The Oft-Misunderstood Ant-Nose Coinage of Ancient China

What are They?

Those who are familiar with the coinage of ancient China will know what is meant by the term “Ant-Nose.” In addition, they will know that these coins have many other names as well, including “Ghost-Face” and “Yi-Bi.” However, this number of collectors is relatively few, and the plethora of names can be confusing if one does not know where they come from. Ant-nose coins are oval in shape (usually 14-18mm by 5-7mm), have an inscription and hole (usually just a deep divot) on a convex obverse, and have a flat blank reverse. An example is pictured here:

![Image of Ant-Nose Coin]

Why are They Called “Ant-Nose?”

Though these coins are commonly called “Yi-Bi,” the Chinese equivalent of “ant-nose,” the original term was “Yi Bi Qien,” which meant “Ant and Nose Money.” Chinese numismatists coined this name when they discovered the ant-nose coins during the Southern Song Dynasty. This distinction in terminology is important as the name referred to two different coins as a collective. When discovered, the Song Chinese numismatists did not know who made these coins, how old they were, or what their archaic inscriptions meant. Of the many varieties known to exist, two are significantly more common than the others, and these two varieties are likely what would have been encountered. The most common variety, which was pictured above, was deemed a “Nose” coin because the inscription looked like a face with an abnormally large nose.
The term “Ghost-Face” specifically refers to this variety, though it is often erroneously used as a general term to describe all of the varieties. The “Ant” coin, which is pictured below, was so named because the inscription looked like an ant. Over time, the translation of “Yi-Bi Qien” was shortened to just “Ant-Nose Money.”

**How Were They Made?**

Ant-nose coins were cast in hand-carved bronze molds like the one pictured below. These were the only coins in China’s history that were cast with molds prepared in this way.

**Who Made Them and When?**

Until recently (the last 100 years or so), the origins of these coins were a complete mystery. No explicit records of their issue have ever been discovered. The only clue archaeologists had regarding the provenance of these coins was that they have consistently been found within the boundary established by the state of Chu during the Warring States period (ca 475 – 221 BC), specifically during the Chan-Guo period (403 – 221 BC).
This date range has been corroborated by finds in which ant-nose coins were discovered buried with other coinage. For example, in the late nineteenth century, a bronze vessel was discovered which held several ant-nose coins and a single round coin which bore the inscription “Zhong Shi Er Zhu,” or “Weight 12 Zhu.” This coin was issued by the state of Qin between 250 and 220 BC, which means that these ant-nose coins were circulating near the end of the third century BC. In addition, this vessel was found in the city of Suchou, which is located in a territory conquered by Chu in 261 BC, so such a date makes sense.

However, the ant-nose coins must have already been circulating for the coins to be together. While the find demonstrates that the ant-nose coins were in use during the late third century BC, it does not answer the question of when they first appeared. A possible answer lies in the ancient records of Chu. According to the historian Chu Feng, the records of Chu include a decree from King Zhuang of Chu stating that the money in circulation was too “light” and that he wanted to make “big ones” to replace the “small ones.” The public rejected Zhuang’s monetary reform, so he went back to making the “small ones.” Feng believes that these “small ones” are the ant-nose coins. However, there is no way to be sure if his conclusion is valid. Also, King Zhuang reigned from 613 to 591 BC, which means that the ant-nose coins were in circulation far earlier than when archaeological evidence suggests they circulated. Though this is not impossible, it seems very unlikely for the coins to have been continuously made and circulated for 400 years. None of the other coinages prior to 221 BC lasted that long, and there are more
official records extant for those than the ant-nose coins. In addition, none of the Chinese numismatists prior to the Song Dynasty knew these coins existed, and a coinage that circulated for 400 years (such as spade coins) would have been noted. I will discuss this further in the next section.

**What do the Characters Mean?**

There are eight different known inscriptions that are found on ant-nose coins, not including sub-varieties. Of these eight, only four have been decidedly deciphered, while the other four are still subject to debate.

Weight distributions, which are also provided for each type, demonstrate both the variability of weights and how some types and subtypes have a characteristic weight distribution that is not seen on other types.

These are ordered in terms of rarity, with the commonest types discussed first.

1. The coin pictured is from my own collection.

   Here is the “nose” coin, one of the varieties from which the name “ant-nose” is derived. One can see how the inscription can look like a face with a gargantuan nose.

   This coin is by far the most-common variety. Ironically, however, its inscription is the most debated one of all of the ant-nose coins. There is no shortage of theories, but I will discuss only four of them.

   I will start with Coole’s decipherment of the inscription on this coin. Coole believed that the hole was a part of the inscription and that the hole was the top of the inscription which was read from top to bottom. In his theory, the inscription reads “Tang Ban Liang” 當半兩, or “Equivalent to One-Half of a Liang” where a liang was the Chinese ounce. In Coole’s interpretation, the character “Tang” is represented by the hole
(or, more accurately, the deep divot) at the top of the coin. Coole comes to this conclusion by recounting an old legend told to him by Chinese Numismatists:

“In the ancient days when the cavalry was galloping by one would hear a sound like Ting-tang, ting-tang! This came from the metal of the stirrups and spurs clicking against each other. Now the character ● Ting (for nail) was at one time just a dot, representing the head of the nail after it had been pounded into a board.

“It seems that an oldtime (.sic) poet once wrote a poem about the troopers galloping by to the resonant sound of Ting-tang, ting-tang. Therefore, by poetic license ting and tang went together and ipso facto were synonymous. Therefore, when they wanted to put the character 当 Tang on this coin they found that there was not enough space for it, and so some brain-child came up with putting a dot on the coin to represent Tang, for after all the dot, ● Ting, was synonymous to Tang.”

“Ban,” according to Coole, was represented by ¥, which was a drawing of half a cowrie. The bottom line represented where the cowrie was cut, and the top two curved lines represented the top two lobes of a cowrie, like this: ।।।।. As the cowrie was an important monetary unit in ancient China, such an interpretation makes sense. Finally, the bottom character was an archaic version of “Liang” consisting of a pair of triangles which represented two half-liang weights on a balance to make a full liang, like so: △△. However, there are two major problems with this theory. One is the interpretation of the hole as a part of the inscription. As one will later see, none of the other varieties (except for one, which will be discussed later) used the dot in their inscriptions. Also, by looking at the fabric of the coin itself, one will notice that the dot is much deeper than the rest of the inscription and, on far fewer examples, a legitimate hole. I have read that the probable reason for such a design element was to be able to string the coins together, though the fact that most of these coins do not have clear holes may invalidate this theory. I would argue is that the “hole” was designed to mimic the hole created when the back was shaved off of a cowrie shell, the shape from which these seem to be inspired.

The other is the discrepancy between the weight of a half of a liang and the observed weights of these coins. By the time these were issued, the weight system of Zhou had already been well-established. A liang was worth 24 zhu, and, according to Zhou weights discovered during archaeological excavations, a zhu weighed the modern equivalent of 0.65g, though in practice it was closer to 0.5g. With this in mind, if these coins were worth a half of a liang, or 12 zhu, one would expect them to weigh around 6 to 7.8g. However, these coins consistently weighed around 2g - 3g each, far short of a half of a liang. With these shortcomings in mind, Coole’s theory seems highly unlikely.
An interpretation put forth by another numismatist describes the obverse design as being an image of a Chu totem, not a character. For his theory, the coin needs to be oriented with the hole at the bottom. The Chu people were known to be totem worshippers, based on the prevalence of totems found in areas occupied by the state of Chu. Two examples of totems are pictured here:

Chu totems are characterized by two round or triangular eyes, a flat, horizontal mouth, and a long tongue hanging vertically down. This numismatist observes several similarities between these totems and the nose coins. For example, the inverted triangles represent the eyes, and the \( \triangledown \) represented the horizontal mouth with a tongue hanging down. In addition, the occasional appearance of horizontal lines above the inverted triangles are indicative of eyebrows, which were less common on both totems and nose coins. The divot/hole represents just a hole and is nothing more significant to the design. While this theory is certainly plausible, most totems I have seen have round eyes, not the triangular shapes seen on the nose coins, and the tongue does not widen appreciably at
the bottom. Despite these two minor issues, there is little evidence to say that nose coins aren’t a pictogram of a totem. As one will see later, the obverse character on most other ant-nose types relate to some important societal value.

Could the inscription actually be a single character? There are two plausible theories regarding the identity of the obverse inscription, one is “Bei” for shell, and “Qi” for “small.” Many dealers and collectors alike maintain that “Bei” is the most likely reading of this coin because of their shape and association to cowries. In fact, in most catalogues, ant-nose coins are grouped with cowries and cowrie imitations. However, when looking as Coole’s list of archaic forms of the character “Bei,” I do not see any that provide a close-enough match to the character on the coin, particularly because the triangles on top point downward instead of upward. If the Chu were trying to depict a semi-faithful representation of a cowrie on their coinage, I would expect them to have the cowrie lobes pointing in the correct direction.

“Qi” for small seems plausible, given that the records of Chu explicitly record “small ones” being in circulation. Wang presents this theory and the character that goes with it in his book: "chi" (small). However, neither I nor contacts fluent in Chinese were able to find this character in modern Chinese dictionaries. It may be present in older dictionaries that Wang had access to, but I cannot explore this theory without the entomological research into the archaic forms of the character. Also necessary would be a
study of the physical records of Chu to determine which character was used for “small ones.” A conclusion of “small” in relation to the Chu records would be convenient, but there is insufficient evidence to make that conclusion. Therefore, a conclusive provenance to pre-600 B.C. China is impossible.

Without trying to decipher the inscription, could the nose coins be denominated in some way? There are scarcer varieties in which a single bar or a pair of bars appears over the pair of triangles.

The coin on the left is from my collection. The coin on the right is from Bob Reis’ inventory.

The variety with the single bar has a characteristic fabric not seen on normal nose coins. They are thinner and lighter, and the three I own weigh 1.3g, 1.7g, and 2.1g. I can’t find information on other genuine examples to corroborate my observations. Bob Reis has owned two specimens with two bars, and he provides the weight of both of them: 2.7g and 2.8g. The weights of those with two bars are a little under twice the average weight of the single-bar specimens. This could be coincidental, but without more weights, a correlation is hard to prove. The bars could just be local variations or mintmarks, in which case a consistency in weights for a given variety would make sense.

Of the seven normal nose coins I have owned, the weights ranged from 1.4g to 2.5g with an average of 2.15g (without the 1.4g outlier, the average is 2.28g), which is more than any of my specimens with a single bar. This weight range is corroborated by several other dealers, with an average weight being just a little over 2g.
The coin pictured is from the Jeffery Young Collection.

Here is the “ant” coin from which the name “ant-nose” is derived. One can see the resemblance to an ant. There are multiple theories as to what the inscription means, each of which have strong points and problems. All of the decipherments are oriented with the hole at the top. I will discuss the four most-widely accepted interpretations as all others are largely ignored by the Chinese numismatic community.

The decipherment that Coole puts forth is “Tang Ge Liu Zhu,” or “Equivalent Each One to Six Zhu.” The modern characters for this are 當各六朱. “Tang” was represented by the dot for the same reasons as outlined above. For the next character, “Ge” 各, which means “Each,” Coole reasoned that the archaic form 當 looked exactly what is seen on the coin, save for the bottom component. This character could have been abbreviated to fit on the coin, which was not an uncommon practice in ancient China. Coole identifies the character “Liu” 六, or “six,” directly underneath. The ancient form of the character is nearly the same. The character interpreted at “Liu,” however, has the feet pointed in the wrong directions. Coole identifies the last character as “Zhu” 銖, which is better known by the archaic version seen on the Wu Zhu: 銖. Coole states that the “Jin” 金 component was left off and just the “Da” 朱 component was used on the coin. The archaic form of this component is 銖. While the bottom character more-closely resembles
the modern version, 朱, more so than the archaic version, 朱, it is still possible that this is a correct identification.

The next school of thought is the same as above, with the exception that the dot is, rather than being a part of the inscription, is actually just a design element for the reasons outlined above.

The next theory is from the numismatist Wang Yu-Chuan. He states that the inscription reads “Lo Yi Zhu” 一朱, or “One Zhu of the City of Lo,” though the character he used in his book (and on the coin) is closer to that of “Ge” 各. Problematically, this interpretation creates an extra line in the middle of the last character that is unaccounted for and is not characteristic of “Zhu” 朱. Another problem with this interpretation is the incongruence between the stated one-zhu weight and the weights of the coins. If these coins were denominated one zhu, one would expect them to weigh 0.5g, but I have not heard of an example that small. These normally weigh 2.5g – 3.0g, which is in line for a six-zhu weight, giving credence to the previous two theories.

Lastly, a newer theory has been presented which identifies the inscription as “Sui Tu Lei” 丂土耒, or “The plow that plows the soil.” This theory seems to have merit because of the similarity of the characters to the ones seen on the coin. “Sui” means “Walk Slowly,” as if pulling a plow. The modern character for “Sui” is 亀 while the ancient character is 亀. “Tu” means “Soil.” The modern character for “Tu” is 夂 while the ancient character is basically the exact same. The last character “Lei” refers to the noun “plow.” The modern character is 耒 while the ancient character is 耒 and 丂. If one assumes that the first calligraphic style of “Lei” was the one used in the Chu state, then these three characters match up to what is written on the coin exactly. In addition, the three characters form a coherent message, which seems to be more than just coincidence. One may make the point that the phrase “The Plow that Plows the Soil” makes no sense when placed on such a coin. However, most of the other varieties do not have inscriptions that have any relation to a monetary value. Rather, their inscriptions have societal value. Thus, this theory makes the most sense, but it is not yet proven one way or another, and neither are any of the other theories.
The pictured coin is from my collection.

The character on this coin is “Jun,” which translates to “Nobleman,” “Chief,” “Ruler,” etc. The ideographic nature on the archaic Chinese written language is very evident here as “Jun” looks like what one would imagine an ancient Chinese noble to look like. One can see the large head with a long moustache and the small body underneath. The modern version of this character is 君 while the ancient version is 君.

Of the two examples of this type I have handled, one weighed 1.6g (the pictured specimen) and the other weighed 1.4g. Dealers who have handled these coins report weights ranging from 1.4g to 1.7g, with the exception of one specimen owned by Bob Reis that weighed 3.38g.
The pictured specimen is from the Jeffery Young collection.

The character on this coin is “Jin,” which means “Metal.” The modern form of this character is 銅 and the ancient form is 銅. Little discussion is needed for this decipherment.

Though this is the fourth most-common type, it is significantly scarcer than the three previous varieties. The following four varieties range from rare to very rare.

I have two weights for these, 0.76g from Scott Semans and 2.3g from Bob Reis. Semans’ weight seems incredibly small, and I believe it to possibly be a typographical error.

The pictured specimen is from Bob Reis’ inventory.
The character on this specimen is considered “Jin,” a Zhou monetary unit. This should not be confused with the “Jin” that means “Metal.” The modern form of this character is 斤, while the ancient forms are 钧 and 斤. Interestingly, 钧 is the same of “Jin” seen on the Dang Jin spades (pictured below) attributed to the Chu state. However, other spade coins of this era, particularly those attributed to the state of Liang, have a different form of “Jin,” 斤. Prior to the Qin Dynasty, a Jin was a monetary unit equivalent to a spade coin that weighed one liang, or around 14g. Hartill theorizes that, because the Dang Jin spades weighed twice that of a one-Jin spade, 斤 is a local Jin unit equivalent to two 斤.

Ant-nose coins have been found with the Dang Jin spades, leading historians to believe that they circulated together and were contemporarily made. The reverse of the spade has the inscription “Shi Huo,” or “Ten Coins.” As ant-nose coins weighed about one-tenth of one of the Dang Jin spades, historians have concluded that the spades were worth ten ant-nose coins in the Chu economy.

The pictured specimen is from my collection. “Jin” is the character on the bottom right of the obverse. “Shi Huo” are the two characters that occupy the reverse.

Coole believed the inscription on this coin to be “Xin,” which means “Joy.” The modern character for “Xin” is 忍, while the ancient forms were 忍 and 忍, neither of
which have a left component of the character similar to that seen on the coin. The character “Jin” makes more sense as it is a closer match to what is seen on the coin and the coins have an association to the Dang Jin spades of Chu. Therefore, I think “Jin” is the proper identity of the character on this coin.

The only weight I could find for this type was from Bob Reis’ specimen, which weighed 4.71g. It is unknown why these would weigh so much more than the other varieties. It is possible that these coins are the “big ones” mentioned previously in the records of Chu, and their short longevity would account for the rarity of this type. However, this is only speculation, and there is no other evidence to back up this supposition. Interestingly, all but one of the rare varieties are very heavy when compared to the common varieties.

6.

![The pictured coin is from my collection.](image)

The character on this coin is “Xing,” which translates to “Crossroads.” The ideographic character here resembles an intersection of roads, or crossroads. The modern version of this character is 行 while the ancient form of this character is 行.

The coins of this type are all very heavy and robust. The pictured specimen weighs 3.7g. Dealers who have handled these coins report a weight range of 3.7g to 3.9g, with the exception of one example owned by Scott Semans that weighed 2.3g. As this type is very rare and heavy, it is another potential candidate for the “big ones” specified by the records of Chu.
The pictured specimen is from the Jeffrey Young collection.

Though still under debate, the inscription of this coin is subject to the least amount of debate. Most modern references say that the character is “Tao,” which means “Kiln.” The modern-day character for “Tao” is 陶, while the ancient version is 道. There is, however, a numismatist who insists that this interpretation is not correct. He claims that the outer ring component of the character means “Curved Hand” or “Cupped Hand,” and the interior component is either the character for “Rice,” 米, or the character for “Grain,” 穀. When put together, the character either means “Handful of Rice,” “Ju” or 米, or “Handful of Grain.” This would make sense if it was a denomination in which each coin was worth a handful of rice or grain. However, a character for “Handful of Grain” does not exist with this particular combination of components. The numismatist gives an example of what the character would look like should it exist: 甸 or 程.

Coole claims that the character is “Qun,” which means “Granary.” The modern form of this character is 國, while the ancient form is 國. The problem with this theory is that, in both its modern and ancient forms, it does not have an opening on the left side as
seen in the picture above. Given that “Ju” is the only decipherment that seems to be problem-free, I believe it is the proper identity of the character on this coin.

The only specimen with a weight specification is from Bob Reis’ inventory, and it weighed 2.51g.

This type is a new discovery that is not recorded in any references. Although no definitive conclusions have been reached with regard to the deciphering of the character, one theory that has been suggested is “Yong,” which means “Eternal.” Numismatists have reached this conclusion by comparing the character to those found on oracle bones and other ancient texts, as well as the modern characters. The character for “Yong” looks like 永 today, while it looked like 佳 in ancient times. There are similarities, but nothing conclusive can be determined without further entomological research into ancient texts.

Bob Reis once again provides the sole weight specification, which is 4.18g. This is very heavy for ant-nose coins, and is yet another candidate for the “big ones” mentioned in the Chu records.
References


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