



How to Interpret your Chinese Coin

The replica Chinese coin included in your kit provides an opportunity for students to learn how archaeologists make sense of artifacts found in the field they might be unfamiliar with. Interpreting artifacts is very much a collaborative effort. Archaeologists use the information other researchers have gathered and cataloged over the years so that they do not have to be specialists in every artifact type.

In this instance students should be taught about this collaboration and instructed to make use of the research materials gathered by other professionals to help decipher the meaning of the writing on their coin. The coin actually contains two types of writing. The side that contains four characters is written in Chinese. The side containing two characters is written in Manchu.

The side of the coin with four characters is read top to bottom and then right to left. Our first piece of evidence comes from the British Museum. According to their website the first two characters denote the reigning emperor's name while the second two mean *tongbao* which translates to English as "circulating treasure" or "coin."¹

The reverse side of the coin is written in Manchu script and not Chinese since the Qing (Ch'ing) Dynasty was ruled by the Manchu. One character, on the right, indicates the Peking Board of Revenue while the other translates roughly as the "fountain head of the currency."²

Your student's task is to complete the artifact examination by matching the remaining characters to a translation listed in the PDF document entitled "Emperor_name" in order to find the correct name and a rough date the coin would have been in circulation (if this were a real coin).

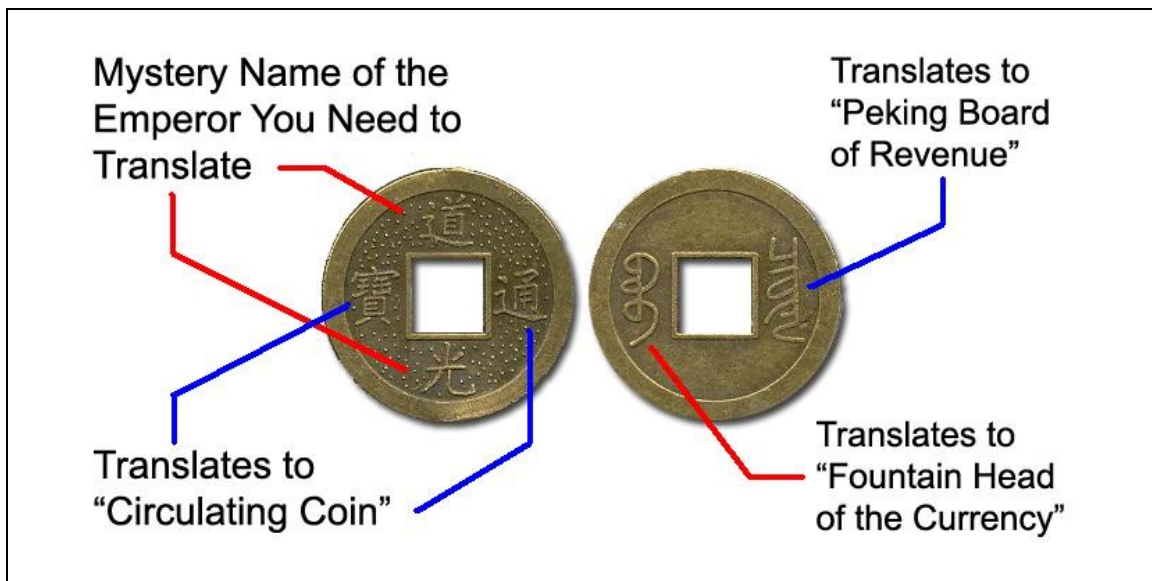
You can use the result of the coin research in your classroom artifact analysis exercise. Ask students how a Chinese coin could have ended up on an otherwise seemingly western (non-Asian) shipwreck. What does the coin's date tell you about the possible date of the other items on the wreck? Would the amount of coins found or their location on the wreck alter the interpretation of other artifacts found on the same site? Change the scenarios described to the students to see what conclusions they can draw.

¹ The British Museum: Explore Highlights, Bronze Dagan Tongbao Coin, <www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/cm/b/bronze_dagan_tongbao_coin.aspx> (2-5-2009).

² Chinese Coins and Charm Images, <<http://www.sportstune.com/chinese/coins/shunchih.html>> (2-5-2009) and Primal Trek <<http://primaltrek.com/charmfeatures.html>> (2-5-2009).



Chinese Coin Identification Diagram



Use the Emperor_name.pdf document to match the Chinese characters with the name and date of his reign to help date the coin in your kit.