

# An introduction and identification guide to Chinese Qing-dynasty coins

by Qin Cao

This guide has been developed to provide a quick and easy way of identifying Chinese cash coins of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), the last imperial dynasty of China. They are the most common Chinese coins seen in the UK.

In English, they are often known as 'cash coins' after the pidgin English word 'cash' for small base metal coins. This word was derived via the Portuguese form 'caixa' from the Indian word 'karsha' (meaning a small copper coin)<sup>1</sup>.

Of course, in Chinese they have a different name, and are known as 'qian' (an old name for coin, originally from a weight term), 'tongqian' (which translates literally as 'copper coin') or 'wen' (another old name for coin).

Qing-dynasty coins, like Chinese coins for centuries before them, are copper alloy pieces cast from moulds, with a square hole in the middle and an inscription. There are no pictorial images on Chinese cash coins. People normally refer to a coin by the inscription on the obverse (front). For example, a coin with the obverse inscription 'Kangxi tongbao' is known as a 'Kangxi tongbao coin'. Unless otherwise indicated, all 'Kangxi tongbao coins' have a denomination of 1-cash.

The obverse inscription on most Qing-dynasty coins consists of four characters arranged around the hole, in the order top-bottom-right-left. The first two characters provide the reign title of the emperor. In the Qing dynasty most emperors had only one reign title (in other dynasties, the emperors had several reign titles each); only one emperor had two reign titles. For this reason, Shizu (the first emperor of the Qing dynasty) are known in English as 'Shunzhi Emperor', 'Shunzhi' being the reign title. The last two characters are usually 'tong' and 'bao'. 'Tongbao' translates as 'circulating treasure' and means 'coin'.

Qing-dynasty coins also have an inscription on the reverse (back). The reverse inscriptions vary slightly over time, and are either in Manchu or Chinese script only, or Manchu and Chinese script together. Coins minted in Xinjiang (a region in the northwest part of China) may also have the Uighur script in the reverse inscriptions.

Qing-dynasty coins have a Manchu inscription because the rulers were from the Manchu ethnic group, originally from the northeast of China. The majority of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Joe Cribb, *Money in the Bank: The Hongkong Bank Money Collection*, London, 1987, p. 4.

Chinese population then, as now, were Han. In 1616, Nurhachi proclaimed himself Khan (ruler) of the Manchus and started issuing coins with both Manchu and Chinese inscriptions. The Qing dynasty had its capital in Beijing, which had been the capital of the preceding Ming dynasty. When it came to issuing coins, mints in the capital city, managed by the Board of Revenue and Boards of Works, were opened up first.

A total of eleven emperors ruled the country over the 250 years of the Qing dynasty, and all of them issued coins. Only 'Tongzhi emperor' issued coins under two reign titles: 'Qixiang' and 'Tongzhi'. He first inherited the throne with the reign title of Qixiang in 1861, but later that year a coup took place, and the Empress Cixi (later known as the Dowager Empress) seized power. The Qixiang reign title was abolished, and the Tongzhi reign title was adopted in the following year. Only a small quantity of 'Qixiang tongbao' coins is known, and they probably never went into general circulation.

This brief guide includes the following sections:

- I. How to read inscriptions on Qing-dynasty coins
- II. A catalogue of Qing-dynasty coins
- III. Qing-dynasty mint marks and map of China
- IV. What could a Qing-dynasty cash coin buy?
- V. Further reading

# I. How to read inscriptions on Qing-dynasty coins

For someone who reads Chinese, obverse inscriptions on Qing-dynasty coins are very straightforward. This article aims to provide tips for people who don't know much about the Chinese language. Chinese is written in characters, and each character has one syllable. When transliterating Chinese, the standard is to use the Chinese pinyin system of romanisation.

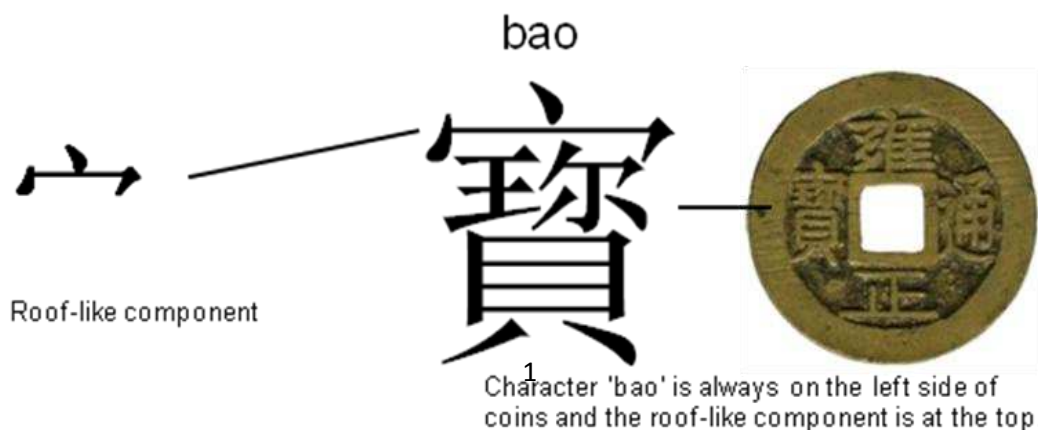
## 1. Determine the obverse and reverse.

Qing-dynasty coins normally have inscriptions on both sides. The side which has four Chinese characters will be the obverse. Below are images of both sides of a coin. One side has four characters, so this must be the obverse. The other side has a different style of inscription and is the reverse.



## 2. Hold the coin the right way up.

Qing-dynasty coins have inscriptions, so you will need to determine which way up the inscription goes. The key is to find the character 'bao' (meaning 'treasure'), which is always on the left side of the hole. It is quite easy to identify: look for the roof-like component with its little chimney.



Look at the four images below and see if you can tell which coin is the right way up. The answer is at the end of this document.



**3. Read the inscription in the correct order.**

The four characters are arranged around the hole. The reading sequence for Qing coins is top-bottom, then right-left. Taking this 'Yongzheng tongbao' coin as an example, the first two characters are 'Yong' and 'zheng', which give the reign title 'Yongzheng' of the Yongzheng emperor (1723-1735). The third and fourth characters are 'tong' and 'bao'. 'Tong' means 'circulating' and 'bao' means 'treasure', and together they state that this is a coin and that it should circulate freely.



**4. The reverse inscription.**

The reverse inscription normally gives the mint of the coin. The Board of Revenue and the Board of Works were the two principal mints in Beijing, the capital city of the Qing dynasty, and their coins were normally of good quality.

There were about 50 local mints spread across the country. Most of them were only in operation for a short period of time. There are 7 main types of reverse inscriptions on Qing coins (see below a-g):

a) *Manchu script only.*

This is the most common type of reverse among Qing coins (see 3. Qing-dynasty mint marks and map of China). The character on the left is always the same: it reads 'boo' in Manchu script. It is the equivalent of Chinese 'bao' written in Manchu script. It refers to the same Chinese character 'bao' in the obverse inscription. The inscription on the right varies according to the mint. Again, the inscription is a phonetic rendering in the Manchu script of a Chinese place name.



b) *Chinese script only.*

On these coins, the character to the right of the hole indicates the mint. The characters to the left of the hole give the value of the coin. In the image below, 'yili' translates as '1 li' ('li' being a weight term) of silver.



c) *Chinese and Manchu script together.*

These coins have a Chinese character to the right of the hole, and a Manchu inscription to the left of the hole. Both refer to the mint, and the Manchu inscription is a phonetic rendering of the Chinese. This only occurs on the 'Shunzhi tongbao' coins.



d) *A single Chinese character on the reverse.*

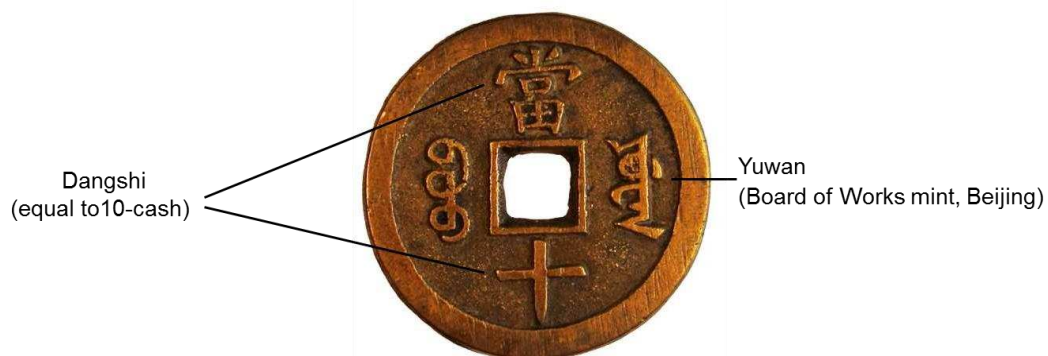
On these coins, the single character is placed above the hole, or to the left or right of the hole. It indicates the mint.

e) *No mint name on reverse.*

On these coins there is sometimes a circle above the hole or a single Chinese character '一' (yi, meaning 1).

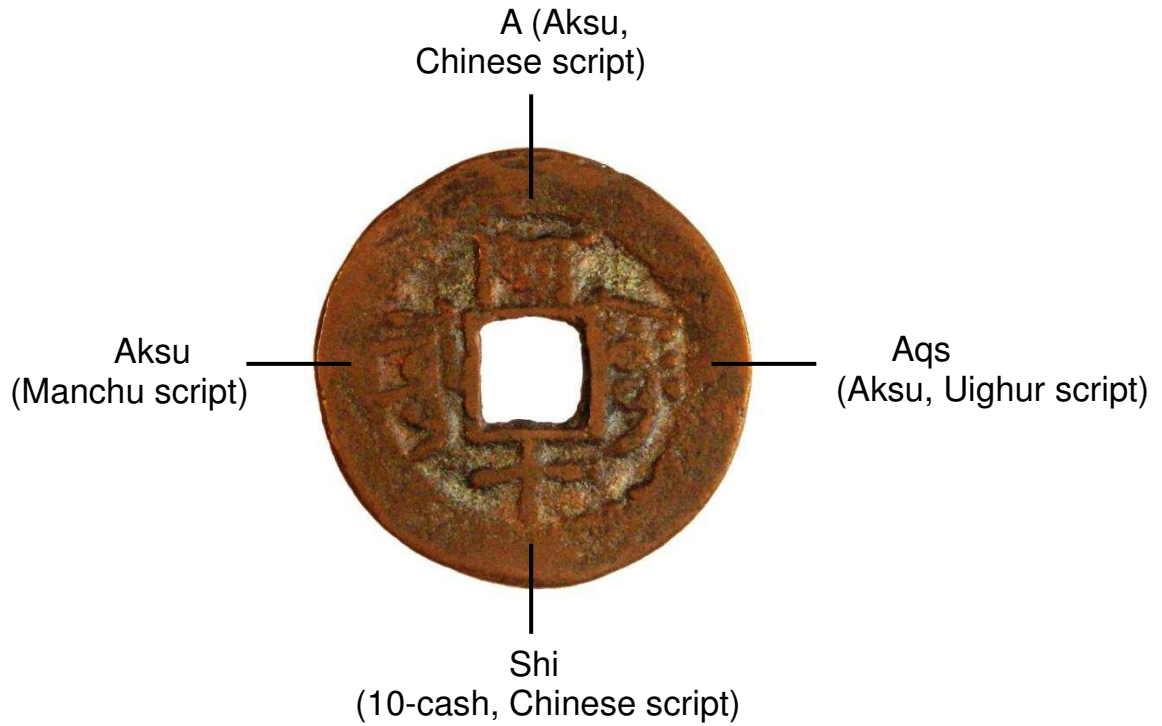
f) *Manchu script and Chinese script.*

These coins have an inscription in the Manchu script arranged to right and left of the hole, identifying the mint. They also have a Chinese inscription (reading top-bottom) which gives the value of the coin, in this case a 10-cash coin. The coin illustrated here is a 10-cash coin. This type is mostly common among the large-denomination coins of the Xianfeng emperor.

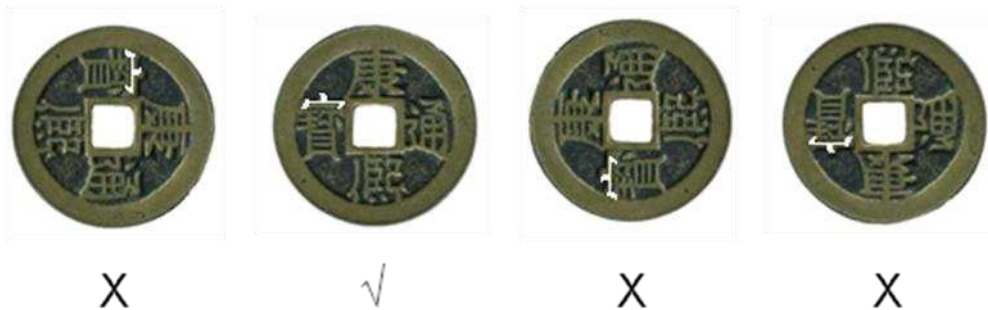


g) *Manchu, Chinese and Uighur script.*

The coins from Xinjiang are immediately recognisable because they are much redder in colour than the other Qing-dynasty coins, reflecting the local copper ore from which they were made. The inscriptions indicate the mint and/or value, and are often in three scripts: Manchu, Chinese and Uighur.



Answer for page 2 exercise.



## II. A catalogue of Qing-dynasty coins




Image	Obverse inscription	Transliteration and translation	Ruler	Period culture	Production period	Denomination	Bibliography
 <p>© Copyright David Hartill</p>		<p>Abkai fulingga han jiha (Abkai-fulingga Khan's money)</p>	<p>Nurhachi (also known as Taizu)</p>		<p>1616-1626</p>	<p>1-cash</p>	<p>Hartill 2005, p.280</p>
 <p>© Copyright David Hartill</p>	<p>天命通寶</p>	<p>Tianming tongbao (circulating treasure of Tianming)</p>	<p>Nurhachi (also known as Taizu)</p>		<p>1616-1626</p>	<p>1-cash</p>	<p>Hartill 2005, p.280</p>
 <p>© Copyright David Hartill</p>		<p>Sure han ni jiha (Sure Khan's money)</p>	<p>Abahai</p>		<p>1627-1643</p>	<p>10-cash</p>	<p>Hartill 2005, p.280</p>






Image	Obverse inscription	Transliteration and translation	Ruler	Period culture	Production period	Denomination	Bibliography
	<p>順治通寶</p>	<p>Shunzhi tongbao (circulating treasure of Shunzhi)</p>	<p>Shunzhi Emperor (also known as Shizu)</p>	<p>Shunzhi (1644-1661)</p>	<p>1644-1661</p>	<p>1-cash</p>	<p>Hartill 2005, p.281-285</p>
	<p>康熙通寶</p>	<p>Kangxi tongbao (circulating treasure of Kangxi)</p>	<p>Kangxi Emperor (also known as Shengzu)</p>	<p>Kangxi (1662-1722)</p>	<p>1662-1722</p>	<p>1-cash</p>	<p>Hartill 2005, p.285-291</p>
	<p>雍正通寶</p>	<p>Yongzheng tongbao (circulating treasure of Yongzheng)</p>	<p>Yongzheng Emperor (also known as Gaozong)</p>	<p>Yongzheng (1723-1735)</p>	<p>1723-1735</p>	<p>1-cash</p>	<p>Hartill 2005, p.292-296</p>




Image	Obverse inscription	Transliteration and translation	Ruler	Period culture	Production period	Denomination	Bibliography
	乾隆通寶	Qianlong tongbao (circulating treasure of Qianlong)	Qianlong Emperor (also known as Gaozong)	Qianlong (1736- 1795)	started 1736	1-cash, 10-cash	Hartill 2005, p.296-316
	嘉慶通寶	Jiaqing tongbao (circulating treasure of Jiaqing)	Jiaqing Emperor (also known as Renzong)	Jiaqing (1796- 1820)	1796-1820	1-cash	Hartill 2005, p.317-325
	道光通寶	Daoguang tongbao (circulating treasure of Daoguang)	Daoguang Emperor (also known as Xuanzong)	Daoguang (1821-1850)	1821-1850	1-cash, 5-cash, 10-cash	Hartill 2005, p. 326-333




Image	Obverse inscription	Transliteration and translation	Ruler	Period culture	Production period	Denomination	Bibliography
 <p>British Museum collection</p>	咸豐通寶	Xianfeng tongbao (circulating treasure of Xianfeng)	Xianfeng Emperor (also known as Wenzong)	Xianfeng (1851-1861)	1851-1861	1-cash, 5-cash, 10-cash, 20-cash, 50-cash, 100-cash	Hartill 2005, p.333-393
	咸豐重寶	Xianfeng Zhongbao (heavy treasure of Xianfeng)	Xianfeng Emperor (also known as Wenzong)	Xianfeng (1851-1861)	1851-1861	4-cash, 5-cash, 8-cash, 10-cash, 20-cash, 30-cash, 40-cash, 50-cash, 100-cash	Hartill 2005, p.333-393
	咸豐元寶	Xianfeng yuanbao (primary treasure of Xianfeng)	Xianfeng Emperor (also known as Wenzong)	Xianfeng (1851-1861)	1851-1861	80-cash, 100-cash, 200-cash, 300-cash, 500-cash, 1000-cash	Hartill 2005, p.333-393




Image	Obverse inscription	Transliteration and translation	Ruler	Period culture	Production period	Denomination	Bibliography
 <p>© Copyright 2005 David Hartill</p>	<p>祺祥通寶</p>	<p>Qixiang tongbao (circulating treasure of Qixiang)</p>	<p>Tongzhi Emperor (also known as Muzong)</p>	<p>Qixiang (1861)</p>	<p>1861</p>	<p>1-cash</p>	<p>Hartill 2005, p.393-394</p>
 <p>© Copyright 2005 David Hartill</p>	<p>祺祥重寶</p>	<p>Qixiang zhongbao (heavy treasure of Qixiang)</p>	<p>Tongzhi Emperor (also known as Muzong)</p>	<p>Qixiang (1861)</p>	<p>1861</p>	<p>10-cash</p>	<p>Hartill 2005, p.393-394</p>
	<p>同治通寶</p>	<p>Tongzhi tongbao (circulating treasure of Tongzhi)</p>	<p>Tongzhi Emperor (also known as Muzong)</p>	<p>Tongzhi (1862-1874)</p>	<p>1862- 1874</p>	<p>1-cash, 5-cash, 10-cash</p>	<p>Hartill 2005, p.394-404</p>







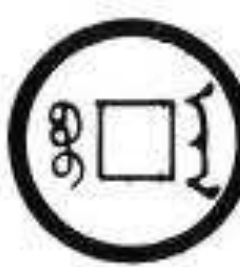
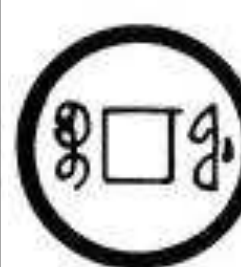

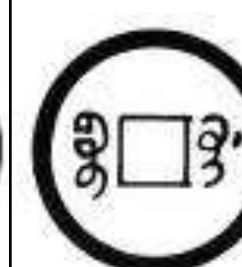
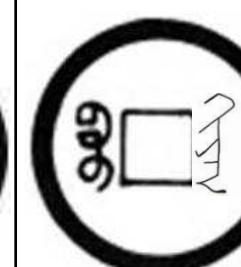


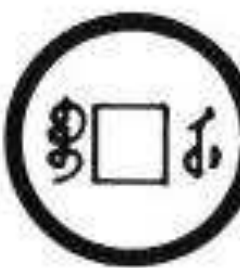
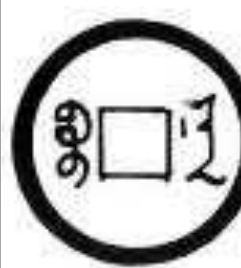
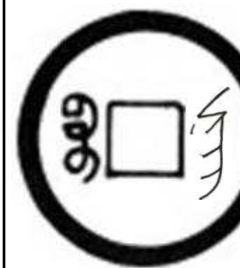
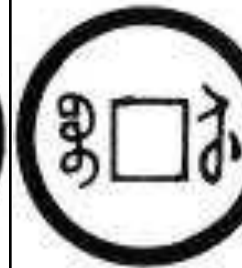
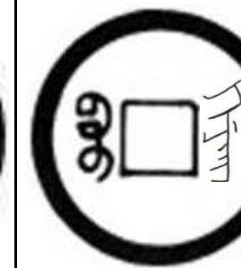




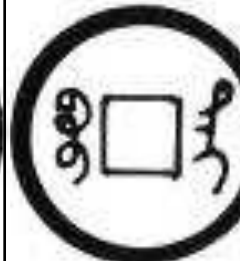
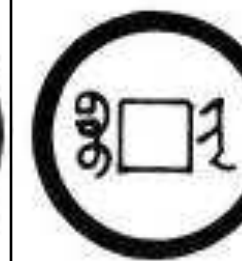
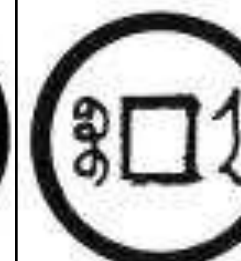



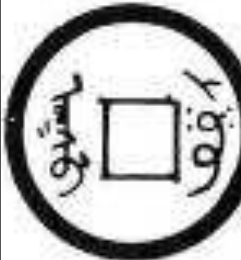
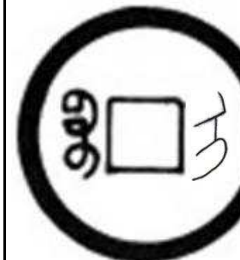
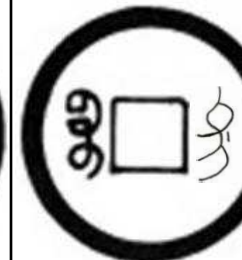
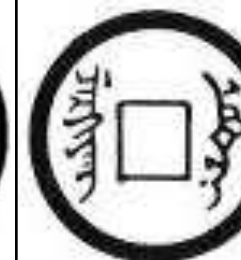
Image	Obverse inscription	Transliteration and translation	Ruler	Period culture	Production period	Denomination	Bibliography
	同治重寶	Tongzhi zhongbao (heavy treasure of Tongzhi)	Tongzhi Emperor (also known as Muzong)	Tongzhi (1862-1874)	1862-1874	4-cash, 10-cash	Hartill 2005, p.394-404
	光緒通寶	Guangxu tongbao (circulating treasure of Guangxu)	Guangxu Emperor (also known as Dezong)	Guangxu (1875-1908)	1875-1908	1-cash, 10-cash	Hartill 2005, p.405-424
	光緒重寶	Guangxu zhongbao (heavy treasure of Guangxu)	Guangxu Emperor (also known as Dezong)	Guangxu (1875-1908)	1875-1908	5-cash, 10-cash	Hartill 2005, p.405-424

Image	Obverse inscription	Transliteration and translation	Ruler	Period culture	Production period	Denomination	Bibliography
	宣統通寶	Xuantonɡ tongbao (circulating treasure of Xuantonɡ)	Puyi (also known as Last Emperor)	Xuantonɡ (1908-1911)	1909-1911	1-cash, 10-cash	Hartill 2005, p.424-425

### III. Qing-dynasty mint marks (common types)

						
Board of Revenue Beijing	Board of Works Beijing	Jiangning (Nanjing for Anhui province)	Fuzhou, Fujian province	various mints in Guangdong province	Guilin, Guangxi province	various mints in Guizhou province
						
Kaifeng, Henan province	Wuchang (Wuhan), Hubei province (pre-1723) ; Nanchang, Jiangxi province (post-1723)	Wuchang (Wuhan), Hubei province (post-1723)	Changsha, Hunan province	Jiangning (Nanjing), Jiangsu province	Suzhou, Jiangsu province	Nanchang, Jiangxi province (pre-1723)

						
Jinan, Shandong province	Xi'an, Shaanxi province	Chengdu, Sichuan province	various mints in Yunnan province	Taiwan	Taiyuan, Shanxi province	Hangzhou, Zhejiang province
						
Baoding, Hebei province	Datong, Shanxi province; Dongchuan Yunnan province	Tianjin	Aksu, Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region	Ili, Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region	Dihua (Urumchi), Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region	Yarkand (Shache), Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region

Note: Mint marks may look slightly different in actual coins.  
 Images of mint marks: © Mevius Numisbooks International B.V.



# Map of China



Note: For known mints, they are marked with square boxes next to them; for various mints in one province that shared the same mint mark, a province name is given in the map. Names in brackets are modern place names for Qing mints.

## IV. What could a Qing-dynasty cash coin buy?

Qing-dynasty coins were of low values and most of them were of the same denomination: 1-cash. However, mints in Xinjiang cast 10-cash coins, and during the Xianfeng reign period (1851-1861) coins of high denominations, ranging from 4 to 1000 cash, were issued in large quantities. As might be expected, coins with high denominations tended to be bigger and heavier than 1-cash coins. The denomination of high value coins was often inscribed in Chinese on the reverse of coins. But size varied even among coins of the same value, due to varying standards and private mintages. For example, a 20-cash 'Xianfeng tongbao' coin from the Fuzhou mint is bigger than a 50-cash 'Xianfeng zhongbao' coin from the Hangzhou mint, despite being less than half the value. Interestingly, in most cases large denomination coins were not traded at their face value, but at a discounted rate.

Coins could be used individually or in strings. A standard 'string of coins' theoretically consisted of 1,000 coins, strung together with a cord passing through the holes. One 'string' theoretically was equal to 1-liang (about 37g) of silver. But the value of copper coins fluctuated, and in practice, the official exchange rate set by the Qing government was not used most of the time.

Below are some indications of what cash coins could buy in the Qing dynasty. The table on the left shows how much rice you could buy with 1000-cash. Rice was part of the staple diet, so there are plenty of records relating to the price of rice. The figures are taken from Peng Xinwei's *A Monetary History of China* (translated by Kaplan, E. H., Bellingham, WA: Western Washington, 2 volumes, 1994, p.737 and p.745-746).

The chart on the right gives some everyday examples of prices from Chinese literature written- Wu Jingzhi's *Rulin Waishi* (The Scholars), a novel written in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (quoted in Peng Xinwei's *A Monetary History of China*, translated by Kaplan, E. H., Bellingham, WA: Western Washington, 2 volumes, 1994, p.737). But as the rice table shows, prices could vary enormously in the course of a century.

Period	Buying power of 1000-cash
1651-1660	99.6 kg of rice
1681-1690	136 kg of rice
1721-1730	116 kg of rice
1781-1790	57.3 kg of rice
1811-1820	25.2 kg of rice
1841-1850	21.7 kg of rice

a steamed bun	3-cash
a bowl of noodles	16-cash
school food	4-cash
school tuition fee (a year)	2400-cash

## V. Further reading

Eagleton, C.; Williams, J., *Money: a history*, London: British Museum Press, 2007.

Hartill, D., *Cast Chinese coins*, Trafford Publishing, 2005.

Hartill, D., *Qing cash*, Royal Numismatic Society Special Publication 37, London, 2003.

PENG Xinwei, *A monetary history of China*, Shanghai: Qunlian Publishing, 1954; translated by Kaplan, E. H., Bellingham, WA: Center for East Asian Studies, University of Western Washington, 2 volumes, 1994.