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ART. XII.—*The Metallic Cowries of Ancient China (600 B.C.).*

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SUMMARY.

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I.

1. Several of the collections of coins made in their own country by intelligent and enthusiastic Chinese Numismatists contain specimens of a curiously-shaped scarab-like copper currency. They are variously called *Y-pi tsien* or 'Ant's nose metallic currency;' *Kuei-tou* or 'Ghosts' heads,' and finally *Ho-pei tsien* or 'Cowries Metallic currency.' The first two of these names, quaint and queer as they are, do not in the least suggest what the things so designated were intended to be. But when we consider that such denominations were applied by numismatists, who were unaware of

the circumstances which had led to the issue of this peculiar currency, we cannot be astonished that the uncritical Chinese scholars of former ages, being at their wit's end, should have adopted a sensational appellative to arouse the mind of their readers to the peculiarity of the case.

2. The taste for numismatics is old in China, though for want of opportunity, not so old as the love of antiquities. Collections of ancient objects and souvenirs among the rich families (not to mention those in the royal museum and library) were already in fashion at the time of Confucius. But metallic currency was then hardly in existence, and could not at that time therefore afford a field for the antiquarian taste for collecting ancient specimens.

It was a common habit among Chinese collectors to compile and publish catalogues of their collections; and this habit having been continued down to the present day, we are enabled to understand how the Chinese are in possession of nearly five score of numismatical works.¹ Many more were not preserved to modern times, and have left no traces of their existence. The oldest of those mentioned in the later books, but which have perished in the meantime, would be nearly fourteen centuries old.²

3. The knowledge of historical minor events, and of palæography, combined with a spirit of criticism, which is required for numismatics, has almost always been defective among the Chinese collectors of ancient specimens of currency. Two or three recent works excepted, their numismatical books are indeed of a low standard. The natural tendency to imitation which has caused so large a part of their literature to be mere patchwork and mosaic, was necessarily fatal to the progress of that part of knowledge.

¹ A list of them is given in the introduction to my *Historical Catalogue of Chinese Money*, from the collections of the British Museum and other sources (4to. numerously illustrated), vol. i.

² The 錢譜 *Tsien Pu*, by 履烜 *Ku yuen*, who lived during the Liang dynasty (A.D. 502-557), often quotes in the description of curious and rare specimens an older work, the 錢志 *Tsien tche*, by 劉氏 *Liu-she*, a work now lost and of unknown date. Vid. 李佐賢 *Li Tso-hien*, 古泉匯 *Ku tsuen hwei*, K. iii. f. 1.

Any statement acquires in that conservative country authority and respect in proportion to its age, however false or fanciful the basis on which it rests. And this characteristic was coupled with the tendency to attribute to the great men of antiquity any valuable deed or improvement of later times. The result was a falsification of the sound notions which otherwise could have been obtained from an unbiassed inquiry made by the collectors themselves, had they taken that trouble.

4. And as they did not do so, they give us figures of genuine specimens of money once current as that of the primitive times. The much-respected names of Fuh-hi and Huang-ti of the fabulous period, as well as those of Kao-yang and Yao belonging to the dawn of Chinese history, are indicated by them as having issued specimens of currency, which a better knowledge now proves to date only from the fifth, fourth, and third centuries B.C. These erroneous statements have both crept into Western literature and scientific books, of course with misleading results. For instance, a well-known German naturalist and traveller gives as a proof of an antiquity of twenty-two centuries B.C. for strata of the loess,¹ the finding of the copper knife-money of Yao at Ping-yang fu.² Now it turns out on investigation that there is no knife-money from that place, and that the *pu*-money found there, and formerly attributed to Yao's time, was issued, as a matter of fact, as late as the middle of the third century before the Christian era. It is obvious from this, that, so far as numismatic chronology, and the inferences derived from it, go, the loess theory of the German scholar must be amended.

II.

5. The *Y-pi tsien* are mentioned by several works on numismatics without any other indication than their name.

¹ F. v. Richthofen, in his *China*, vol. i. p. 150.

² Their attribution to Yao rests on this simple-minded Chinese reasoning, that as Ping-yang was the capital of Yao, all the antiquities found there are remnants of his time.

So, for instance, in the great catalogue of the Antiquarian Museum of the Emperor Kien-lung, published in 1751 (forty-two vols. in folio¹). The complete ignorance as to their authenticity is shown by the fact that the author of a small treatise on the current money of foreign countries, *Wai Kwoh Tsien Wen*, has reproduced a figure of the *Y-pi tsien*, without any indication or reference as to their origin. The mere fact of his including them in his work shows that he thought himself justified in considering them non-Chinese.

It is needless to dwell further on the ignorance of those of the native numismatists, who know nothing about the real nature of these coins, and indulge in the wildest speculations about them. It will be sufficient to indicate only their most important suggestions, and then to give the probable solution of this little problem.

6. As to the various names these monies bear, we may remark that 'Ant's nose current money,' or *Y-pi tsien* 螞蟻錢, is the oldest known. We find it quoted as the common appellation by Hung Tsun in the twelfth century A.D., the most important of the ancient numismatists. Besides the name, he does not give any other information, except a short description of the specimens.

7. An explanation of this quaint name has been put forward by the learned author of the *Ku kin so kien luh*, another numismatical work of some importance. He says that in ancient times people used to bury with the dead, and in the coffin, some *tchin-y* 螞蟻, i.e. valuable ants,² meaning by that, metallic figures of ants, and hence these little scarab-shaped objects dug out of the ground received their queer appellation. The suggestion of the learned author receives some sort of confirmation, so far as the custom of burying objects is concerned.

¹ Vid. the reprint of the numismatical part, *Kin ting tsien luh*, K. xv. f. 14v.

² This statement has perhaps some relation to the following § 23, bk. ii. sec. i. pt. ii. of the *Li-ki, Sacred Books of the East*, vol. xxvii. p. 140: "At the mourning of Tze-chang Kung-ming, I made the ornaments of commemoration. There was a tent-like pall, made of plain silk of a carnation colour, with clusters of ants at the four corners, (as if he had been) an officer of Yin."

8. Yet we hear more about sham implements or objects than of anything of intrinsic value. For instance, an interesting statement is attributed to Confucius, in the *Book of Rites*, that "in the time of the Hia, the earliest dynasty, they did not sacrifice to the dead, but simply made for them incomplete implements of bamboo, earthenware without polish, harps unstrung, organs untuned, and bells unhung, which they called 'Bright implements,' implying that the dead are spirits (*shen*) and bright."¹ So much for the supposed Confucian statement. On the other hand, the use of images as charms is still current in modern times. To images or drawings of tigers, lizards, snakes, centipedes, etc.—the list is almost inexhaustible—is ascribed the virtue of attracting to themselves the diseases which would otherwise attack the inmates of the house.²

We cannot say that this justification of the popular appellation of the Ant's nose currency is satisfactory, and we should not be surprised if our readers pronounced the whole business unseemly. However, in Chinese matters of popular feelings and notions, hypercritics would never have any rest.³

9. Another name—and a more popular one—of the same scarab-shaped specimens of ancient currency was *Kwei-tou*,⁴ i.e. 'Ghost's head' or *Kwei-lien*, i.e. 'Ghost's face.'⁵ No reason is given by the native scholars for such a soubriquet, and therefore we are at liberty to suggest that it may have arisen from the fact that some of them were found in graves.

10. It is only with the third name, *Ho-pei tsien*,⁶ or cowries metallic-currency, which we find in a recent work, the *Ho pu*

¹ *Li-ki, Than Kung*, sect. i. pt. iii. § 3, *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. xxvii. p. 148. This passage is not to be found in the *Liki* as published and translated by J. M. Callery, *Li-ki ou Mémorial des rites* traduit. . . . Turin, 1853, 4to. The text is the abridgment made by Fan, a renowned Chinese scholar. Sham objects, like carriages of clay and human figures of straw (substitute of living people), were not always that which was put in tombs. For instance, the following case (*Li-ki, Than Kung*, sect. i. pt. iii. § 19): "At the burial of his wife, Duke Siang of Sung (d. B.C. 637) placed in the grave a hundred jars of vinegar and pickles."

² N. B. Dennys, *The Folk-lore of China* (Hong-Kong, 1876, 8vo.), pp. 72, 51.

³ Sham objects have been buried with the dead also in the West at the time of the stone period. Cf. below, §§ 11, 17.

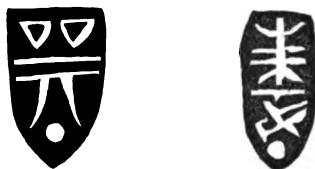
⁴ 鬼頭. name given to them in the *Topography of Ku-shé hien* 固始縣志, where many were found.

⁵ 鬼臉.

⁶ 貨貝錢.

wen-tse kao,¹ published in 1833, that we reach the real explanation of their peculiar shape and of the purpose of their issue as substitutes for the ancient currency of cowries.

11. A numismatist of the twelfth century² reports³ that many specimens were found in the sand and pebbles of *Hu-sze*,⁴ a village of the Ku-shé district, in the prefecture of Kuang-tchou, in the S.E. of the province of Honan. In the last century enormous quantities were discovered,⁵ during excavations on the banks of the *Wah*⁶ river, in the prefecture of Kiang-ning (commonly Nanking), in the province of Kiang-su.



III.

12. The pieces of this curious money are of copper; their sizes are about 75 mm. to one centimetre in width and two in length, and their shape that of an oval, convex at the obverse and flat at the reverse.⁷ They were generally

¹ 貨布文字考, bk. iv. fol. 16-18.

² 朱樞近漪 Tehu-fung kin-y in his 古金待問續錄 *Ku kin tai wen ouh luh*. They were described by 洪遵 *Hung tsun* in his 泉志 *Tsiuen toh* published in 1149.

³ Quoting the 固始縣志 *Ku-shé hien toh*, or 'Topography of the Ku-shé district.'

⁴ 期思里 in Ku-shé hien. The latter is situated by lat. 32° 18' and long. 115° 37', according to G. Playfair, *The Cities and Towns of China*, No. 3632.

⁵ According to the 吉金所見錄 *Kih kin so kien luh* in 18 books; *Ho pu wen tso kao*, bk. iv. f. 17v.

⁶ 挖河.

⁷ Besides the *Ku tsiuen hwei*, tcheng iii. f. 16, the *Ho pu wen-tse kao*, bk. iv. ff. 16-18, already quoted, cf. also the 錢式圖 *Tsien shah t'u*, bk. xxiv. f. 2, in the *Tehun tsao tang tsih* collection, 1842; the 泉史 *Tsiuen sho*, 1834, bk. i. f. 19.

pierced with a small round hole at the one end rather narrower than the other, as if to be strung in sets, in the usual fashion of Chinese money.¹ On the obverse they bear stamped on the surface an inscription showing their value. There are two kinds of inscription, according to size :

1) 各六銖 *Koh luh tchu* 'each six tchus,' written in an abridged form of the ancient characters of the time. This for the smaller ones. The larger ones bear :

2) 半兩 *Pan liang* 'half ounce,' therefore worth twelve tchus, or the double of the smaller ones. The two symbols are written as in the other case, in an abridged and peculiar form ; but their reading, as well as that of the other legend, is not open to doubt.

13. The shape and size of these pieces justify plainly the appellative of 'Metallic Cowries-money' given to them. But where, when, and on what occasion were they issued ?

An ingenious Chinese writer, Wu Tchang-king, has said that they were issued by the Great Yü, while he was engaged in his engineering works to quell the great inundations caused by the overflowing of several rivers. The suggestion has been eagerly adopted by the author of the *Tsien sheh t'u* (1842), who ought to have known better than to accept such a preposterous hypothesis. The fact that some of the finds of metallic cowries took place in the Wah river is the sole possible excuse for this wild theory, which has not a particle of evidence in its favour. The Great Yü's (2000 B.C.) dominion did not embrace that part of China

¹ The 欽定錢錄 *Kin ting tsien luh* (1787), bk. xv. f. 14v, simply refers to the description in the *Tsien tche* by *Hung tsun*. This work, which is not good, is a reprint of the numismatical part of the great Catalogue of the Museum of the Emperor Kien lung, *Kin ting sze tsing ku kien*, in 42 vols. gr. fol. published in 1761. The illustrations of the *Kin ting tsien luh* are imaginary and very bad, as they were not made from rubbings of the coins, but simply from the descriptions. In the 錢志新編 *Tsien tche sin pien*, by Tchang Ts'ung-y, published in 1826, bk. xx. f. 7, the description of the *Y-pi tsien* only is given, accompanied with four illustrations. An abridged translation of this work, which is rather uncritical and inexact, has been published under the title of *Chinese Coinage*, by Mr. C. B. Hillier, in the *Transactions of the China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, part ii. 1848-50 (Hong Kong, 1852), pp. 1-162, with 329 woodcuts similar to those of the original. See p. 156. Dr. S. W. Bushell says that it is one of the smaller and less trustworthy works, cf. his article *Chinese Authors on Numismatics*, pp. 62-64 of *The Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal*, vol. iv. Foochow, August, 1871.

where these curious pieces of money have been found. He did start an expedition across the modern Anhui province, towards the mouths of the Yang-tze Kiang, against some aboriginal and independent populations, but he never was able to come back, and his host was annihilated there.¹ So that there is no possibility of his having established there a regular metallic currency—and that at a time, too, when none existed in his own dominion, and was not to exist, even as far as regulation goes, for nearly a thousand years. It was only about 1032 B.C. that rules were enacted, fixing that copper for currency should be weighed by *tchus*; and therefore the metallic cowries, which bear their weight inscribed in *tchus*, cannot have been issued till after, and, as we shall see, long after, the latter date.

The opinion of Wu Tchang-king, shared by the author of the *Tsien sheh t'u*, was not in accordance with popular tradition, but it is a good instance of the complete lack of criticism which, with two or three exceptions, is so conspicuous in the works of native numismatists.

14. It is in the *Siao Erh ya* that we find expressed what the common opinion was.² This work has the merit of being a very ancient one; it is a dictionary similar to the *Erh ya*, and compiled by K'ung fu,³ a descendant of Confucius, known also under the name of K'ung ts'ung tze, who died about 210 B.C. The author alludes to a practice of putting some such pieces of money into tombs, and records that they were issued by Sun shuh-ngao.⁴ The latter was prime minister to *Tchuang*, King of Tsu, between the years 613 and 590 B.C., and his name is connected with the monetary

¹ The unsuccessful issue of his expedition (reported in a few words only in the *Tchuh shu ki nien* or Annals of the Bamboo Books, part iii. 1, and Sze-ma Tsien *She ki*, bk. ii. f. 14), was so complete that the body of Yü could not be brought back, and a century and a half elapsed before the possibility for a descendant of Yü to penetrate in *disguise* into the country, in order to pay the required honour to the tomb of the great engineer (*She ki*, bk. 41. f. 1).

² 小爾雅, quoted in the *Tsien sheh t'u*, bk. xxiv. f. 2z.

³ 孔鮒 also 孔叢子. His work was commented upon by Li kuy, of the Han dynasty. It is noticed in Dr. E. Bretschneider's bibliography, *Botanicum Sincicum*, No. 784. And a short biography of him is found in W. F. Mayers' *Chinese Readers' Manual*, vol. i. p. 322.

⁴ 孫叔敖. His biography was written by Sze-ma Tsien, *She ki*, bk. cxix.

history of the country by his objection to a whim of his ruler, who wanted to assimilate to one and the same value all pieces of money small and large.¹

15. We have no regular records of the ancient history of Chinese money, and we are therefore compelled to build it up from scraps of information scattered in the literature and from the evidence derived from the monetary specimens themselves. In the present case there are no geographical names on the pieces, and the indications of weight are our sole information. These, of course, show that their issue was subsequent to the regulations as to the weights of metallic currency, enacted for the first time in 1032 B.C., and in a more precise and definite manner during the years 681-643 B.C. This was the time when Hwan kung, Prince of Ts'i, became leader of the princes,² under the nominal suzerainty of the King of Tchou, whose former authority had come to be a mere shadow. The time of Sun shuh-ngao and his ruler Prince of Ts'u, is sufficiently posterior to the rule of Hwan kung for the historical probabilities to be in accord with the above reported tradition, which attributes the issue to their government. The tradition, as we have seen, is very old, as we noticed it in existence in the third century B.C., three hundred years therefore after the event.

¹ The story is told at length in his biography, *O.C.* ff. 1-2; it has been reproduced in a shortened form by Ma Twanlin, in his *Wen hien t'ung k'ao*, and inexactly reported by him. The king wanted to make the money light 莊王以爲幣輕; but Ma Twanlin has erroneously substituted 重 *chung* 'heavy' for the character 輕 *king* 'light,' therefore implying the reverse of the King's intention. Besides, the passage appears in Dr. W. Vissering's *Chinese Currency*, p. 23, who has blindly followed Ma Twanlin, as relating to a King of the Ts'in principality in the third century B.C., while it referred to a King of Ts'u 350 years previously. As a rule the monetary and the geographical sections in Ma Twanlin are very defective.

² In 771 the King of the Tchou dynasty, then ruling over the whole of the Chinese dominion, had been killed by the non-Chinese and independent Jung tribes (cf. *The Languages of China before the Chinese*, § 206). His successor removed the capital from Tchang-ngan (mod. Singanfu in Shensi) to Loh (near Honanfu, Honan), but the power of the dynasty never recovered its former greatness and prestige. The various rulers of the principalities over which the suzerainty of the Tchou had hitherto been effective, made themselves more and more independent; but it happened that by *le droit du plus fort*, the most powerful of these principalities assumed the leadership 霸 *pa* for the time being. The princes of Ts'i, Sung, Tsin, Ts'in, and Ts'u were successively leaders of the princes between the years B.C. 681 and 591; and these years are sometimes called the period of the five *pa*.

16. And if we are not able to put forth any other statement, we must not forget that the border states and separate principalities of the Chinese agglomeration before the Han period have left no minute records, and scarcely any at all. Besides this, some old works in which information might have been found have most probably disappeared, as no less than five great bibliothecal catastrophes between the years 213 B.C. and 501 A.D. have reduced the earlier literature of China to a mere wreck.

17. Another argument of considerable value is that the great finds of the *ho-pei tsien* took place within the territorial limits of the state of Ts'u, and not elsewhere. The district of *Ku-shé*, above quoted, was formerly the independent small principality of *Liao*,¹ which was conquered and absorbed by the state of Tsu in B.C. 622.² The region of the Wah river, where the other finds were made, did not belong to the state of Ts'u at the time of Sun shuh-ngao, but it became so later on, and the currency of the conqueror must have followed the extension of his dominion. There is nothing to show that the issue of the *ho-pei tsien* was limited to the time of the ruler who had first issued them, and their great convenience must have maintained the existence of so convenient a medium of exchange until they were ousted by the uniform metallic currency established by the Han dynasty.³ The aforesaid region was included in the state of Wu, which was frequently at war with that of Ts'u; the latter had even directed in 548 B.C. a naval attack (by the Yangtze Kiang) on the Wu state, which however succumbed under the attacks of its southern neighbour, the principality of Yueh, in 472 B.C.;⁴ but conquered and conqueror were finally absorbed by the great state of Ts'u in 334 B.C.⁵

¹ G. Playfair, *The Cities and Towns of China*, No. 3632.

² 齊 Cf. *Tao tchuen*, Duke Wen, year vi. § 6.

³ Some sort of reorganization of the taxes, etc., took place in the state of Ts'u in 547 B.C. Cf. *Tao tchuen*, Duke Siang, year xxv. 9; in J. Legge, *Chinese Classics*, vol. v. p. 517.

⁴ *Tao tchuen*, Duke Siang, year xxiv. 3.

⁵ Sze-ma Tsien, *She ki*, *Ts'u she kia*, bk. 40. Cf. Terrien de Lacouperie, *The Languages of China before the Chinese*, § 192.

IV.

18. The causes which brought the metallic cowries into use need no great penetration to be understood. Their curious shape was an attempt at combining the time-honoured appearance of the currency with the metallic, the material advantage of which had been made obvious by the metal coinage in use in the neighbouring Chinese states towards the north.

19. Cowrie-shells as a medium of exchange in the Far East were known before historical times. They were employed in that way by some of the Pre-Chinese populations of the Flowery Land, as early as the time of the entrance of the Chinese into the country by the N.W., *i.e.* in the twenty-third century before the Christian era. And it is in Chinese literature that we find the most ancient allusions to them,¹ but we do not know how such a curious custom began. It is only by inferring their having been used as ornaments on headdresses and on embroidered cloth, that we may suppose that this is the reason why they came to be valued, and asked for. Their use extended later on from Australasia and Southern China to India,² to Tibet and to Africa. The Chinese, which means for many centuries a small portion only of the present China proper, regulated their circulation as well as that of the tortoise, and other shells. The introduction of metallic currency caused the circulation of cowries to disappear gradually in the Chinese states. And history has preserved us the date of 338 B.C. as that of the final interdiction of the cowrie-currency (under the rule of the Prince of Ts'in in N.W. China) because of the irregular

¹ Some more information has been given in my notice on Chinese and Japanese money, pp. 190-197-235 of *Coins and Medals, their Place in History and Art*, by the authors of the British Museum Official Catalogue (London, Elliot Stock, 1885).

² They were not known in N. India in ancient times, at least they are not mentioned in the Code of Manu, nor in that of Yājñavalkya (about the Christian era). Cf. Edward Thomas, *Ancient Indian Weights* (*Marsden's Numismata Orientalia*, new edit. part i.), p. 20. When the Muhammadans conquered Bengal early in the thirteenth century, they found the ordinary currency composed exclusively of cowries. Cf. the references in Colonel H. Yule's *Glossary*, p. 209.

and insufficient supply of these and other shells.¹ For centuries their circulation had been contemporaneous with that of the metallic money in the various Chinese States, and it lasted not a few centuries afterwards in some out-of-the-way corners, as, for instance, it is still doing in Bástar (N. India),² and some parts of Indo-China.

20. The State of Ts'u, where the issue of the metallic cowries took place, was a non-Chinese one; while in the north it was conterminous, north of the Yang-tze Kiang, with the Chinese dominion, and was gradually falling more and more under the influence of Chinese civilization. In the east and south it was in relationship with independent populations belonging to the Indo-Pacific races. Among them the cowries formed the chief currency, with so much more facility that the supply was at hand, as it was derived chiefly from the Pescadores Islands,³ between Formosa Sea and the mainland.

¹ Sin Wang Mang, usurper (A.D. 9-22), at the end of the First Han dynasty, endeavoured, without success, to revive the circulation of cowries and shells. Cf. his enactments in my *Historical Catalogue of Chinese Money*, vol. i. pp. 381-383.

² Dr. W. W. Hunter, *Imperial Gazetteer of India*. Col. H. Yule. A. C. Burnell, *Glossary of Anglo-Indian Words*, pp. 208-209.

³ Some also were found formerly on the shores of the Shantung peninsula. Cf. A. Fauvel, *Trip of a Naturalist to the Chinese Far East*, in *China Review*, 1876, vol. iv. p. 353. At the International Fisheries Exhibition, London, 1883, the Pescadores and Lambay Island sent 44 species of cowries. Cf. *Chinese Catalogue*, pp. 29, 63-65. They are found in abundance on the shores of the Laccadives and Maldive Islands, African coast of Zanzibar, etc., the Sulu Islands, etc. Cf. Ed. Balfour, *The Encyclopedia of India*, s.v.

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