of the hair of the fire-rat" (p. 161). This same robe is mentioned in the Pearl-Forest of the Dharma Garden (法苑珠林, Fayuan zhulin, 688), a famous Tang Dynasty (618-907) Buddhist encyclopedia, as being in the possession of a 4th-century Chinese monarch (法苑珠林 卷047, n.d.). This suggests an actual asbestos robe may have existed and that such garments could have served as the basis for Kaguya Hime’s robe.

Thousands of Japanese monks made pilgrimages to Tang China to train under eminent Chinese monks during the time period that the Pearl-Forest of the Dharma Garden was written. The most noted of these include Dōshō (629-700), Genbō (d. 746), Saichō (767-822), Kūkai (774-835), Enin (793-864), and Enchin (814-91) (Fogel, 1996, p. 22). Additionally, Qian (2010) explains the Japanese were crazy for Tang culture, and so the government sent numerous missions to retrieve texts from China.

During the Period of the 264 years from 630 to 894 A.D., the Japanese government sent their ambassadorial groups to the Tang Dynasty sixteen times in groups of from 200-300 people or 500-600 people each time. They brought back a large number of Chinese books each time, when they returned to their country [...] Moreover, the Japanese government set up "An Institute of Copying Chinese Classical Books" (Qian, 2010, p. 229).

Therefore, any number of the religious and secular Japanese groups who traveled to China could have either come into contact with stories of the aforementioned robe or brought back books containing information about it and fire rat legends.

IV. Conclusion

Inuyasha’s red fire rat robe can ultimately be traced to early misconceptions about asbestos, a mineral with white, silky fibers, and salamanders, an amphibious creature with a lizard-like body plan. As early as the 4th to the 3rd-century BCE, some ancient Greek writers believed the naturally moist nature of the salamander allowed it to resist or even douse flames. Such writings arrived in China nearly a thousand years later. Like the Arabs centuries later, the Chinese associated stories of salamanders with asbestos fibers to derive legends of furry, fire-retardant creatures most often described as a rat. Chinese sources from the 4th-
1) In the animated series, the viewer first learns about the robe’s superior protection against flame and weapons in season 1, episode 3. The 3rd movie, Inuyasha the Movie: Swords of an Honorable Ruler (2003), explains that Inuyasha’s dying father left him the robe to protect the newborn and his human mother from a blazing fire.

2) Located on the Greek Island of Euboea.

3) Located in the southern island-like chain of the Peloponnesse peninsula of Greece.

4) An island east of Greece and south of Turkey.

5) Laufer, 1915, p. 317 n. 4 and p. 321. The brief story reads: “The same man told me that in one of the Waqwaq Islands there is a bird with red, white, green, and blue plumage, like the woodpecker. In size it was like a pigeon. It is called a samandal. It can go into a fire without being burnt, and stay without eating anything but earth for a long time. While it is brooding on its eggs, it does not drink, but only after they are hatched. When the young are born, it leaves them for a time and does not go near them. When they have grown their feathers and have begun to move, it feeds them with its beak” (Buzurg & Freeman-Grenville, 1981, p. 101).

6) Some Chinese legends about asbestos predate the arrival of the Greek source to China. The Book of the Latter Han Dynasty (後漢書, Houhan shu, c. 5th-century), a historiography compiled from older works detailing the period from 6 to 189 CE, describes the supposed introduction of asbestos material to the Middle Kingdom. It is listed among items given to the Han court by barbarian tribes from southwestern China: “Their contributions of tribute-cloth, fire-down (huo cui火毳), parrots, and elephants, were all conveyed to the Treasury” (Laufer, 1915, p. 360). The same source claims this textile of fire retardant bird feathers is identical to “fire proof cloth” (火浣布, huo huan bu) (Laufer, 1915, p. 360).

7) Source altered slightly. It originally reads “…the kingdom of Ke-p’d” but Laufer thereafter provides information that suggests a more accurate rendering.

8) The fact that Kaguya Hime sent one of the suitors to retrieve the Buddha’s bowl suggests the anonymous author of the above tale was familiar with the story from the travel journal of Xuanzang (玄奘, 602-664), a famous Chinese Buddhist monk: “The alms-bowl of Buddha is still in this country [India]… Having subdued [Peshewar], the king of the Yuezhi (Tocharians), deeply reverencing the law of Buddhas, wished to take the bowl and go; therefore he…caparisoned a great elephant and placed the bowl on it. The elephant then fell to the ground and was unable to advance. Then he made a four-wheeled carriage on which the dish was placed; eight elephants were yoked to draw it, but were again unable to advance. Then he had a four-wheeled carriage on which which the dish was placed; eight elephants were yoked to draw it, but were again unable to advance. The king then knew that the time of his bowl-relationship was [sic] not come (Hsieun & Beal, 1906, pp. 299-373).

9) This is the Japanese name for the immortal island of Penglai from Daoist lore.
Founded in 2006, Historum is a history forum dedicated to history discussions and historical events. Our community welcomes everyone from around the world to discuss world history, historical periods, and themes in history - military history, archaeology, arts and culture, and history in books and movies.
The third InuYasha film, InuYasha the Movie: Swords of an Honorable Ruler, which is not directly based on the manga, gives InuYasha's mother the name Izayoi (十六夜?). He uses the Tenseiga sword to restore her to life, then covers her with the Robe of the Fire Rat and orders her to flee. Before she leaves, he names his son InuYasha. The Great Dog Demon remains behind to fight Takemaru to the death as Izayoi flees with their child. Character sheet for the protagonists of Inuyasha. Main Character Index | Supporting Characters | … Sometimes Inuyasha's companions will just stand in the background and make commentary about the fight, even though they have no valid reason not to participate. Parental Abandonment: For as of yet unspecified reasons the main group, sans Kirara, are all suspiciously missing from their children's lives in Yashahime: Princess Half-Demon. Polite Villains, Rude Heroes: They're always bickering with one another over the smallest things. This contrasts them to the Band of Seven, who get along much better and cooperate even when they argue. When they stopped for lunch, Inuyasha cornered Miroku and dragged him a ways away, well out of a human's hearing reach. Still, he sent the girls and Shippo—seated comfortably underneath a lone tree's shade—anxious glances while Miroku cocked his head in confusion. "Inuyasha, you pull me over here and then stare at our lovely escorts."