

THOSE ELUSIVE CHINESE MULES

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What on earth, you might reasonably ask, is a Chinese mule? Is it a cross between a horse and an ass? Well, perhaps, but the mules we're talking about are defined in Webster's dictionary as "coins or tokens struck from dies belonging to two different issues". The act of combining dies that do not match, thus creating a mule, is known as muling. These coins are infrequently encountered due to their rarity; therefore, as a collector of Chinese coins I feel privileged to own several. I obtained my first mule in an unusual way – by accident you might say, as the dealer who sold it to me for the princely sum of \$1.50 didn't recognize it as such and neither did I at the time. Both of us made the mistake of accepting the provincial name on the English reverse as bona-fide without checking the obverse mintmark. It wasn't until a careful examination of the coin prior to cataloging, that the discrepancy was revealed. We will find out more about my mule later. First let us examine the classification of Chinese coins wherein mules are to be found.

Imperial China, as it is well known, produced cash copper coins without interruption beginning in the Chou dynasty, many centuries before Christ. It wasn't until the introduction of modern western style minting equipment to China at the turn of the twentieth century, however, that coins were "struck" rather than "cast". The first of these new mints was the Canton mint in Kwangtung province, which was set up in 1889 utilizing European presses and modern coining methods. Production of copper ten cash pieces commenced in 1900. The setting up of these mints allowed the mass production of copper cash with which to facilitate trade.

The proposal to mass-produce copper cash by modern methods was first brought to the emperor's attention in 1897 in the form of a memorial to the throne. Proving that bureaucracies worked no faster then than they do today, the proposal was set aside and not acted upon until February 1902 when the emperor issued the following decree:

"For some time during the past, the legal currency of the various provinces has been insufficient for use. Formerly the two provinces of Fukien and Kwangtung minted large round copper coins of excellent workmanship, which, after they had been put into circulation, were declared by the people to be convenient for handling.

“The province of Kiangsu has now adopted this same coinage and realizes its very convenient and beneficial attributes, and that moreover, it places a check upon the practice of illicit coining and melting as well.

“Let the Viceroys and Governors of the provinces bordering the banks of the Yangtze River and along the seacoast provide the necessary funds and adopt the aforementioned plan, and immediately mint these coins in addition to those now being made by them, so that they may be placed into general circulation. This we hope will prove to be a help to the currency, and a boon to the people. Respect this!”

This act set in motion the production of enormous quantities of struck copper cash coins. At first 1, 2, 5, ten, and twenty cash coins were struck. Since the ten cash coppers met with great popularity, production of the other denominations was gradually suppressed, with all but the ten and twenty copper pieces eventually disappearing. Available statistics reveal that in every year from 1904 to 1908, the various mints collectively produced between one and three billion copper coins!

The metal composition of copper cash pieces consisted officially of 88.75 percent copper, 8.8 percent pewter, and 2.45 percent lead. In 1905, the composition of copper cash was modified to 95 percent copper and five percent zinc. In the early days the coinage adhered to these standards. However, over time little heed was paid to the intrinsic value of the metal used, causing the copper coinage of China to become severely debased. Evidence of this may be seen today when examining the same coin, which in some cases appears to be struck in copper while others are of brass. It was not long after the establishment of official weight and fineness standards, that few coins were to be found which met these government criteria. Greed and a lack of integrity had prevailed. Unscrupulous mint directors, insufficiently supervised, and not held accountable by the central government in Peking, quickly debased the coinage for enormous personal gain; so much so, that by the end of the Ch'ing dynasty (1911) struck copper coinage had depreciated by sixty-two percent.

Inasmuch as the overwhelming number of imperial Chinese mules occur among the struck ten cash coins, we shall limit further discussion to that series. Minted ten cash pieces fall into two distinct categories: (1) those struck for general and provincial use, as opposed to (2) those struck in the Tai C'hing Ti Kuo series. The latter constituted an attempt to bring standardization to China's imperial coinage, replacing the various provincial issues with a standard dragon design.



Considerable artistic license was taken by coin die engravers when depicting the imperial dragon. The basic types were: the “front view dragon”, with pearl (1) and fireball (2); the “side view” dragon with three variants (3-5); the “flying dragons” (6-8) and the “Tai Ch’ing Ti Kuo dragon” (9), which when adopted in 1905, standardized imperial coinage throughout China.

Almost without exception mules are to be found among the provincial issues. A great variety of coins were accidentally struck, the obverses of which are found with improper reverses and vice-versa. Woodward in his *The Minted Ten Cash Coins of China* lists these mules, by province, in great detail.

These ten copper coins display a remarkable variety of that imperial emblem, the dragon. These mythological reptiles adorn the ten cash series in many varied forms. Considerable artistic license was taken when displaying these symbols of Manchu authority. The four basic types of dragons depicted on struck cash include the (1) front view dragon, (2) side view dragon (most frequently encountered), (3) flying dragon (various configurations), and (4) the standardized Tai Ch'ing Ti Kuo dragon. Some of the aforementioned varieties include the "round mouth dragon", "square jawed dragon", dragons with large and small scales, long and short tails, and others with eyes incuse while still others are in relief.

The method of dating coins in the ten cash series is derived by combining two characters found in the "chia-tzu", known as the Chinese Sexagenary Cycle. This is a system replete with astrological, zodiacal and other mystical components. In this method of dating, one character is taken from the Ten Celestial Stems and the other from the Twelve Terrestrial Branches. These "branches" are associated with twelve animals – the rat, ox, tiger, hare, dragon, serpent, horse, ram, monkey, fowl, dog and boar. When used in their proper sequence, each pair gives its name to a particular year. Thus, the term "year of the dog", tiger, and so on. Each cycle spans a period of sixty years and then repeats itself. (See table). You will notice that each combination represents more than one date within the cycle, so some additional knowledge is required to properly attribute the date to a coin. For example the "ping wu" (丙午) year combination in the table could represent either year 1906 or 1966. We must know that ten copper imperial pieces ceased to be made after 1911, the fall of the Ch'ing dynasty, for example, in order to properly ascribe that coin to 1906 vice 1946. Most of these decisions are self evident, and do not present any great difficulty.

Another common feature appearing on most imperial provincial copper coins are the inscriptions found on both the obverse and reverse. The most frequently encountered inscriptions found on the obverse (Chinese side) of general issue and provincial coinage are Mei Yuen Dan Chi Chen Shih Wen (每元當制錢十文), "Every round is equivalent to ten cash" and Dan Chi Chen Shih Wen (當制錢十文), "Equivalent to ten cash". These inscriptions are found at the base of the coin, while the top contains the provincial heading such as Shan Tung Shun Tsoh, "Made in Shantung Province".

Ten Celestial Stems

		庚	辛	壬	癸	甲	乙	丙	丁	戊	己	
Twelve Terrestrial Branches	Horse	午 1870 1930		1882 1942		1894 1954		1906 1946		1858 1918		
	Ram	未	1871 1931		1883 1943		1895 1955		1907 1947		1859 1919	
	Monkey	申	1860 1920		1872 1932		1884 1944		1896 1956		1908 1948	
	Fowl	酉		1861 1921		1873 1933		1885 1945		1897 1957		1909 1949
	Dog	戌	1850 1910		1862 1922		1874 1934		1886 1946		1898 1958	
	Boar	亥		1851 1911		1863 1923		1875 1935		1887 1947		1899 1959
	Rat	子	1900 1940		1852 1912		1864 1924		1876 1936		1888 1948	
	Ox	丑		1901 1941		1853 1913		1865 1925		1877 1937		1889 1949
	Tiger	寅	1890 1950		1902 1942		1854 1914		1866 1926		1878 1938	
	Hare	卯		1891 1951		1903 1943		1855 1915		1867 1927		1879 1939
	Dragon	辰	1880 1940		1892 1952		1904 1944		1856 1916		1868 1928	
	Serpent	巳		1881 1941		1893 1953		1905 1945		1857 1917		1869 1929

Many Chinese coins and occasionally banknotes use the ancient cyclical method of dating. In this system years are assigned names derived from two lists, the Ten Celestial Stems and the Twelve Terrestrial Branches. Associated to the branches are twelve animals, each in it's proper sequence, giving it's name to a particular year. "1928 was the Year of the Dragon", or "I am a Horse (born in 1954)", for example. The system is repeat with astrological, zodiacial and other mystical components. Each cycle spans a sixty year period and then repeats itself.

The four large characters at the center of the obverse are usually found to be Kuang Hsu Yuan Pao, "Round Currency of the Kuang Hsu Period", thus attributing the reign of the Ch'ing emperor Kuang Hsu (1875-1908). Occasionally, only the characters Tan Shih "Value Ten" are found.

The obverse of the standardized Tah Ch'ing Ti Kuo series of ten cash coins contains the provincial mint mark at the center surrounded by the legend "Tah Ch'ing T'ung Pien" (Great Ch'ing Copper Coin) with its Manchu language equivalent at the top of the coin. These coins, when dated, always use the ideographic symbols found in the Sexagenary Cycle. The characters Kuang Hsu Nien Tsao (光緒年造) attributing the coin to the Kuang Hsu era appear on the reverse. After the death of emperor Kuang Hsu, long of failing health, the throne passed to Pu Yi, who succeeded him under the reign title of Hsuan-T'ung. Thus the coins of this series dated 1909-1911 bear the characters Huang-T'ung Nien Tsu (宣統年造) on the reverse.

As was previously mentioned, the majority of mulings appear on the provincial coinage of Kiangnan, Kiangsu and Kwantung. My mule, being a product of the Kiangsu mint, is one of these.

The Kiangsu mint was located at Soochow. It is recorded that the Soochow mint was built in 1898 and closed in 1906 whereupon the minting machinery was sent up to Kiangnan province to be installed in the mint at Nanking. After 1906 the Kiangsu mint ceased coin production.

My Kiangsu mule bears the Chinese date 1902, has a reeded edge (which is unusual for this series), and is of the type having on its obverse side the Chinese inscription "Round Currency of the Kuang Hsu Period" with the Kiangsu mint mark at the center, all of which is enclosed in a circle of dots. The outer rim carries the inscription "Every Round is Equivalent to Ten Cash" at the bottom and "Made in Kiangsu Province" at the top.

The reverse of my coin is what makes it so interesting. Instead of the standard flying dragon motif with "Ten Cash" below and "Kiang-Soo" above, my mule was made by improperly striking the coin with the die used for Kiangnan provincial coinage, resulting in a Kiangsu-Kingnan mule. Kiangsu on the obverse and Kiangnan on the reverse. An obvious mule!

Obverse of Typical Provincial Ten Cash Coin

**“Kuang Hsu Yuan Pao”
(Round Currency of the Kuang Hsu Period)**

Kiangnan Mint Mark in Center

**Chinese Date 1904
(From the Sexagenary Cycle)**

Made in Kiangnan Province



Every Round is Equivalent to Ten Cash



Kiangsu ten cash mule, consisting of the correct obverse die mismatched with a Kiangnan reverse.



Kiangnan mule, the opposite of the above situation. Here an incorrect Kiangsu (Kiang-Soo) die was erroneously selected for minting the reverse of this Kiangnan ten cash coin.

So how did this happen? Here we enter the world of speculation. Certain facts seem more than likely to have contributed to this anomaly. First of all, we must recognize that Kiangnan province did not always exist. Its territory was composed of the present day provinces of Anhwei and Kiangsu. The Nanking mint in Kiangnan produced ten cash coins commencing 1901 in enormous quantities until 1908 when overproduction forced the mint to temporarily close. At the same time the Soochow mint in Kiangsu was producing ten cash pieces. Could it be possible that some of the overproduction for the Nanking mint was assigned to Soochow for striking? If so, this would account for Kiangnan dies being accessible to the Soochow work force. In any event, somehow the reverse dies became interchangeable as Kiangnan-Kiangsu mules also exist (Kiangnan obverse with Kiangsu reverse die).

Another possible scenario to explain the mulings would be the closure of the Soochow mint in 1906 and the transfer of its machinery and equipment to Nanking. Could it be that the Kiangsu dies were also transferred north? If this were so, and through carelessness one of the Kiangsu dies was improperly paired with the Kiangnan ten copper die, this could account for the production of Kiangnan mules. A good example of this is the non-dated Kiangnan provincial ten cash piece minted with “Kuang Hsu Yuan Pao” together with the Kiangnan mintmark on the obverse and a flying dragon with “Kiang-Soo” written in English above on the reverse.

In another possibility, one can conjure up a situation which could explain the existence of my Kiangsu mule. In this situation, could the Kiangnan mint workers have used an old Kiangsu die with the Chinese date 1902 when striking their Kiangnan coppers? In other words, could they have gotten the Kiangsu reverse wrong but the Kiangnan reverse right? This seems highly unlikely as the obverse of the coin is Chinese and therefore the improper use of the Kiangsu mintmade die for the strike would have been easily detectable to any mint worker proficient in his own language. In addition, it is unlikely that the use of a reverse dated 1902 die would have gone unnoticed when the coin was struck in 1904.

On the other hand, when considering the muling of Kiangnan coppers with Kiangsu reverses, it is quite conceivable that a mint employee, not being proficient in the English language, could easily pick up the wrong reverse die when setting up the machinery for production.

One can further hypothesize that the production of the Kiangnan, Kiangsu and Kwantung mints (the mints in which most mulings occur) was so poorly supervised that quality control as we know it today, was in all probability non-existent. Undoubtedly, once the existence of a mule had been detected, the wrong die would have been replaced with the correct one. However, this would not have happened until some mules had been released into circulation.

In addition to the Kiangsu-Kiangnan and Kiangnan-Kiangsu ten cash mules, mulings exist in other provincial coinage as well. An example of this is a Kwangtung-Chihli mule without date. Other, less obvious mules exist. Instead of mismatching the coin dies of two different provinces, these mulings occurred as a result of mismatching dies of the same province. An example of this is a mule of Kiangnan province wherein the proper obverse die was matched up with the improper die for the coin being minted. In this case, a flying dragon reverse die was mistakenly used, wherein the proper minting of this coin called for the use of a front view dragon.



Correct die

Incorrect die

In this example a muling of the proper Kiangnan obverse (left) with an incorrect reverse die is seen. The resulting mule displays a flying dragon reverse (incorrect) instead of the front view dragon intended.

Woodward in his excellent work *The Minted Ten Cash Coins of China*, which first appeared as a series of articles in *The China Journal of Science and Arts* commencing in 1926, even goes so far as to assign comparative rarity to all copper ten cash coins. This scale attributes coins as C (common), S (scarce), R (rare), RR (very rare) or ER (excessively rare). Understandably, the mules fall within the highest degrees of rarity. All mules are classified by him as “very rare” or “excessively rare”. My Kiangsu mule, falls within the RR category.

So there we have it. An ardent numismatist can spend years pouring over hundreds of ten cash coins without ever encountering a mule, then suddenly...., when least suspecting it a mule appears. Such is the joy of coin collecting.

Subsequent to writing my original article I have come across yet another mule worthy of reporting. This coin is a Kiangnan 10 cash bearing a Chinese date of 1906. It has the proper Y10k.4 obverse with incused mint mark on a raised disk at center, but the reverse is from another coin die. Instead of the proper Tai-Ching-Ti-Kuo Copper Coin reverse, the mule has a “facing dragon” with “TEN CASH” below without hyphen as in Y138.1. This mule is listed in the *Standard Catalog of World Coins* as Y140, the number being assigned to both raised and incused mint mark varieties.

The *Standard Catalog of World Coins* also states that other Kiangnan mules exist with Chinese dates 1902 and 1903. I have never seen these specimens.

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