

The World's First Money, Chinese Cowries & Their Imitations by Ted Puls

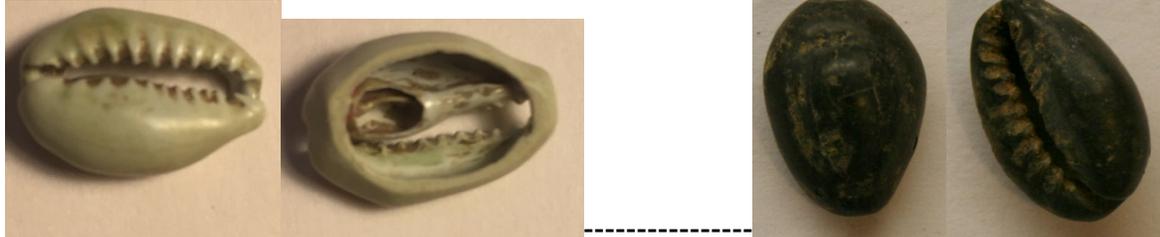
The oldest money is the humble cowrie. In China, archeologic finds suggest their use as a durable form of storing value. Cowrie experts report that the earliest use of cowrie for money was ca. 2000 B.C. These small shells sometimes are stored in rare and beautiful bronze vessels made for this special use. This practice suggests the high value placed on these shells.(1) The earliest inscription discussing monetary use dates from the time of transition from the Shang Dynasty into the Zhou dynasty ca. 1100 B.C. (2) Bronze vessels of this era often had inscriptions to honor ancestors and report the faithfulness of the person ordering the vessel to the ancestor. One added how much he paid for the vessel in the honorific. The value paid was 120 strings of cowries for the vessel. The "string" at this time was apparently 10 shells on one string. If this accounting is accurate, it suggests that a pretty high value was placed on these shells.

Cowrie shells are not found in the interior of China. The center of culture at this time was far inland. Shells exist around China's sea shore not many are found. The known source for goodly numbers of early cowrie shells was Zanzibar during historic times (Eurocentric point of view) and as trade increased the smaller Maldivian cowries were used which helped shipping costs. This far away source for cowrie made them rare as well as durable enhancing their usefulness as money. Even if some cowrie came from China's coast there was long distance shipping. This early use of large numbers of cowrie suggests the existence of a significant long distance trade interaction from East Africa, the Indian Ocean or other locations. North central China is a very long way from any cowrie source. I don't know if the cowries arrived in China via land trade routes or by sea trade from Africa or the Indian Ocean. Either seems to be remarkable for the time. I also note that Chinese Shield money or "chuan" from this era, seem to resemble designs on Scandinavian large button like items from mid-first millennia B.C. times. Additionally, I wonder if, while the Israelites were wandering around the desert in biblical times, the Viking's ancestors were wandering around Russia and China, trading.

Once traded into China, the cowries were of two species. The cowrie called *Cypraea moneta* were even named for their use as money. Another species *Cypraea annularis* were also mixed in the money supply. The "moneta" usually have one side with wide shoulders and the other with more rounded smooth edge resulting in an asymmetric diamond shape. The "annularis" are named for the yellow ring on the shell back. These seem to be more symmetric oval shaped. They seem to be generally smaller in size too. That these two species were used and even mixed together in hoards seem to have been noted by moneyers. Carved imitation cowries used later often have the diamond shape or the oval shape continued in the carved reproductions. Later times in China history, small differences in standard coin designs were used to denote a coins' mint or the date of the coin. The two types could have a meaning for the differences of similar cowrie carvings too. I propose that it is possible that the paired cowrie styles could also have more cosmic symbolism as in representing the later concept of yin and yang symbolizing balance in Chinese cosmology.



Cypraea moneta= back intact shaved back with green hue



Cypraea annulata=oval shaved back with green hue Cypraea annulata=black

Both types of shells were used in two styles in Ancient China. Some cowries were used as plain intact shell. Some cowries were shaved to cut off the rounded back apparently to allow easier or more compact stringing. Maybe the uncarved cowries were stored in a vessel rather than stringing. Some cowries are found with a green tint (both shaved and unshaved types) which is thought to be from long storage in bronze vessels. These green “jade” cowrie are considered to have an added cachet as a special kind of cowrie today. I have noted blackened cowries exist both shaved and intact types. I suspect that they were buried in soils with high manganese or iron or somehow treated to get this black color. The usual is for the cowries to be white.

White cowries carved from other shells are known. I suppose either that the increased demand for money in a booming economy or loss of trade routes (war or weather) had cut into the real cowrie supply and caused such efforts to be made. The shell used is either traditionally called mother-of-pearl or sometimes, Tridacna shell (giant clam). I am not sure how to tell that the carved item is one of the other. The pearly surface on them suggests the oyster rather than a flat white color clam shell, as the origin to me. This still suggests that long distance trade from the sea to the interior was still happening. Fresh water clams/oysters are possible also but the clams that I have seen have very thin shells but are iridescent like some carved cowrie. The typical design of the manufactured cowrie is one with roughly oval shape. Variations from this are: rounded on one end and more pointed on the other, pointed on both ends, and mostly round. These carvings usually have a central slit or groove through the length on the obverse. Sometimes the groove has cross lines to imitate the actual cowrie. The reverse usually has two holes but sometimes has one or none.

Carved cowrie imitations are known from a northern Chinese group called the Ordos Culture. They are known for bronze casting but also produce small, ca.14 mm flat

almost round white iridescent cowrie imitations with a simple slit on one side and no decoration on the other. One that I have has a single hole as if for suspension most don't have this hole. One also has a remnant of the shell exterior with coarse raised natural lines. Other examples of iridescent shell carving of cowries of uncertain origin, are oval items one 23 mm with slit and crossing lines and 2 holes. Another is 27 mm with the slit and four connected drilled holes through the slit. This thin carving may well be from a freshwater shell. Diamond shape shell carvings vary in size more one with 13 mm length one hole and a slit to a 39 mm asymmetric place shoulder of the diamond and a single hole that I bought labeled as tridacna shell. A final type that is associated with cowrie hoards are a type of bi-cone disk with a central hole not resembling a cowrie at all. These bi-cones exist in bone cowrie carvings too- see below.



Ordos culture carved shell cowrie-round suggesting copy of annularis



Shell cowrie copy diamond shape suggesting moneta type



Shell cowrie copy oval suggesting annularis



Oval thin cowrie copie with oval shape suggesting copy of annularis



Shell cowrie copy-diamond shape suggestive of moneta



Shell disk associated with cowrie, note amuletic orange Coloring

Other cowrie found are carved stone types of cowrie. They seem to share more common shape with the carved shell types eg. the tendency to demonstrate both the pairing of oval annulare type cowrie and the more diamond shaped moneta cowrie. The stone cowrie seem more varied in style than other imitations. I have classified them into multiple categories with the eventual hope of using this to aid in finding their origin. White stone cowrie are sometimes of a very white smooth stone and is from the culture called upper Xiajiadian. The type known to be from this culture c.a. 1000 B.C. are a flat module oval or diamond shaped with a single central slit, and two reverse holes. These seem to be sized varying from 14 to 17 mm. Another type has more rounded corners on the diamond. Another type seems to be one with the style with one end oval and the other more pointed. These have the central slit, cross lines sometimes diagonally placed with a two-hole reverse. These measure from 12-21 mm length. Two other

exotic types seem to be made from this same stone which must be made in this same area. One of my favorite, but rare types, has four, and one has six holes. The first has the usual slit and crossing lines but the reverse has two 1-2 mm vertically placed holes and two 3-4 mm horizontally placed holes and measure 14-20 mm in length. These are called ghost face type. Finally, a similar shaped cowrie exists with two vertically placed 1 mm size holes with four larger 3-4 mm holes to make another odd reverse design. This type is 20 mm long.



Oval Upper Xiajiandian stone cowrie



Diamond shape



Oval/ pointed type



Diamond shape White stone ghost cowrie

A much longer carved cowrie found is a large green stone possibly really jade. The one reverse hole suggests that it could be from the Jin Dynasty (1000-600 B.C.). One type is 36mm long and has a simple dome shape with a single slit in center. A similar large 43 mm one also has the slit but also cross lines. Another stone type that comes in

larger sizes is simpler white diamond shape with central slit and one hole ranging is size from 25-32 mm length. Another similar type has the slit and also no hole. This type ranges is size form 19- 36 mm long. These have flat obverse and reverse and right-angle edges.



Large jade carved cowrie



large white stone diamond cowrie

A much more pleasing type in stone more closely mimics the natural shell cowrie. The Qi kingdom (1039-221) produces a 24 mm white cowrie in smoothed diamond shape with a graceful slit and cross lines more wedge shaped. The reverse has a 12 mm hole. A similar cowrie is dark almost black with similar well-formed features but a 10 mm hole. Another pleasing stone cowrie has the asymmetric diamond shape, very finely carved lines much like a real cowrie and a reverse 10 mm hole. They have a 25-27 mm overall length.



Qi cowrie with moneta shape

A white polished stone cowrie type of unclear origin has a unique shape. The obverse has a gently sloping drop to reach the central line and also cross lines present. The oval shapes stones have two holes and range from 17-23 mm lengths. Another type of this shape is mottled brown, has the slit and cross lines but seven confluent holes drilled in reverse.



Sloped groove style cowrie

Cabachon types are what I call the next group. These come in brown, white and greenstone and jade. The first group has the simple slit with cross lines and range from 23- 32 mm length. A group of white or brown types are similar but have cross lines that alternate locations on each side of the slit. These usually have two holes in the reverse and are 28-30 mm size. A second variety has a similar lapidary style but one end is rounded and the other is more pointed, a third more diamond shaped. Brown speckled stone is used on another 26-29 mm size cowrie. An asymmetric diamond shape with one hole of this group is known in 25 mm size. At the end I would mention an interesting bead like cowrie shape with a tortoise shell pattern on two sides of the bead exists about 16 mm length. This one makes me recall the rare tortoise money of the Han dynasty ca. 119 B.C



Cab type jade cowrie

cab type with alternating cross lines



Cab type brown stone oval/pointed brown stone cowrie diamond shape



Cowrie money with turtle design

Cowries carved from deer bone (rather than cow bone) are most common. The bone canaliculi are usually visible on the reverse of the carved face. One type can be attributed to the Jin Dynasty (1000-600B.C.). This dynasty seemed to produce bone cowrie with a v-shaped central line. Occasionally a similar cowrie made from a dark brown material are found with similar module. Across the central line are cross striations. Most have one hole but a few have two. My green carving is 18 mm long while the more numerous brown ones are 18-24 mm. The two hole types have similar line and cross line but two reverse holes drilled into the central line. The 2-holed green type that I have is 23 mm while the darker brown one is 26 mm, and the tan ones vary from 19-23 mm long.



Green bone cowrie finely made

brown material cowrie

The other bone types seem much less finely made and have an obverse with a rounded two-dimensional arch rather the cabochon like shape of the finer types. The central line is a simple slit. The come with two holes in the back, one hole and finally no holes. My green examples are sized from 20-23 mm long. The brown one 25 mm. One very different example is just a flat piece of bone with usual central line cross lines and two reverse holes. One example has two larger holes at 5 mm diameter instead of 1-2 mm size. One-hole examples come with 2 mm hole or 5 mm reverse holes. Continuing simplification of the manufacturing caused the omission of any reverse hole. Green examples of this type measure 19-23 mm and brown ones 22 mm. I think the final simplification of this simple arch type has obverse slit no cross lines and no reverse hole. The green ones measure from 18-25 mm and the brown one 20 mm. Associated with these cowrie finds are carved bone bi-cone disks as mentioned above. The green ones measure 24-26 mm and a brown carving is 35 mm size.



Cabochon fine style bone cowrie

degrading style bone cowrie



Bone cowried flat surface with lines

bone cowrie with one hole-like Qi Dyn.



Bone cowrie degrading from two to no reverse hole



Bone cowrie associated bi-cone

Metal replicas of cowrie followed possibly from additional shortages of natural cowrie. Fragile thin metal shells with the slit being curved probably were first. They are usually of the similar size to the natural cowries ca 20-22 mm size. These can be dated poorly but as some have gold leaf applied by a lacquer associated method that disappeared circa 600 B.C., they have to date before this time. Some Chinese call another style “Mongol” style referring to some cowrie probably made in northern reaches of the area. These have a straight hole and no teeth along the edge. These are also found with gold leaf suggesting a date. These are often not finely cast even though the purported culture did have a fine casting tradition. A final type of metal cowrie imitation was made by the Lu culture in Shantung during the time of Confucius (ca. 500B.C.). These shells have a flat top and slit with fine cross lines. They are larger from 30-33 mm in length.



Bronze cowrie

Bronze cowrie with gold leaf



Mongol style bronze cowrie

Mongol style gold leaf cowrie



Lu culture cowrie, from Shantung

Shells and their shape finally metamorphosized to what Western cultures call ant nose or ghost head type money. This refers to the most common type that the Chinese character appears to have eyes and maybe lip lines or a ghost robe represented by the lines. The meaning of the design maybe a weight "jin" or other unknown meaning maybe for a place name. Other characters are known on these types probably made from ca. 400-220 B.C. They measure from about 15-18 mm in size with many modern counterfeits measuring much larger.



Ant nose money

ge liu zhu money

jun money

An interesting additional cowrie money item are what Westerner's call "Hell Money" types. These can be made in clay or lead. They exist appearing like a mound with somewhat cowrie shell like line and teeth. Others have the bridge like mound similar to the bone cowries. Some become more stylized and have the usual slit and teeth/crosslines but also additional lines are placed over the surface laterally. One type and multiple zig-zag lines sometimes called lightning variety. Flat topped types usually in grey clay seem to mimic the Lu culture cowries, with another flat cowrie stylized more in a leaf shape with multiple cross lines. Finally, clay hell money was made to imitate the varied ant nose types. Lead copies of the ge liu zhu type have been found and one with "jun" is presented



Clay cowrie



Clay stylized cowrie in red clay



Lu culture style clay cowrie



clay leaf like cowrie



Cowrie in lead ge li zhu style



clay "jun" cowrie

To collect such objects is challenged by the lack of references. No Western sources are complete. The standard reference by David Hartill "Cast Chinese Coins" has some accessible varieties. A less famous but much more complete tome is By Alex Fishman and Heinz Gratzner "The Early Round Coins of China". Chinese works are now hard to get with trade war and covid limiting access. Despite this, the adventure of collecting continues even if you don't collect the first money.

Bibliography

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