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CHINESE NUMISMATICS IN AMERICAN MUSEUMS

by Robert W. Hoge

American Numismatic Association

Zǎi zhì luàn; zhī xīng shuāi.

Dú shì zhe; kǎo shí lù.

Tōng gu jīn; rò qīn mù.

"[History] records the peace and turbulence [of a country]; [through it we] know [whether a country] is flourishing or declining. Readers of history, examine reliable records. [One should] understand the past and the present as if [one sees them with] his own eyes."

(Three Character Classics)¹

Introduction

Coins are among the most durable and abundant socio-economic documents left to today's world by civilisations past. China, the "Middle Kingdom," emitted a vast output of numismatic materials over the last three millennia, and is indeed very likely the region where the concept of coined money originated. In the West, Chinese numismatics has enjoyed a fair degree of popularity as a collectors' pastime, but few collections have developed to a scale where serious comparative research has become possible. A number of American museums are beneficiaries of these private collectors, but their resources have not received anything like the attention commonly given to classical, medieval and modern western coinages. Although initial steps have been taken, in terms of their classification, arrangement, authentication and publication, American public collections of Chinese numismatic materials offer decidedly unfulfilled potential to this enormous field. This paper will

address the nature of the development of Chinese numismatics in American museums, survey the principal holdings of which I am aware, and provide a case-study of the field in an examination of the collections of the Museum of the American Numismatic Association. It will touch upon both "the good news and the bad news": the prospect of information and imagery exchange through the digital world of cyberspace, and the murky morass of counterfeits.

Development of American Collections

As trade relations between East and West grew up in the wake of the 'Age of Discovery', East Asian coins found their way into western hands, first as curiosities and souvenirs rather than as objects for scholarly scrutiny. An early context for the collecting of Chinese coins in the "New World" was among the Native Americans of the Pacific Northwest coastal region (Columbia River valley, etc.), where the "cash" coins found a popular use as decorative items. As substantial communities of Chinese immigrants crossed the Pacific to work and settle in the United States in connection with the labour opportunities provided by American gold-mining and railroad-building, traditional Chinese coins came with them. No doubt such family heirlooms could have given a first glimpse of China's numismatic background to many other Americans.

Serious collecting and study of Chinese numismatics in the United

States only began, however, in the latter half of the 19th century, and at this time the first American public acquisitions may be found. Most of this impetus resulted from the activities of western diplomats and Christian missionaries then working in China. These were educated people who would have already possessed some awareness of classical studies and perhaps even of coin collecting. Missionaries in most cases would not have had sufficient personal wealth to collect valuable art objects in the marketplace during the course of their sojourns among the Chinese, but humble coins provided a wide collecting field with considerable historical and literary interest for them. Then missionaries soon learned, too, that collecting and studying old coins had a long and honourable tradition in China. Eventually, Americans returning from service in the East sold or donated a number of collections to various museums in the United States, as was also the case in Europe. Scholarly attention was primarily brought to bear on early Chinese coinages by the publication of the first important western language work in the field, Lacouperie's catalogue of the collection of the British Museum (1892), and by the writings of Henry A. Ramsden, a Briton resident in Japan.²

Collecting by missionaries was brought to an end by the establishment of the People's Republic in 1950. For the next 25 years, few coins were exported from China although large numbers were presumably found in the course of public works projects. In the 1970s, with the repositioning of China's political and economic priorities, quantities of old coins entered the international market place.

The salient features of Chinese numismatics have long been recognised. Students have had to deal with hypothetical dating discrepancies (coinage was long assigned to legendary rulers as far back as the early Bronze Age), with a genuine lack of pre-Qin Dynasty historical documentation, and with the relative inaccessibility of modern archaeological publications. But today, basic coin attribution can be accomplished by anyone with some degree of interest. Chinese numismatists and their Western colleagues have recognised approximately 6,000 distinct issues, among which nearly innumerable varieties may be distinguished. A very generalised summary of Chinese coinage issues may be useful at this point.

- Imitation cowry shells and related "ant-now" and "ghost-face" metallic castings of the earlier Zhou Dynasty;
- Zhou Dynasty prototype cast bronze knives and spades followed by their less-robust successor, the hollow-handled spade, perhaps appearing first in the "Spring and Autumn" period (722-479 BC);
- Flat 'Spade' coins;
- 'Knife' coin types;
- Pre-Qin dynasty round coins, generally with round central holes;
- Qin and early Han ban lian coinage, about 221 to 118 BC;
- Han and successor dynasties wu zhu coinage, to AD 618;
- Anachronistic spade, knife and roundcoin issues of the usurper Wang Mang, AD 7-22;
- Scarce "Three Kingdoms" and other issues contemporaneous with the wu zhu issues;
- Tang four-character coins and their successors, prototypes for

- subsequent issues, from AD 618;
- Standard currency issues from the Song Dynasty onward, bearing the imperial nian hao, or "years designation," notably the dui qian Song issues with varying script styles, and later, often with reverse markings of date, denomination and mint;
- Occasional issues of iron counterparts to the standard bronze coinages;
- Occasional large denomination coins from periods of emergency;
- Paper currency, with known genuine specimens dating to the Yuan and especially the Ming Dynasties;
- Voluminous western-style paper issues from the 19th century onward;
- Silver-bullion ingots, the locally issued "sycee" series of varying, regional forms;
- Western-style, machine-struck coins beginning in the 19th century;
- Imitative coinages of Japan, Korea and Vietnam, and perhaps Indonesia - a form of circulating counterfeits;
- Unofficial issues and other counterfeits in general;
- Coin-like "charms," and amulets, called ya sheng or hua qian ("flower coins");
- Issues from the sphere of Islamic influence in far western China.

Survey of American Institutional Collections

The American Numismatic Society,
New York (45,000+ pieces)
The ANS with more than 45,000 pieces, clearly holds the pre-eminent collection in the United States, and possibly the foremost in the world. As of February 1998,

some 29,619 Chinese numismatic objects of all kinds were listed on the ANS' computer database. The bulk of the collection was formed by John Reilly, Jr. (d. 1931) who had acquired the entire collection (15,000 pieces) from the scholarly English collector Henry A. Ramsden (1872-1915). Reilly's daughter, Mrs. Eric N. Baynes, donated his collection in 1937, although it had been at the Society since 1917. On the basis of these holdings, *Early Chinese Coinage* by Wang Yu-ch'uan was published in 1951, marking a notable advance in studies of the ancient, spade and knife money and the earliest round coins. The ANS also possesses an outstanding library of oriental reference works and unpublished manuscripts. In February 1998, the ANS hosted a "Chinese Cast Coin Workshop", at which ANA museum volunteer George Fisher and I presented papers.³

The Museum of the American Numismatic Association,

Colorado Springs, Colorado (6,000+ pieces).

The ANA Museum, with well over 6,000 items, holds perhaps the second largest collection in the United States, with series encompassing the entire range of Chinese numismatic material. The Arthur Braddan Coole Oriental Library at the ANA is possibly the foremost such reference collection. It served as the basis for Coole's 1967 *Bibliography*, the most comprehensive such work attempted to date.⁴ The library includes about 120 shelf feet of books, in Chinese, Japanese and western languages. Fuller details on the collection and its development follow in the case study provided below.

The Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, D.C. (3,000±
pieces.)

The most important part of the National Numismatic Collection at the Smithsonian consists of the cabinet formed by George B. Glover, an American who served as a commissioner of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs at Canton beginning in the 1860s. This collection, which featured some signal rarities, was published by the well-known British collector S.H.S. Lockhart (3 vols., 1895, 1907) and was donated to the Smithsonian by Glover's widow in 1897. At the time, this was considered "probably the most complete collection in existence, surpassing those of London and Paris." The Glover collection includes 1,237 Chinese coins as well as a large number of "charms." Through other donations the National collection has obtained significantly more specimens over the years.⁵

Field Museum of Natural History,
Chicago, Illinois (5,000 pieces.)

The Field Museum in Chicago holds a major collection of extensive scope, roughly 5,000 pieces, but it consists largely of Manchu issues. Included are several hundred spade, knife and early round coins, and several dozen iron pieces. About 500 items are from the former collection of Frank H. Chalfant (1862-1914), who served as a Presbyterian missionary in western Shantung Province. Chalfant gained renown as the first Western authority on the Shang Dynasty oracle bone inscriptions. His numismatic collection covered all periods and included some interesting rarities as well as numerous counterfeits.⁶

University of Pennsylvania
Museum of Archaeology &
Anthropology,

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
(4,000 pieces)

The major holding of Chinese coins in the University Museum was formed by Edward Waite Thwing, who went to South China as a missionary in 1892, and subsequently formed an outstanding collection with a special focus on the early spade coins. Thwing sold his collection in 1905 for the then substantial sum of \$2000, and the purchaser, Robert C.H. Brock, donated the collection to the Museum's cabinet. Researcher Howard Bowker studied the collection in 1946, and reported that it included hundreds of spade coins (30 of the early hollow-handled issues), many pieces of knife money and early round coins, but not a single example of the interesting issues of the mid-Han dynasty period usurper Wang Mang, whose archaizing coins are routinely found in most cabinets. The Thwing collection numbered altogether about 4,000 Chinese coins.⁷

Carnegie Museum of Natural History,
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (1,135
pieces)

The Carnegie Museum of Natural History's major collection of 600 pieces was formed before 1895 by missionary Stephen A. Hunter, whose daughter Anna Hunter donated it to the Museum in 1954. It is a general collection perhaps typical of those formed by the missionaries. The other collections at the Carnegie, numbering over 500 pieces, are without provenances.⁸

Newark Museum,
Newark, New Jersey (3,000
pieces)

The principal Chinese collection at the Newark Museum was part of the

original numismatic accession (1921) donated by Frank I. Liveright, a serious and enthusiastic collector of many kinds of numismatic materials. Hundreds of Chinese pieces were included, among them examples of the early knives and spades, sycees, coin "trees" and casting molds.⁹

Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut (1,000+ pieces)

Wesleyan University formerly operated a natural history museum, featuring many collections of materials obtained by alumni, including Methodist missionaries to China. The numismatic holdings include over 1,000 items, mostly unattributed cash coins, but with some spades and knives, funerary money and counterfeits.¹⁰

A number of other American institutional collections are believed to have holdings of Chinese numismatic materials but information on these is presently unavailable.¹¹ Colleges and Universities have commonly been recipients of typical missionary collections, but normally they have had little or no awareness of what they have been given. Some museums have divested themselves of their collections, while others have borrowed private collections for exhibition purposes. There are presently no curators of Far Eastern numismatics *per se* in the United States, although the collections at the American Numismatic Society, the Smithsonian Institution and the American Numismatic Association are actively managed, respectively, by curators Michael L. Bates, Richard G. Doty and myself, with the support of volunteers and other staff.

The novel availability of quantities of items in the market place recently

has helped to popularise this field, as has the Publication of George Fisher's edition of the classic Chinese numismatic reference work by Ding Fubao *Lidai Gu Qain Tu Shuo* ('Dynastic old coins illustrated and described').¹²

A Case Study: The Museum of the American Numismatic Association

Although some of the ANA Museum's accessions date back as far as 1928, the museum was established only in 1967. Its collection has rapidly grown to become one of the world's largest and most important. Scattered donations of Chinese items have been given by a number of individual donors, and a few pieces have been acquired by purchase or exchange, but the most significant holdings of Chinese materials have come from only a few sources.

Of the utmost importance is the well-known oriental library of Arthur Braddan Coole, acquired from his estate in 1978. Coole's publication of this collection as part of the bibliography for his *Encyclopaedia of Chinese Coins* was truly a landmark effort. The complete official dynastic history in this collection is believed to be one of only five or six outside China.¹³ Regrettably, Coole sold his numismatic collection to finance his publishing endeavour; yet the ANA has obtained some items once in it through gifts made by the purchaser, Jack Klausen, and by Coole's son-in-law, John Akers.

In 1991, Baker University, of Baldwin City, Kansas, donated to the ANA the collection that had been bequeathed in 1930 to this his *alma mater* by Dr. Thomas Henry Coole, A.B. Coole's father and original mentor in Chinese numismatics. The

greater part of this collection had been identified and mounted onto 150 cardboard panels for display by A.B. Coole at the time of the bequest. The collection was later inventoried and appraised for the University by Bruce W. Smith.¹⁴ As accessioned in the ANA Museum, the collection consists of 1,611 items, and is probably fairly typical of the missionary collections formed during the first part of this century. It contains few rarities but a wide and representative range of issues.

The collection of Dr. Marlowe E. Wegner, who served in China as a Lieutenant in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II, was recently donated by his son, Christopher Wegner. It presently comprises 2,347 items, and is generally of better quality than the T.H. Coole collection. It includes examples of the early spade and knife money, Zhou, Qin and Han round coins, Wang Mang issues, and some of the scarcer coins from throughout the traditional Chinese series of cast coinage. Among these are specimens from the Three Kingdoms and Five Dynasties periods, rebel issues, and a fine selection of Xinjiang and other western pieces, relating to Wegner's service at Chengdu. Armed with a first edition of Schjoth and a growing knowledge of Chinese, Wegner had the good fortune to confer with Chinese numismatists and other scholars who were refugees from the Japanese.¹⁵ These colleagues helped him with his purchasing and with the identification of counterfeits. In some cases, erstwhile curators may have sold him items from former museum collections.¹⁶

In 1987, the museum received a hoard of Yi (or 'Ming', as they are better known) type knife coins as

part of a huge donation from Werner Amelingmeier. Seventy of these representing all variations present, were accessioned into the cabinet. A.B. Coole had devoted an entire volume of his encyclopaedia to this series.¹⁷ Combined with other examples in the ANA collection, these knife-coin issues are now the best-represented ancient Chinese coinage in the museum.

The museum holds a large assortment of Chinese paper money, ranging from three of the Ming dynasty Hong Wu guan (1,000 cash) notes, two having once belonged to A.B. Coole, to thousands of duplicate 20th century bank issues. About 1,000 notes are presently considered to be part of the permanent collection. There are also over 50 'charms' and fantasy pieces and well over 100 outright counterfeits (not including suspect 'imitation' pieces), over 40 silver 'sycee' ingots, three 'money trees' of coins and charms attached to their sprue channels, and a number of funerary substitutes for actual monetary items.

Altogether, the ANA collections are relatively well catalogued, with most pieces identified with both Fisher and Schjoth reference numbers, and with nearly all pieces adequately attributed and classified.¹⁸ In this extensive project I have been wonderfully assisted by volunteer George Fisher and others. Much work remains to be done, however, such as entering the collection onto the museum's computer database catalogue.

The ANA's holdings are available for researchers and also in the form of exhibitions in the galleries and as travelling displays offered to ANA member clubs. For several years the ANA has offered a course on

Chinese coins, taught by George A. Fisher, Jr., as part of its annual Summer Seminar programs.

The Problem of Counterfeits

Identification of counterfeits, crucial for an understanding of the socio-economic significance of coinage, is a severe obstacle not only in American Museum collections but for the field of Chinese numismatics as a whole. Reasons for the difficulties are manifold. First, Chinese traditional coinages are all cast, as is also normal for the forgeries. Second, many of the authentic series were produced by local or unofficial mints in which standards of production varied greatly. Third, during periods of economic upheaval, counterfeits proliferated, and were often tolerated even though the penalty for the crime routinely was beheading (in actual practice, apprehended counterfeiters were evidently forced to work in government minting operations, at least under the Manchus, presumably refining their skills in the process). Fourth, the general Chinese attitude toward counterfeits among collectors has been much less obdurate than that found among western scholars. Such pieces are considered both as collectors' items and as material suitable for study. The gradation between counterfeit and 'fantasy' issues is blurred, and certain coins have enjoyed a kind of talismanic status for centuries.

Pieces intended to fool numismatic collectors have been made for a great many years, and the practice would seem to have escalated with the advent of the ignorant westerners in the 19th and 20th centuries. This nefarious activity has become especially pernicious as the collector values of many coins have increased significantly in the

marketplace. Comparison with clearly genuine examples can, in many cases, demonstrate the falsity of the majority of older counterfeits, and some more recent productions can be identified on the basis of variant modern technological practices or artificial patinations. But unsuspected forgeries pose great problems for most museum collections in the United States and abroad. Tourist shops commonly offer sets of forgeries to the unwary, promoters sometimes use "replicas" of curious old coins for their entertainment value, while numismatic dealers frequently offer counterfeits to their clientele.

Traditional Chinese references have been illustrated by coin rubbings, which alone cannot distinguish the counterfeits from their genuine counterparts; nor, in most cases, can photographs suffice to do this either. The standard references by Lacouperie, Lockhart and Coole are rife with unidentified forgeries. Publications of comprehensive analytical studies and dissemination of high-quality digital images are badly needed. Determination of authenticity is often quite difficult, and the only way to control the counterfeits is through a massive international effort to identify and condemn them.

Sadly, a recent trend has been in the other direction. Some Chinese hobby and numismatic publications have offered advertisements for a collection of 4,819 different cast reproductions of historical cast Chinese coins in their original sizes, promoted as "The Complete Collection of Chinese Ancient Coins." These pieces range from the spade and knife coins to the last of the Qing issues (1911). These are being produced by the Chengdu Ancient Culture Development

Corporation, supervised by the China Historical Museum. It has been stated that they proposed to issue 4,000 sets of these forgeries (19,276,000 coins!). There are, reportedly two well-known consultants to this project: Professor Yu Weizhao, chief of the China Historical Museum; and Professor Li Xuejin, chief of the History Research Centre of the Chinese Institute of Social Science, vice-president of the China Numismatic Society and chairman of the Society's academic committee. One might ask, who would pay the asking price to foreigners of US\$18,500.00 other than someone of criminal intent? Probably this "project" will have misfired, but the potential release of this vast quantity of new forgeries is frightening.¹⁹

Conclusion

We have summarily reviewed a number of American museum collections of Chinese numismatic materials, noted the sources of these holdings and looked at some aspects of current activities and future directions. Numismatics can benefit greatly from the possibilities offered by the computer age, and Chinese coins and other items are no exception. In the United States, there are substantial collections, although awareness of them by the public is not widespread and their significance is reduced by the presence of many forgeries. Eventually, we may look to the 'virtual museum' of the world's collections on-line to give these materials the cultural relevance they deserve. Most American Museums are currently working to create computer catalogues of their collections.

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