

## COMMUNIST COPIES OF A REPUBLICAN CHINESE DOLLAR

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Coins of the Chinese Soviet Republic, which was established in November 1931, form a numismatically interesting aspect of China's history. These coins are well listed in various editions of Krause and Mishler's *Standard Catalog of World Coins*. The Soviet Republic struck well made small copper cents and 5-cents (Y-506, 507), and silver 20-cent coins (Y-508). A range of silver dollars are ascribed to several provincial "Soviets" or regions more or less under communist control: a 1931 coin of uncertain validity (KM-5) bearing Lenin's effigy, a crude 1931 Hunan Soviet issue bearing on the obverse a five-pointed star and a small hammer-and-sickle, various issues of the Fukien-Chekiang-Kiangsi and Hupeh-Honan-Anhwei Soviets, generally with a hammer-and-sickle superimposed on a globe (Y-503, 504). Rare dollars of other Soviets are listed in Krause-Mishler as KM-1, 1.1, 1.2 and 2. An extensive series of very crude copper 200-cash (Y-510), less crude 500-cash (Y-512) and additional competently produced dollars with the globe/hammer-and-sickle motif (Y-513) were produced in 1933 and 1934 by the Szechuan-Shensi Soviet. An example of the 500-cash coin is shown in Fig. 1, and Szechuan-Shensi dollar in Fig. 2. These "Soviet" provinces mentioned above included almost half of China, centered in the south-eastern region.



Fig. 1. 500-cash of Szechuan-Shensi Soviet of 1934 (Y-512).  
(Note that this and other coin illustrations are slightly enlarged.)



Fig. 2. One dollar of Szechuan-Shensi Soviet of 1934 (Y-513).

However, perhaps slightly predating the earliest of these issues, from 1930, are coins based on an early dollar of the Republic first struck in 1914 for Yuan Shi-kai, at first the "Provisional President of the Chinese Republic" and later the definitive President. These putative communist issues are discussed below. An able military strategist and very astute politician, Yuan Shi-kai controlled the Korean army from about 1882 to 1895, when Korea was suzerain to China. China was comprehensively beaten in a war with Japan from July 1894 to March 1895. This had no adverse effect on Yuan Shi-kai's fortunes: during the revolution of October 1911 he forgot his former loyalty to the Monarchy and became a Republican. Sun Yat Sen was sworn in as first President of the Provisional Government of the new Republic on New Year's Day 1912; he controlled too few military forces to sustain his position and he soon resigned, leaving Yuan Shi-kai to succeed him. On the second anniversary of the 1911 revolution, on 10 October 1913, Yuan Shi-kai was installed as the first definitive President of the Republic of China.

Encouraged by an active monarchist group, which seemed unconcerned by Yuan Shi-kai's pivotal role in forcing the abdication of the boy Emperor Hsüan-t'ung to accommodate the Republic, he started to consider a revival of the Empire. On 12 December 1915 the Council of State pressed Yuan Shi-kai to accept the throne and on 31 December he announced that his new Era, with himself as the Emperor Hung Hsien would start the following day. Conditions in China were chaotic; on 22 March 1916 Yuan Shi-kai formally abolished the still-born Hung Hsien period, which had never enjoyed an inauguration. On 6 June 1916 he died from uremia (Smith and Fu, 2002). After a short career as potentate of China, his posthumous numismatic career was long and extraordinary.

This Yuan Shi-kai dollar had a very remarkable history. Originally minted in Year 3 of the Republic (1914), it was legitimately produced in enormous numbers throughout China until 1927, although Yuan Shi-kai had died eleven years before. According to Kann (1954, pp. 214-5):

*"Originally it was decreed that the head-mint--Tientsin-- should lead in the striking . . . and . . . should distribute amongst branch mints in the various provinces the requisite dies, thereby vouchsafing uniformity in weight and design. But this ruling was . . . ignored: partly through lack of discipline, and partly based upon need, subsequent to the then existing civil commotion throughout China."*

*"As a matter of fact, we are now faced with a multitude of differences in the design of the Yuan Shi-kai dollar of the 3<sup>rd</sup> year . . . How many of such varieties actually are in existence is very difficult to determine at this juncture; but the author has cause to assume from 200 to 400 such" [including coins of the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> years of the Republic, and fractional issues].*

The exhaustive research that Kann saw as necessary to sort out this daunting problem of 200-400 dies has, not surprisingly, never been attempted. He had a shot at summarizing die varieties of the 1914 Yuan Shi-kai dollar but this was not a highlight of his work. The basic coin (Fig. 3) bears on the obverse the President's profile



Fig. 3. One dollar, 3<sup>rd</sup> Year of the Republic (1914) for Yuan Shi-Kai (Y-329).

facing left, beneath a legend: '3<sup>rd</sup> year of the Chinese Republic' and on the reverse the value "One Yuan" (= dollar) within a wreath of barley, fastened by an elaborate bow at base. Kann listed about 30 die varieties of this coin but illustrated very few (K-646, 647, 648, 649). The differences noted are very slight, and without Kann's specimens in front of one, it is generally impossible to match a specimen with a Kann number. Kann (1954, p.215) mentions another variable, rather cruder type as:

*"... of somewhat mysterious origin. . . the author has cause to assume that it was produced semi-illegitimately by either warlords, or else communist armies, in the outlying provinces, before the latter had their own coinage. Logically one ought to assume that here the silver fine content shows a lower degree. These products cannot be described in details, for all of them vary considerably in design, both as regards obverse and reverse. They are not the work of common forgers, for the latter would have stuck to the original design as far as possible. This group . . . (see type 650) is very interesting indeed, though there remains little hope that anybody would be able to unravel the mysteries of the 'origin of species'".*

The principal group of these "mysterious" coins were 650, 650a and 650b in Kann's sequence. These, he noted, *"are said to emanate from communist-administered territories, where they were assertedly struck round 1930."* Unfortunately, no source is given for this statement. However, just before (Kann, 1954, p.214) he suggests that:

*"The popularity of the Yuan Shi-kai dollar, even in the outlying provinces, induced warlords there to produce in primitive plants imitation pieces with poorer silver content. These were dated 3<sup>rd</sup> Year of the Republic, and are divulging vital changes from the originals. . . The communist armies in either Kiangsi, Anhwei or Szechuan, probably even after 1930, are reputed to have placed such 'imitation' dollars into circulation."*

So, did the communists reuse warlord issues, or did they make at least some of the imitations? Did they mint more of these or just use the existing warlord issues (if any)? It seems clear that little or no hard information on the origin(s) of these coins has survived, or perhaps more likely, come to the attention of someone interested in the question. It must be said that while these coins are somewhat crude, they are not the products of “primitive plants” called for in Kann’s comment. Warlords and/or the communists are implicated; perhaps evidence for the latter is stronger in view of the later production of several sometimes well struck silver dollar types by various communist-controlled “Soviets”.

An observation further aligning against the warlord option is our knowledge of the numismatic contribution of warlords in China in the 1930s. Admittedly the author’s best knowledge is of the warlords in Sinkiang and adjacent western provinces: we know these men numismatically through the paper money they issued (Smith, Khabibullaev & Fu, 1999; Smith & Fu, In Press). Their principal aim was to extract as much “real” money from areas under their control in exchange for enforced acceptance of valueless “bank notes”. It would have been quite out of character for any of these warlords to have gone to the expense of issuing currency of actual value. The author knows less of warlords in Central and Eastern China in the 1930s, but suggests that their Western counterparts can be ruled out as originators of any of the copied Yuan Shi-kai dollars.

Arguably the first communist usurpation of the First President of the Republic were Yuan Shi-kai dollars counterstamped with 3 Chinese characters—“Soviet”—in a rectangular cartouche near the back of the head. This apparently very scarce coin is listed as Kann-650e. Some doubt has been cast on the authenticity of these coins in a recent Website article by Leung. A correspondent to this website submitted the following comment:

*“According to some research, this YSK Soviet stamped dollar was created by a coin dealer named Ping Yu-Lin, who also made many counterfeit coins including different types of Chinese Soviet money during the 30s, in Shanghai. The punch was made by an ex-employee of Fukien mint. These were leaked out by his partner after they had arguments. Ping later died in prison. The Soviet stamped dollars also found on coins with date yr.9.”*

Unfortunately, we are told nothing of the “research” on which this suggestion was based. If these counterstamped coins were “fantasies” in the time-honored Chinese tradition, they must have been made for internal consumption since the specialist Western market for Chinese coins in the 1930s must have been vanishingly small. If these were concocted by Mr. Ping and his partner, they certainly did not flood the market in China; Kann (1954) regarded the coin (650k) as “*very scarce and highly priced*”.

For the “mysterious” warlord/communist issues, Kann again lists more varieties than he shows. Of his types 650 and 651 he notes ten or so die varieties, only half of which are illustrated. Of the four examples of imitative coins available to the author, surprisingly, three can be matched with some confidence to Kann’s illustrations.



Fig. 4. One dollar, Communist/Warlord imitation of Y-329: Kann-650.

Figure 4 corresponds to K-650: the characters of the obverse legend are large very close to the top of the head, Yuan has a 'lump' below the eye on the upper cheek, while on the reverse the details of the wreath vary and the bow is somewhat clumsily drawn.



Fig.5. One dollar, Communist/Warlord imitation of Y-229: Kann-650a.

Figure 5 corresponds to K-650a: again, the obverse characters are large and very close to the head, while on the reverse the wreath encroaches on the "One yuan" legend. Figure 6 corresponds to K-650b: the legend stays clear of the head but the nose is bulbous and a prominent jowl extends from below the year. In making these identifications the shape of Yuan Shi-kai's ear proved diagnostic! Once an ear-match was made, other die details called for-- the Chinese characters, stars on the President's epaulettes, writing of the denomination and details of the wreath on the reverse could be checked. The fourth coin (Fig. 7) was not listed by Kann: it differs markedly from all others examined-- the nose is small and pointed, the obverse characters are small and poorly written, while the reverse wreath is crudely drawn. Evidently this is one coin in the "series" (if the term may be used here) that has not been published. As mentioned below, the weight of this coin is within normal limits for the Republican model, unlike some imitations.



Fig. 6. One dollar, Communist/Warlord imitation of Y-329: Kann-650b.



Fig. 7. One dollar, Communist/Warlord imitation of Y-329.

Except for Fig. 7 the above departures from the standard issue are not great; the die engravers, communist or warlord, did a generally good job. The author has found that the best means of identifying an imitation coin is through a feature only seen through careful examination. Uniformly in each of several "official" coins examined, just inside the raised rim at the edge of the flan in obverse and reverse is a perfectly regular ring of alternating dots and short lines. In these coins (Fig. 8) the dots are 1mm apart and the ring is 0.8mm in height. If this was a security device, it was successful. Those copying the coin often made a decent effort to match the original but failed to reproduce this feature around the entire perimeter, in the specimens examined here. In addition to this pattern on an "official" coin, Figure 8 includes enlargements of a portion of this edge pattern from each of the imitations mentioned above: in sequence, coins shown in Figs. 4, 5, 6 and 7. The dots may be elongated to 1mm or more or may become small or replaced by short lines. In places the spacing is increased to over 1mm. In common with the rest of the coin, Fig. 7 shows almost no attempt to reproduce this pattern. Otherwise, these defects often merge with regions where the dot-and-line pattern or more or less correctly rendered.



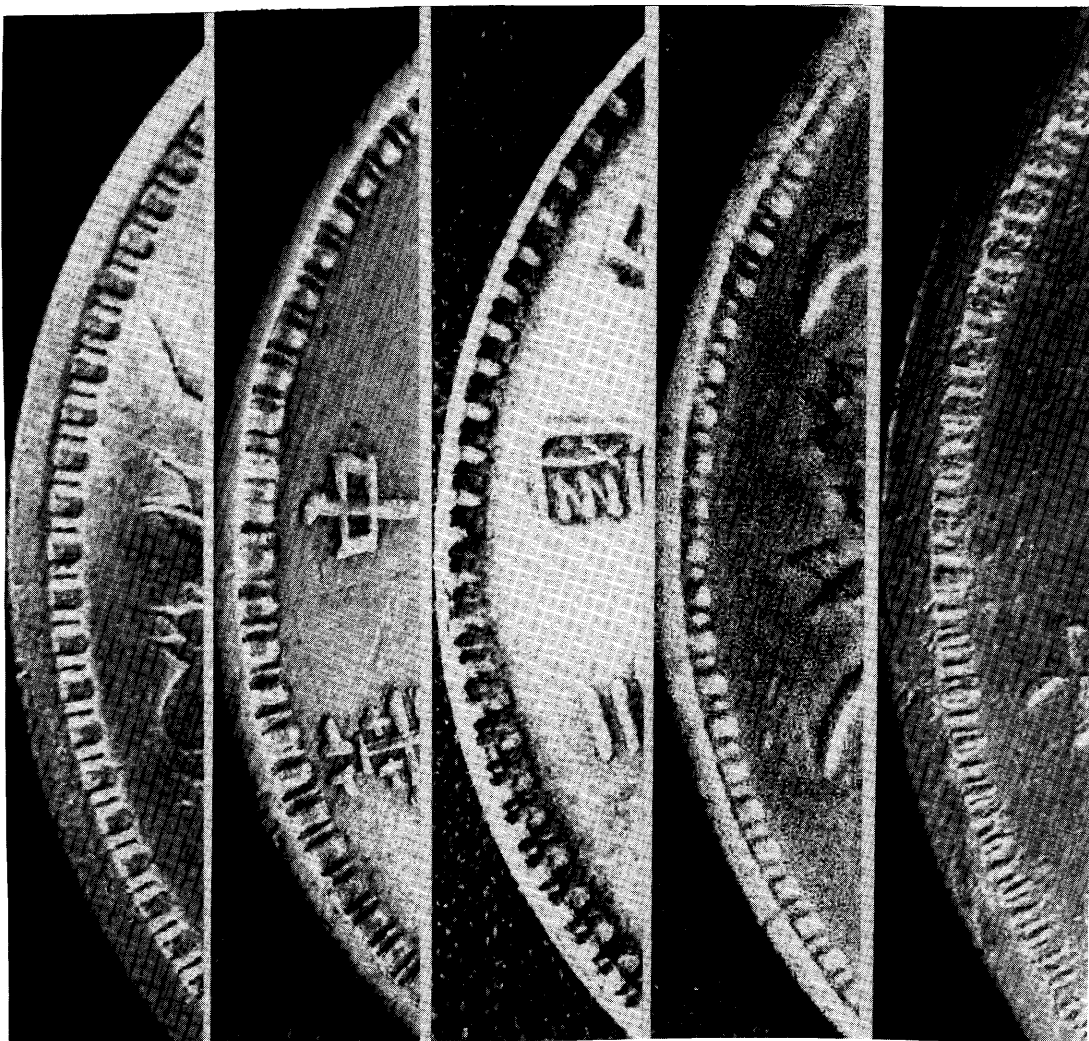


Fig. 8. Enlargements of the edge pattern on obverse or reverse. On left: from an "official" coin (Fig. 3); then in sequence from coins shown in Figs. 4, 5, 6 and 7.

Except perhaps for the last example (Fig. 7), these coins are, as Kann mentioned, by no means barbarous. If they are communist issues, it may be noted that at least the dollars of the Szechuan-Shensi Soviet were competently engraved, although some of the lower denomination copper coins cannot have give satisfaction to Mao Tse'tung or Stalin on the die-engraving abilities of the proletariat.

Subsequent accounts have almost ignored these imitations. The *Standard Catalog* (Krause and Mishler, 1996) notes that:

*"Although bearing dates of Yr. 3 (1914) and Yr. 8-10 (1919-1921), these Yuan Shi-Kai dollars were struck for years afterwards. Coins dated Yr. 3 . . . were struck continuously through 1929 and were also later struck by the Chinese Communists. Later again, in the 1950s this coin was struck for use in Tibet. . . The total mintage of all four dates of Y#329 is estimated at more than 750 million pieces."*

Chang (1981) simply lists the basic coin (CH218) with CH219 covering specimens with a small circle mintmark in the bow on the reverse. Dong Wenchao (1992) makes no mention of any imitations of this dollar but adds that not only Tientsin was initially directed to produce the coins but also the mints of Nanking, Kwangtung, Hupeh and Kansu.

Kann gave the weight of his specimens of the Yuan Shi-kai dollar (and of other Republican dollars) at 26.9 – 26.4gm. Krause and Mishler (1996) give the weight as 26.4gm, with a fineness of 0.89. Weights of the coins shown here are as follows: Fig. 3 (26.955gm), Fig. 4 (26.55gm), Fig. 5 (24.47gm), Fig. 6 (24.46gm), Fig. 7 (26.40gm). Of the four imitations, two are within the “correct” limits while two (Figs. 5, 6) are about 10% light. However, we have no information on the silver content of the imitations: each has a distinct yellowish cast which may suggest adulteration with copper. As cited above, Kann (1954, p.215) assumed that these coins might be debased, but offered nothing more.

We have seen no specimen or other reference to Yuan Shi-kai dollars reportedly struck in the 1950s-- if true, this is a minor frozen-date Maria Theresa thaler episode. Whether the coins discussed here were produced by warlords or communists may be numismatically interesting but otherwise is an almost trivial question-- the devastation inflicted on the general populous by each was comparable. These coins remain as a component of the convoluted numismatic history of 20<sup>th</sup> century China: a coin with a remarkable history in its own right, even aside from warlords or communists. These imitations seem almost forgotten; the author does not recall recent advertised listings, and he obtained his specimens 30 years ago. It is possible that additional information might come from detailed analysis of the vast number of Yuan Shi-kai dollars that have survived, but no zealot has yet come forward to tackle this task. Perhaps this article will, at least to a minor degree, contribute to the question if readers examine and reassess their coins. The author would be delighted to receive any such information.

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