CHAPTER 12

Coins Which are Not Money:
Cultural Functions and Symbolism

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Until 1911 the dominant ideology in China was Confucianism, which dictated every aspect of life: how to behave, what gestures were proper, how to celebrate every station on the path through life—everything was prescribed in detail. Only a handful of objects were not covered by these constraints, e.g., illustrations on an ink stick; as well as charms and amulets. The name the Chinese use for these is *yashengqian* 壓勝錢 ‘coins to suppress and overcome evil’, or simply *huaqian* 花錢 ‘coins with pictures’, or *jiyuqian* 吉語錢 ‘coins with lucky expressions’. All traditional coin catalogues from the Song to the Qing period have a final chapter on coins which did not serve as money. The oldest well-wishing coins in my collection date from the Han period. One is an ordinary five-*zhu* 五銖 coin, but an inscription on the reverse side says: *Junyi jili* 君宜吉利 “May you be lucky and successful in your endeavours” (Fig. 12.1 and 12.2). Another one from the Han period is the same size, but has on one side the recurring wish *Tianxia taiping* 天下太平 “May there be peace under the sun”, and on the other side an illustration of a family, the father on the left working in the field, the mother churning butter, and two children playing (Fig. 12.3, 12.4).

Those charms were privately made, as well as produced by the official mints, because both strove for the best of luck. One coin that was certainly made by the government mint dates from the time of the Five Dynasties (906–960), more exactly the Posterior Zhou (951–960). It shows a figure with a sword, and a dragon that is supposed to protect the young dynasty (Fig. 12.5). In the Song and Yuan periods the most popular amulets were of the so-called openwork types (Fig. 12.6). Dragons are quite numerous on these coins, but also people at leisure or at work (Fig. 12.7), or a whole protective temple, like on coins that show shrines of Mazu 媽祖 or Tianhou 天后, the Heavenly Mother and tutelary goddess of Fishermen (Fig. 12.8).

We will now concentrate on official and unofficial well-wishing coins from the Qing dynasty.

The first official congratulatory coins were cast in 1713 (Kangxi 52) to celebrate Emperor Kangxi’s (r. 1662–1722) sixtieth birthday. The driving force
behind the lavish nation-wide celebrations that were to mark the occasion was Wang Yuanqi 王原祁 (1642–1715), the senior vice president of the Board of Revenue and head of the coinage department. He organised a month-long festival in Peking, with parades and street theatre, etc. He also invented a new way to write the xi 熙 in the motto kängxi and got the festivities in the streets of Peking recorded in a 50 metre long painting. He also designed two large coins, which were presented to every higher official in the whole country. The obverse side of the coins shows the inscription Kangxi zhongbao 康熙重寳 “Heavy Kangxi coin”, with the newly designed xi, the reverse the two characters for the mint of the Board of Revenue (baoquan 寶泉), and either two dragons, or a dragon and a phoenix (Fig. 12.9, 12.10). Those two coins became very famous and were privately copied for nearly all later emperors. From the reign of Kangxi only one more coin shall be shown here: a privately made and very abstract dragon (12.11, 12.12).

From the Qianlong reign (1736–1795) onward, every emperor had one or more types of Tianxia taiping coins cast. The one on the top left was cast by the official Eastern Mint, the main mint which also cast all prototype ‘mother cash’ (muqian 母錢) for the mints throughout the empire. The other three were privately made (Fig. 12.13, 12.14). The next two were not cast by an official mint, although the inscriptions wish the emperor to live ten thousand years (Fig. 12.15, 12.16). Quite popular were coins with pictures of stars and the moon, like the left one from Suzhou, Jiangsu. The coin on the right, in white copper, might have an anti-Qing message as it ostentatiously shows the characters for sun and moon, of which the name of the Ming dynasty is composed (Fig. 12.17, 12.18). There are also Qianlong coins with a dragon or a horse (Fig. 12.19, 12.20), and naturally many copies of the famous Kangxi coins, but also with Buddhist symbols (Fig. 12.21, 12.22).

If one was invited to a wedding, it was customary to bring a present. A silver coin from a jeweller, inscribed with wishes for the young couple, was considered as quite appropriate for such an occasion (Fig. 12.23, 12.24). A curiosity is a machine-struck coin bearing the typical inscription of Qianlong coins, yet with a triangular hole in the middle, and a dragon and a spider on the reverse. This coin was made for the 1915 San Francisco World Fair (Fig. 12.25, 12.26).

During the Jiaqing period (1796–1820) the official well-wishing coins became more numerous. From the four Tianxia taiping coins shown here only one was cast by the main Eastern Mint, the other three are private ones. From the style of writing it can be assumed that it was cast in 1804 (Jiaqing 9, Fig. 12.27, 12.28).

Then there is a whole official series with the inscription Jiaqing wannian 嘉慶萬年 “Long live Jiaqing”, cast in the first four years of his reign, when the Qianlong emperor was retired, but still alive. The first one was a tribute to