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EXHIBITION ON SPECIAL SUBJECTS OF CHINESE MONEY

By Wang Dan

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Chinese numismatics holds a unique and important position in world numismatic history. China has experienced an unbroken and complete numismatic series of technical and economic processes from the objective-coin, to the weight-coin, to the cast-coin to the struck-coin. It embodies complex and varied historical and artistic content, was made out of manifold materials, has unique style and distinctive appearance, and offers an extraordinary variety in the calligraphy of the inscriptions. This is especially at the end of the last century and the beginning of this century, when the cast-coin system which had been adopted for several thousand years was abandoned, and the more advanced struck-coin system took its place. This huge change not only brought about the great profit due to large scale manufacture, but also caused a tremendous shake-up to the old ideas. The contradiction and mixture of eastern and western culture during this transitional period offered a bright field for Chinese money exhibitions. To delineate the inner world of Chinese numismatics in an exhibition is very interesting work. Now, we will talk about some of our thoughts on this topic.

Over a long period, Chinese money exhibitions have been produced in an almost identical manner, both by private collectors and by numismatic institutes or museums. The approach has been to display the coins one by one in chronological sequence. This had a quite close relation to the social background at that time. On the other hand, there

were not many scholars doing research in the numismatic field, and their research was limited by lack of archaeological support and literature materials.

Still, this approach to exhibitions has its advantages. The audience can get a straight, clear and general idea of the development of Chinese numismatic history. This method particularly suits the beginner in numismatics and those who only want to know the broad outline of Chinese money. But it is far from enough if you want to understand Chinese numismatics deeply and entirely. This is because the information it can pass on is simple, can seem dull and merely covers a small part of the substantial content of coins regarded as cultural relics. With the deepening of the positive results we have achieved through research and new archaeological discoveries, we think, more attention should be paid to special exhibitions.

Special exhibitions must be based on the latest achievements of study of some special subjects. For example, there has been a difficult problem for a long time relating to the coins of pre-Qin Dynasty (14th century BC – 221 BC). Recently, along side scientific archaeological development, and the deeper research of palaeography, a lot of new coins have been discovered. Some new light has been thrown on the inscriptions of pre-Qin coins so we can now decipher words accurately which had remained unknown for hundreds of years.

Besides, the development of historical geography, the history of ancient minority nationalities and the alternation of political powers also creates a favourable circumstance for the study of pre-Qin Dynasty coins. Nowadays, the casting places of various different shapes, their dates of issue, the cause of change and development, as well as how they were put into circulation have become basically familiar to us. Therefore, conditions are ripe for the exhibition on this topic.

We feel that while an exhibition programme has a close relationship with the academic research it should also be related to the latest numismatic developments. This can add some amazing and cultural factors to the exhibition. Last year, the China Numismatic Museum put on an exhibition named *Chinese Modern Commemorative Gold and Silver Coins*. Since these gold and silver coins embodied modern design and a lot of modern technologies, we used some support objects to reveal their noble and luxurious character. We were also able to emphasise their political and social significance. This exhibition has attracted extensive attention and praise from all sections of the community. Exhibitions on special subjects can not only explore a given period, or a given class of coins, but can also fix on a small topic.

Cast-coins have survived for nearly 3,000 years in China. The dominant designs on them are Chinese characters instead of patterns as on western style coins. The legends have been brought into a state of art by the Chinese coins, which is called inscription calligraphy. In the China Numismatic Museum, there

is an independent subject - Coins and Calligraphy. Scores of coins dating from the Warring States to the beginning of the Republic of China (8th century BC to the 1920s) were selected to explain this idea. The inscriptions on the coins respectively stand for various types of Chinese calligraphy and their development process, such as the large seal character on the pre-Qin coins, the small seal character on the Qin and Han Dynasties, slave script on the coins of Tang Dynasty, running script on the coins of Song Dynasty etc. Each type of calligraphy also contains different sub-sets, for instance, the suspended-needle seal character on Wang Meng coins and the jaded-bone seal character on Northern Zhou coins, are both varieties of the seal character. Another example is *Chongningtongbao* and *Daguantongbao* which were both issued by the Song Dynasty, and whose inscriptions were written by Song Huizhong. From these, we can accurately judge the improvement of the emperor's calligraphic skill.

Comparison is a very effective technique in an exhibition. To achieve the ideal conditions for comparison we exhibit pieces against the same background and under the same light. We display coins of the same kind, showing the distinction between genuine and forgery, ancient and present, Chinese and foreign - comparison makes the distinctions easy and clear at a glance. In this way, we can compare the coins of the same chronological period but cast in different places, as well as the coins cast in the same places but issued at different times.

Comparison makes some problems clearer and more easily understood, otherwise a lot of articles would be needed to explain them. Therefore, we will employ this method to the coming exhibition we plan to hold, called *The Chinese RMB and the International Exchangeable Currencies*. There are 23 kinds of currencies included in this exhibition. By comparing, visitors will enjoy various kinds of advanced technologies, national characters and designs incorporated against counterfeiting. Visitors will learn more of the stories behind these currencies and will develop more confidence avoiding being cheated by imitations.

Numismatics belongs to the cultural circle of a community's background. Although coins or banknotes are themselves small, they are big enough to reflect the community activities related to them. Based on this view, we insist that in our exhibitions all the emphasis is on the coins by putting them in the central position. All the other comments are around them.

In the China Numismatic Museum, in order to connect money and community together, we designed some special subjects, such as Money and Society, Money and Folk Custom etc. For example, during the *Chongning* period of the Song Dynasty, despite the lack of small denomination coins and the objection of the public, the

government at that time still persisted in issuing large denomination coins. In order to explain the social impact of this decision we arranged for a painting *Drinking bean milk*, in which a customer bought a cup of bean milk with one of the large denomination coins; the bean milk dealer did not have small change for him, so he had to ask the customer to drink more to solve this embarrassing problem. This story easily explained our point.

Exhibition support items can not be neglected either. Not only can they establish the exhibition atmosphere, but also can create a harmonious and artistic effect.

In order to introduce the usage of paper money in the Ming Dynasty and the money policy at that time, besides the note *Damingbaochao*, we especially created an imitation of an official notice of the issuing of paper money. This copy we put on a decorated wall in Ming style. Elsewhere, in order to better introduce the financial situation during the end of the Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic of China (end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century), we created a model of a private bank house. It makes the visitors feel personally in the scene, as well as enlivening the exhibition atmosphere and deepening the exhibition theme.