

Counterfeit Ancient Chinese Coins

By Scott Semans

It is hard to overstate the problem. The current market is overrun with fakes of ancient Chinese knife, spade, cash, and related cast bronze objects. Since about 1985 forgers in the PRC have developed new techniques in the service of faking bronze vessels and other antiquities of high value. These techniques are easily applied to coins. Reportedly, dealers will take rare coins to these factories where they are reproduced, with the correct metal composition, patination color and type of soil adhesion proper to that dynasty and type. Traditional methods of forgery detection (such as summarized in Jen) are impotent against these fakes, and the problem now extends down to some fairly inexpensive items.

I do not think there is any cause to worry about inexpensive coins, such as ordinary Sung and Ch'ing, or the cheaper reigns of Ming, regular pan-liang, wu-shu, kai-yuan and the like, or lower-value struck coins. These are still abundant in China and are apparently not being faked. There are now a significant number of mainland Chinese buying rare coins (ancient and modern). Added to the steady demand from Japan, Taiwan, and overseas Chinese, the market for Chinese coins is booming. It is encouraging that the fake problem has not affected homeland demand, and I am hopeful that expertise in detecting these modern forgeries will be developed there. The curators at the Shanghai Museum see coins from excavations as well as suspicious pieces from the marketplace, and seem to know how to tell. Also, *China Numismatics*, from the Chinese Numismatic Society, began running a series on modern fakes about 1996, though usually with no information on how to distinguish them. A number of books have come out in China describing and/or picturing fake numismatic items, but they will not be very useful to the Western reader.

How does a Western collector, with no access to this rare expertise, protect himself from these forgeries? In short, avoid expensive items and attractive, high-grade pieces, know true market values, know your dealer, pay attention to provenance, avoid auctions, and seriously consider NOT collecting Chinese coins at all!

Avoid expensive coins. Ancient China is truly an undervalued field. You can find hundreds of types, and tens of thousands of varieties for under \$1, and many pieces from the Chou through T'ang under \$5-10. Even the least expensive knives and spades can be had for under \$30. Until you learn what these coins should look like, and who is selling them, why risk buying fakes by spending more?

Avoid high-grade, attractive coins. This is really a tough one, because it is every collector's instinct to buy a pretty piece. And the forgers know it! Virtually all of the modern (ca. 1985+) fakes are created to look like the cream of hoard finds, with breathtakingly even patina in hues of green, blue, and red. Some real hoard material is like this, but more often crusty with obscured characters or with impressions of an adjacent piece cooked into the patina. Non-hoard material is safe: at least partly brown, though often with some color as well. The strokes of the characters are unevenly visible, with patina, adhesions, wear, or simple miscasting creating a broken look to the writing. Buy a brown coin, a chipped, cracked, or ugly coin and you can be sure you are not getting a fake.

Know a coin's true value. This is also tough, because there are no really good, objective price guides, but sometimes the only practical way to spot a fake is by its price: too cheap. There is a mentality among some coin dealers that a really good fake is worth nearly as much as a genuine coin, so they will sell it to you for just a little less than wholesale value. A bad fake, they will discount much more. Many Western buyers will play along with this, aiding deception with self-deception: "Well, he's only asking \$x. If it's real, it's worth \$xxx, but if it's fake, I haven't lost much." Wrong. Why would a seller with access to Chinese markets sell something for less than he could get in Beijing? Not only has the buyer wasted his money, the piece will go into his collection and, eventually, into someone else's collection. Think of the next guy down the line, or of your heirs. Even if there are only a few fakes in the collection, a knowledgeable buyer may lowball everything, which is easier than

authenticating everything. The original buyer does not even gain in education because he will not be able to compare it with a real piece and see the difference. The best source of pricing information is the offers of specialist dealers. Frankly I have not spent any time evaluating pricing in the several PRC and Taiwan catalogs; if you have, tell me! Fisher's Ding values are bottom-of-market (1980s) dealer-to-dealer in-China prices: way, way too low, and Jen's values are erratic. It is the more experienced buyer who will be able spot a fake from its price, not the novice.

Know your dealer. It's not just about integrity, but knowledgeableness as well. There are only a few dealers in the West who handle ancient China in depth, and a few more in the Far East who deal by mail order. One who is both knowledgeable and honest is Gilbert Tan Kuan Yang of Singapore. I'm sure there are others, but either I have not seen enough of their actual merchandise or they appear to be inactive, or don't sell retail, so I won't mention them here. I am not skilled enough to detect the best of the current fakes myself, but I can run a limited amount of material past the one expert in North America who is. I would rather not name the bad eggs, because they come and go so fast. Most of them really don't know if their coins are good or not, and basically don't care. If you want my opinion on a given seller, I'll give it if I have one. Watch out for phony guarantees: "If you don't like it, you can return it." This seller knows that you don't have the knowledge to spot good fakes, and by the time expertise develops to distinguish them, he will be gone anyway. Look for someone who has specialized in ancient Chinese coins and belonged to relevant numismatic societies for some time, and has a good reputation in the field.

Avoid auctions. Auction firms don't take returns once they've paid the consignor, while fixed-price sellers may guarantee authenticity for the lifetime of their business. European auctions may be the safest, because often they handle old-time collections, but it's still best to ask where the material came from. Unfortunately the big international auction known for Asian coins has had fakes in the past. Online "auction" sites are not really auctions in the sense understood by coin collectors. There is nobody authenticating merchandise or seeing that it is properly described, or suffering a loss of reputation if a pattern of bad merchandise emerges, and the managers of these sites are notorious for being unreachable, and failing to act against offenders. In fact, you won't even know a seller's NAME until you pay for your purchase, if then. Now what does that tell you about the integrity of the medium? Still, you can protect yourself to a degree. If it's just a few bucks, if it's brown or worn - why not? DO "view seller's other auctions" and search "completed auctions" using characteristic phrases of that seller to gain an even broader picture of his offerings. This is something that requires a bit of experience, but if you detect a sameness of appearance across material from different regions or dynasties, it's a tipoff. If he offers some low-grade modern coins, but all the ancients are "pretty," or mostly modern coins, plus a few expensive ancients, do you think this seller really knows what's good and what isn't? And if "you can return if it you don't like it" is the best guarantee offered, are you sure you want to bid? European collector Lars Bo maintains a [webpage](#) identifying auction and fixed-price dealers who appear to offer forgeries.

Provenance. This is the record of ownership of a given coin, ideally from findspot (if a hoard) through current owner, though in practice it is any information at all you can glean about where your piece has been. My first question to someone offering me ancient Chinese coins is, what evidence do you have that the piece was outside of China before 1985? Pieces from old collections are, in my opinion, worth a premium over those without provenance. Provenance can start with you: save your invoices. An invoice from a knowledgeable dealer, or one showing purchase before about 1985 will give potential buyers confidence when it is time to sell your collection. It will also make it easier to get a refund from a reputable seller if your purchase later turns out to be counterfeit.

Something should be said of the useful but limited technique of comparing a suspect coin to a known genuine coin, or a rubbing of same. A coin-to-coin comparison is always a useful exercise, but seldom practical for the collector. The cheap coins of which he may find many were produced from different master cash which varied intentionally or accidentally more than between a fake coin and its original. Earlier, or less common coins may

be less varied but even catalogs aiming at comprehensiveness (much less a given collection) give only a suggestion that something straying slightly from the others is bad. True, a cast is smaller than an original, but many catalogs are printed (or reprinted) smaller than 100%, and in any case exact sizing was rarely a goal of Chinese minters. Less so was weight control, given the imprecise nature of casting. Weight is a useless concern in forgery detection. The Schjoth catalog, so popular among Western collectors for the cleanness of its images, employs drawings, and is completely useless for comparisons. I have never seen an expert use "comparison" as a way to judge a potential forgery, but it can be helpful to the novice in providing a general sense of what a given type should look like, and it can help sort out charms bearing the same characters as coins, or the clumsier sorts of what I call traditional (or pre-ca.1985) fakes. But comparison will do no good against the current crop of forgeries.

The aforementioned Gilbert Tan recently traveled to Oslo to view the Schjoth collection and published an [article](#) not only identifying the forgeries and fantasies, but classifying them according to how they were made. Although there are better primary references in the field, David Jen's [Chinese Cash: Identification and Price Guide](#) brings the Westerner important collector lore from China, including on p.313-315 a good summary of the techniques for unveiling traditional forgeries. Much of it is hard to appreciate without concrete examples at hand, but it is a fascinating read. To whet your appetite for his full text, here's Jen's outline summary of the classic Chinese skill of forgery detection (some paraphrasing):

Methods Used in Making Fake Coins and their exposure

1. Recasting using real coins
2. Mould retouching
3. Trading parts (glue-ons)
4. Face-lifting (recutting new characters)
5. Etching with acid
6. Piecing together
7. Striking with a die punch
8. Retouching
9. Faking patina

Six Key Areas in Assessing Cash Coins

1. Legend
2. Alloy
3. Sound
4. Color
5. Odor
6. Profile, or "shen"

I particularly like Jen's discussion of shen, translated "profile" in the English sense, perhaps, of a criminal profile. Though my own translation of the concept would run to instinct-intuition-unconscious fruits of experience, the author seeks to describe a skill more abstract than even the arts of creating and detecting criminal coins outlined above, or perhaps a summation of them:

A genuine coin has something about it that cannot be reproduced on a forgery. That something is called "Shen" by the Chinese. It is the essence of artistry, created through the joint efforts of the brushmaster who wrote the legend and the workers who minted the coins. An artist produces a painting through a moment of inspiration, and then goes on to make copies of it, but to the observer, there is the feeling that something was not passed on . . . that something is "Shen." . . . A real coin has a sharper look, the alloy more compact, the legend natural and full of vigor, and the signs of aging apparent. All these factors come together to form a profile that is inimitable. We observe a coin in its entirety, that is, we look at its profile. If the coin is genuine, the "Shen" is sure to be there; a forgery appears dull and lifeless in comparison, an empty mask devoid of "Shen."

Jen says nothing about the recent crop of forgeries and the improvements upon classic techniques they display. This is an important omission, but perhaps an indication of how slowly expertise is developing even in China. In criminal investigation it is said that the bad guys learn how to hide evidence almost as quickly as investigators invent new techniques to uncover it. I have heard that there are now a few knowledgeable high-level dealers in China who take a very hard attitude toward fakes, though they are generally not the ones who deal directly with Western collectors. As dealers learn to purchase from these sources, the quality of coins entering the Western market should gradually improve.

There are two other sorts of things that collectors may at first confuse with numismatic forgeries: the charm (amulet), and the contemporary (circulating) forgery, both being quite collectable. Just about anything with a square hole and some picture or image is a charm, or much less often, a token or medal - but not a coin and not intended to pose as one. Naturally, Emperors adopted as the reign titles placed on their coinage certain lucky phrases, and this phrase on a charm may seem to Westerners as mimicking coins - but no more so than a Lincoln Memorial medal apes a Lincoln penny. Then too, a truly lucky reign (often in retrospect) creates a demand for that Emperor's coinage to be worn as a talisman, and local charm-makers will augment the supply when the originals run low. Schjoth's plates on charms, or any of the works devoted to this topic, will quickly show the reign titles most favored in this way, but most charms are distinct enough from coins in one way or another that they will not confuse a collector of moderate experience. Charms themselves, as private issues, can not be forged per-se, and some motifs have been copied down through the centuries. Still, a collector may prefer an example from the period in which the design originated or served a particular cultural function in place of a recent homage from Taiwan or Hong Kong, and here one's knowledge of coin metals and casting techniques at various periods comes into play.

Circulating forgeries are a useful addition to a collection. Common (thus easily passed) coins are favored, not the rarities of interest to collectors. Early conservative types such as the pan-liang were forged, but since the Emperors at that time contracted out minting, a circulating forgery is something that will bedevil only an expert on this complex series. Even at the near end of the series, Ch'ing forgeries are quite common, and range from small size, brassy, or crude (as the numerous Vietnamese copies) to mintlike issues discernible only by such as Dr. Werner Burger, whose *Ch'ing Cash until 1735* shows varieties by year and contains useful information and illustrations of fakes. Collecting and unmasking contemporary forgeries is a pleasant and educational exercise. These and charms, both interesting in their own rights, can help the novice learn to spot collector-oriented forgeries employing traditional techniques.

My own education in the new crop of numismatic forgeries has been expensive. A supplier of generally bulk, low price far eastern material in Singapore began offering rarer ancient China. From different dynasties, it all had blue-white patina, and he didn't run out. Suspicious, I showed specimens to my then-expert, who truly is expert in the traditional methods of faking. He OK'd it and I sold thousands of dollars worth. Then I heard about the PRC fake factories from a collector, also in Singapore, checked with a couple of contacts inside China, and decided the circumstantial evidence warranted a recall. I refunded over \$7000 worth, but by that time the seller was out of business, so I still own it. I still deal in ancient China, but not as actively. Most of my own stock was purchased before the fake production really got under way, or from a source who checks material through the Shanghai Museum. I have been buying cautiously from PRC sources, and running anything suspicious by my expert friend. What I like to buy are pre-1990s collections, even the old time "missionary" collections, which I used to roll my eyes at because they are always full of old-style fakes. Spotting those less sophisticated forgeries seems like fun now!

Collector Lars Bo has created a [web page](#) to warn against some of the ebay sellers who offer forgeries.

Transcribers Note: Visit the Scott Semans Web site at: <http://www.coincoin.com> for a fine selection of coins, books, and articles.