

MAKING YOUR CASH GO A LONG WAY: FIVE CHINESE COINS IN THE SOUTHERN YUKON AND NORTHWESTERN BRITISH COLUMBIA

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ABSTRACT

Recent discoveries of Chinese coins minted in the early fifteenth, late seventeenth, and early eighteenth centuries have rekindled interest in their protohistoric and early historic modes of transport from China to the interior of the Yukon and northwestern British Columbia. Russian and British trading may have provided the link between China and coastal Tlingit peoples who carried or traded the coins into the interior. Historic Chinese placer miners in the late 1800s and early 1900s may have also carried these coins with them as lucky charms, amulets, or gaming pieces. While small components of site assemblages, the coins represent significant and expansive patterns of culture contact and movement in the North.

INTRODUCTION

Two archaeological fieldwork efforts in the Yukon during the summer of 2011 each identified a Chinese coin (sites KdVf-7 and JeUn-1). These were the second and third Chinese coins found in the Yukon in archaeological contexts. The first Chinese coin was found in 1993 by Keary Walde at site KbVo-1 near Beaver Creek. None of these three sites yielded additional historic materials, but they did produce lithic debris from stone tool manufacture. In the fall of 2011, a private collector notified the Yukon Heritage Branch of two additional Chinese coins found just across the border in an abandoned mine site in northern British Columbia on the Fantail River by Tagish Lake. The minting dates of these five coins range from approximately AD 1408 to 1727 (based on Hartill 2005:247, 295). Overviews of coin manufacture and historic trade are presented below. These are followed by a short summary of Chinese coin use in the protohistoric and early historic periods of the Northwest Coast and the interior

of the Yukon and British Columbia. Locations where the coins were found are discussed, along with dates and locations of mints. Historical records and archaeological finds indicate the Yukon experienced widespread and complex culture contact that ranges from precontact trade between coastal and interior First Nations to the influx of diverse ethnic groups during historic-period gold rushes.

CHINESE CAST COIN MANUFACTURE

The coins identified in this paper were minted during the Ming (AD 1368–1644) and Qing (Ch'ing) (AD 1644–1912) dynasties and were mass produced by the cost-effective method of casting. During this period, “mother” coins were first created by carving in a softer material such as tin. Casting frames of tightly packed, fine-grained sand were sprinkled with coal or charcoal dust, which acted as a molding agent to improve casting. The mother coins were

placed near each other along a central line, which gave the appearance of a long thin “tree” of fifty to one hundred coins (Bowman et al. 2005:5; Hartill 2005:xviii). This first frame would imprint one side of the coin. A second frame was placed on top of the mother coins to imprint the other side. Then the mother coins were removed, the top and bottom of the first two frames were placed together and the mother coins were placed on top of the second frame. The process was repeated and multiple frames with molds in the packed sand were tightly bound together. Molten alloy was poured down the central lines of the casting trees and allowed to cool. The frames were opened and each coin was broken off, cleaned, and placed on a long square rod through the central hole. This allowed large numbers of coins to be turned at the same time while the casting spurs were filed off. The coins were then cleaned and strung together in groups of approximately one thousand, called “strings.” The number of coins per string varied depending on the value of the coins as well as the local customs or markets. Various finishes and coatings were applied (Hartill 2005:xviii).

The value of the individual coins was assigned by weight, but shortages of copper and forgery attempts caused Chinese emperors to make changes to control production. A few relevant changes are noted here. The coins minted during these two dynasties had four characters on the obverse of the coin. These characters were read from top to bottom and right to left. At the beginning of the Qing Dynasty (AD 1644) the coins were minted at the Board of Revenue and the Board of Works (and at some provincial mints), and these did not have any inscriptions on the reverse. In 1645 the provincial mints started producing coins with one inscription on the reverse to show mint location. In 1653 the style changed to include two characters on the reverse, one of which stated the coin value was 1/1000 of a liang (approximately 36 grams) of silver (Keddie 1990:18). By 1660 the character on the left side of the reverse had changed to the Manchu equivalent of the name of the mint while the Chinese name of the mint was shown on the right (Hartill 2005:281).

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, coins were basically six or seven parts copper and three or four parts zinc, but the ratios of these and other metals changed over time. Coins with a higher copper content were more valuable as copper was in higher demand. By 1683, the shortage of copper induced an official decision to allow a higher ratio of zinc, at 40% (Cowell et al. 2005:66). Since some

coins were thought to possess more monetary or luck value as charms or amulets, these were often conserved to be passed on or traded at a later date. In contrast, the value of some of the coins decreased over time, and many became almost worthless and were simply thrown away. Therefore, it was possible for individual coins minted hundreds of years apart to be restrung together. As the Chinese became more involved in international trade in the 1700s and 1800s, the value of cast coins was reduced, and by 1845 a liang of silver could purchase approximately 2,200 cast copper coins (Keddie 1990:18).

CHINA—YUKON TRADE INTERACTIONS

We define as protohistoric any Asian or European materials that reached the Northwest Coast and were subsequently traded into the interior prior to written first-hand accounts (for discussions of the trade in metal at this time, see Keddie 1990:2; McCartney 1988:57). Other indicators of the protohistoric period are the arrival of the first non-native diseases and information concerning non-natives. Therefore, dates for the protohistoric period vary from place to place. It is difficult and perhaps impossible to determine when the first Russian, Asian, or European influences began to impact First Nation people in the Yukon interior. News of early non-native shipwrecks and explorers and traders may have travelled inland along First Nation trade routes with foreign items such as metals, cloth, glass beads, and, later, tobacco and other goods.

“Drift-iron” refers to metals and other materials that wash ashore following shipwrecks. Historical accounts of shipwrecks in the region date to the mid-1700s, but much earlier wrecks are possible (Brooks 1875). Metals and other foreign trade items may have been obtained on the coasts of Alaska or British Columbia from Asian or European shipwrecks (Quimby 1985), likely due in part to the Kuroshio (Black Stream) or Japanese current, which flows east from Japan past the Aleutian Islands, the Gulf of Alaska, and along the Northwest Coast (Fig. 1) towards California (Callaghan 2003). This current carried both willing and accidental seafarers to the east. Travel times for materials caught in the current vary, but in one 1916 example a damaged Japanese fishing boat drifted across the Pacific Ocean to the Dixon Entrance of Haida Gwaii in twenty-four days (Emmons 1991:10).

Some of the first far-reaching effects in the protohistoric period of the Yukon interior may stem from Russian exploration in the early and mid-1700s and other Asian

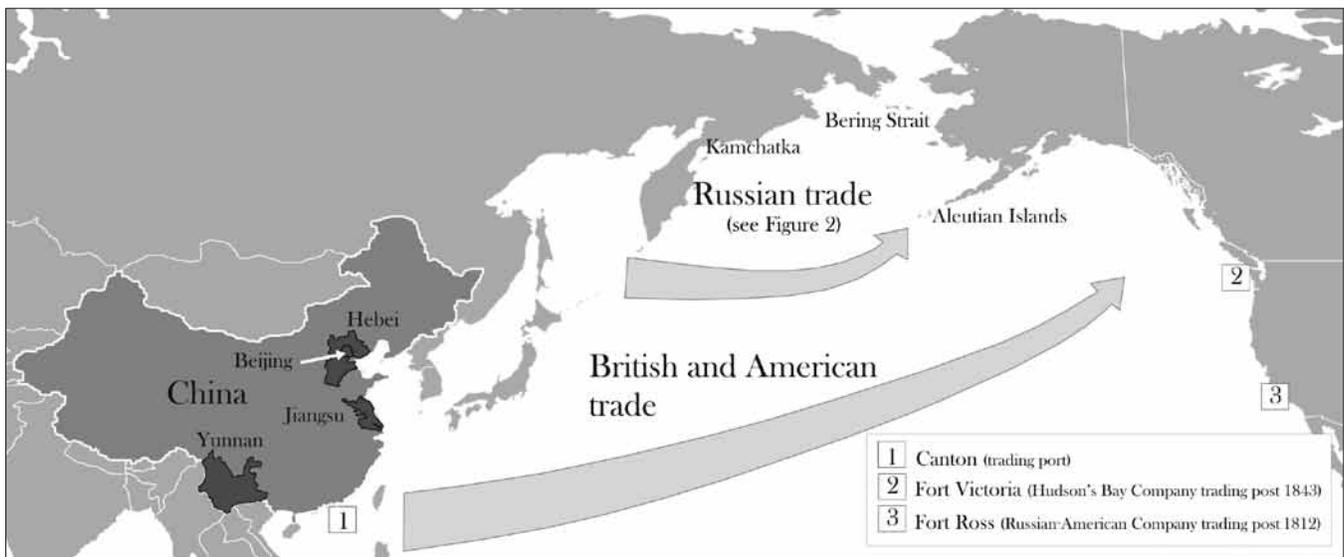


Figure 1. General trade from north China and Japan to Alaska via the Russians and from South China to the Northwest Coast via the British and Americans.

and European exploration and contact with coastal communities (Andreev 1952; Quimby 1985; Veniaminov 1984). This includes the actions of early European privateers known to have travelled along the Pacific Coast of North America between 1575 and 1742 (e.g., Cook 1973; Schurz 1959). However, it was well known that the Chilkat Tlingit travelled and traded with many interior First Nation peoples (e.g., Abel 1993; Castillo 2012; Davidson 1901; Legros 1985; McClellan 1975; Olson 1936). These interior peoples included the Northern Tutchone from the Dawson, Mayo and Selkirk areas and occasionally the Mountain Dene people from as far away as Fort Norman on the Mackenzie River in Northwest Territories. The Tlingit protected and controlled the trading routes into the interior and fiercely defended those routes when they were threatened. The main trade routes into the interior of northern British Columbia and the Yukon were up the Stikine and Taku rivers, over the Chilkoot and Chilkat passes, and along the Alsek River from Dry Bay in the Yakutat area (e.g., Davidson 1901; Emmons 1991:55; Mahoney 1870:20).

Based on written accounts by the early 1700s, Russian Tsar Peter I (Peter the Great) ordered an expedition that would travel from Kamchatka to America (Dmytryshyn et al. 1988). In 1728, Vitus Bering sailed from the mouth of the Kamchatka River northeast along the Russian coast, then through the strait that now bears his name. He did not sight the American coast on this expedition and returned to Russia, where plans were laid for a second voyage in 1741. Early exploration efforts

were also made by the Dutch (Veniaminov 1984:63), the Japanese (Quimby 1985), and the Spanish (e.g., Andreev 1952; Olson 2002), all of which may have influenced Native populations.

Bering's second voyage in 1741 opened the Russian era of exploration and settlement in Alaska. News of Bering's explorations spread quickly, nationally and internationally. The Russian reports of rich marine resources and, in particular, the news of the luxurious sea otter pelts increased international trade in the region. This early exploration in the Russian era involved hundreds of *promyshlenniki* (private traders) who reached the Commander Islands two years after Bering's first voyage and reached Kodiak Island by 1762 (Black 1984:81).

By 1784, Grigorii Shelikhov had built a trading company and established a settlement at Three Saints Bay on Kodiak Island (Fig. 2). From this base his traders expanded outward to other islands and the mainland (Clark 1984). As exploration continued, the Russian government continued to assert its control in the area within a field of growing international interests. The Russians were not alone: Cook's voyage of 1776–1780 and Vancouver's voyage of 1791–1795 played critical roles in mapping and exploring the area for the British (Fig. 1).

In 1792, Alexander Baranov was put in charge of Shelikhov's company, renamed the Russian-American Company, which built temporary trading and defensive posts on some of the islands and coastal harbors (Black 1984, 2004; Grinev 1993; Hosley 1981; VanStone 1984). These posts helped to open Alaska to the fur trade. The

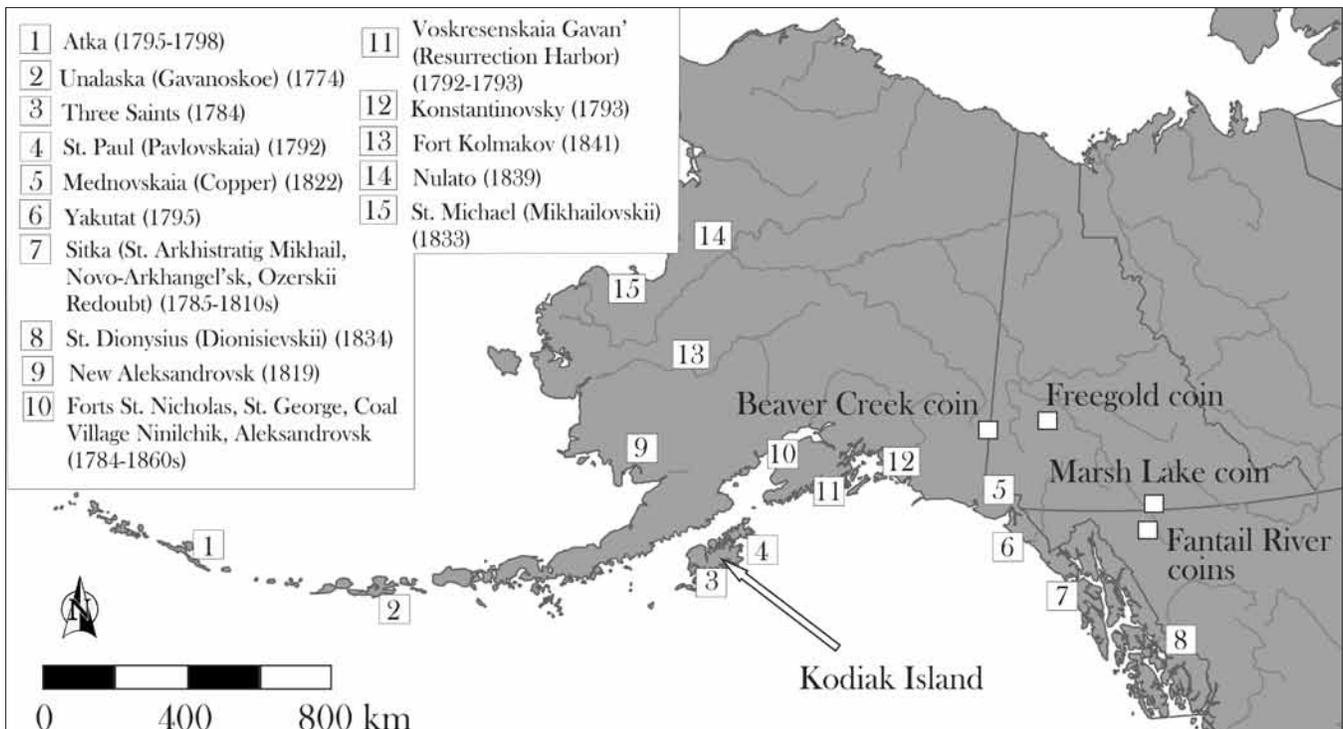


Figure 2. Early Russian settlements in Alaska in relation to Yukon coin finds (Black 1984, 2004; Grinev 1993; VanStone 1979).

first half of the nineteenth century was a period of sustained maritime exploration, and the Russian-American Company extended its empire to Fort Ross in California. Of particular interest to interior trade were the Russian establishments at Yakutat, Sitka, Mednovskaia, and St. Dionysius in the late 1700s and early 1800s (Fig. 2) (Black 1984, 2004; Grinev 1993; VanStone 1979).

The British realized the potential to trade sea otter pelts from coastal indigenous people to a ready market in South China (Grinev 2005). An estimated thirty-five British fur trade ships reached the Northwest Coast between 1785 and 1794 (Grinev 2005:97). Cold waters, abundant food, and sheltered harbors resulted in otter pelts of exceptional quality, which were sold and traded in China for tea, silk, and porcelain that were brought back to Europe (Gough 1989:251–252). Principal trade contacts for the British were coastal Tlingit and Haida. These First Nations were particularly accomplished traders whose interaction spheres extended from Vancouver Island to the eastern Yukon (Emmons 1991:56–57; Fitzhugh and Crowell 1988:238; McClellan 1987:234–235).

The coastal Tlingit traded with Eyak, Chugach, and interior Athabaskans of Alaska and Yukon (Grinev 2005:215). Major rivers and trails brought candlefish (eulachon) oil, dried shellfish, seaweed, shells, obsidian, walrus

ivory, spruce root baskets, tobacco, traditional medicines, metals, and handicrafts to the interior, while Athabaskans supplied Tlingit traders with furs; elk, moose, and caribou hides; cloaks of marten, mountain goat, and marmot; clothing decorated with porcupine quills; sinew; and meat (Krause [1885]1956:108; Legros 1984:17–18; 2007:48–49; McClellan 1975:502; Olson 1936:211). European and Russian contact likely extended Tlingit trade networks, based on nineteenth-century records of visits between Tlingit and Ahtna, Northern Tutchone, Hän, Kaska, and Sekani First Nations (Grinev 2005:216–217).

The trading cycle that developed can be summarized as a Russian, British, and American reliance on indigenous hunters to collect pelts that were traded for metals, including weapons; blankets; cloth; and miscellaneous mass-produced low-cost items such as glass beads and Chinese coins. The coastal peoples, such as the Chilkat Tlingit, traded foreign items along with traditional coastal materials. The Russians retained connections to trading centers in North China and Japan while British and American traders used southern Chinese ports (Fig. 1). Indigenous peoples of the Yukon and Alaska therefore fueled an international exchange system that connected fur markets at Chinese and European ports to Russian, British, and American traders. Pre-existing networks between coastal

Tlingit and interior Athabaskans were drawn into an international system that delivered sea otter and beaver pelts from the Northwest Coast and Yukon First Nations to upper-class Chinese and Europeans (Epstein et al. 1980:11).

Control of the trade routes played a major role in Tlingit society, and threats to their interior relationships were not taken lightly. This was very evident in 1852, shortly after the Hudson's Bay Company opened Fort Selkirk on the Yukon River. A Chilkat Tlingit raiding

party travelled inland and forced Robert Campbell and his crew to leave the trading post, which was consequently burned by the Northern Tutchone (Castillo 2012:212). Fort Selkirk was reached by travelling over the passes from the head of Lynn Canal down into the headwaters of the Yukon River. However, while travelling south back to the coast, people could also travel along a "Chilkat Return Trail" east of Aishihik Lake, on to Dezadeash Lake and south to the Chilkat Pass (Fig. 3).

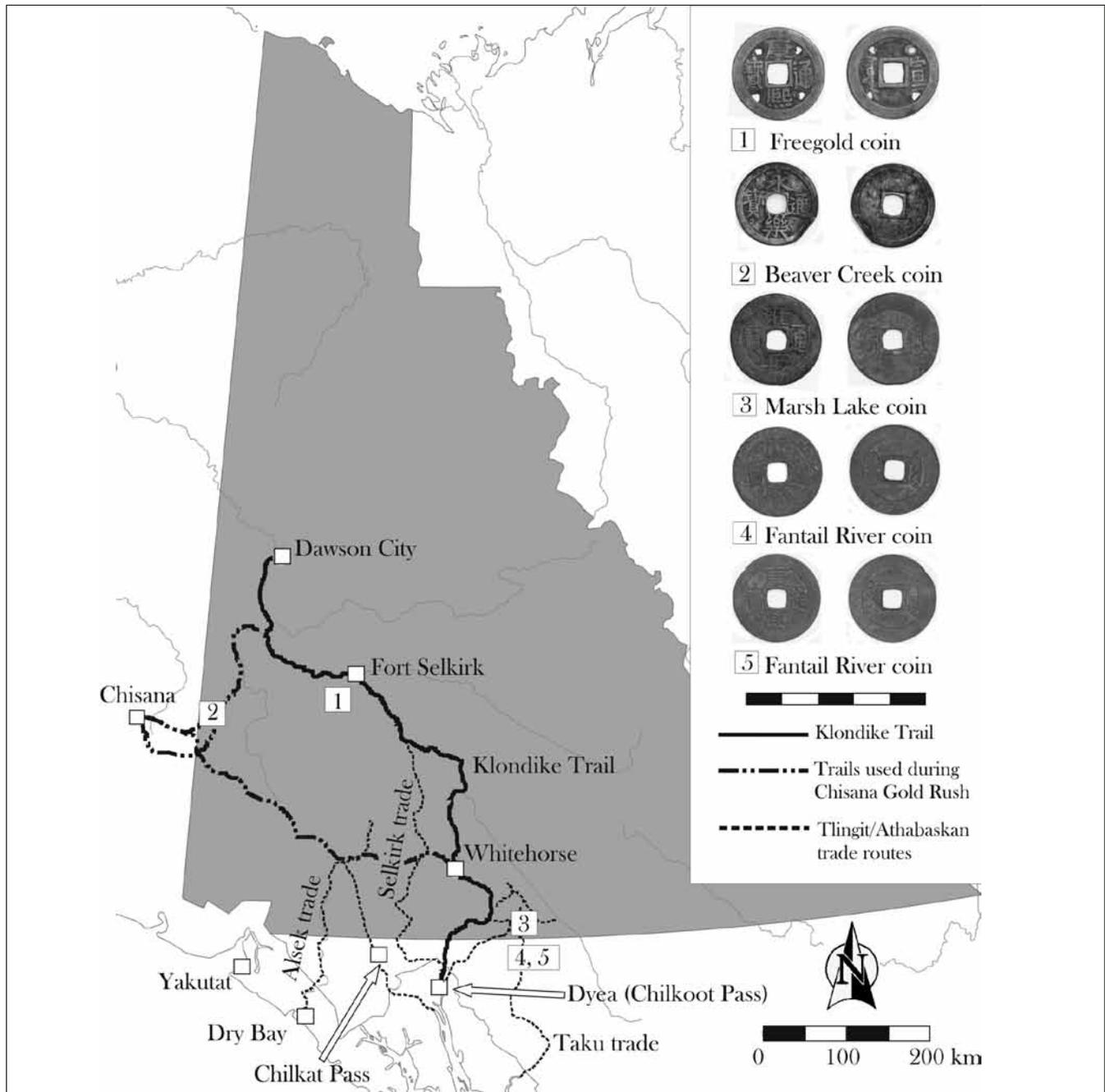


Figure 3. Yukon coin locations in relation to trade routes and gold rush trails.

PROTOHISTORIC AND EARLY HISTORIC USE OF CHINESE COINS

Billions of Chinese coins were cast in the seventeenth century alone, and many thousands of them were brought to North America and used for a variety of purposes. In the eighteenth century casting increased to almost four million strings (with about one thousand coins per string) per year (Hartill 2005:275). Some of the earliest uses of the coins by coastal and interior indigenous people may have been for decoration and adornment, by stitching the coins through the center hole into headdresses, baskets, and clothing (Akin 1992; Beals 1980:61). Another early use included a defensive and/or decorative role in Tlingit body armor, which was modified to include coins and metal in attempts to deflect Russian musket balls (Henrikson 2008:394; von Aderkas and Hook 2005:45). Many historic accounts note how Chinese coins were stitched into leather armor jackets or cuirasses (e.g., Emmons 1991:344; Fitzhugh and Crowell 1988:231). After fighting with the Russians decreased, the use of coins in ceremonial dance vests and as decorations may have increased, as with other rare goods that were used as displays of wealth (Beals 1980:62; Kan 1993:224) (Figs. 4, 5). Chinese coins were also used well into the early 1900s as decorations in hair and adornments for the deceased (Beals 1980:62; Keddie 1990:8). One of the better known examples of use of Chinese coins was in the Chilkat Tlingit mask that was portrayed in a 1980 fifteen-cent U.S. postage stamp (Keddie 1981, 1990:15).

In the mid-1800s, Chinese immigration increased and in the northwest interior of British Columbia Chinese immigrants used coins as good luck charms, gaming tokens, “coin swords” (sword-shaped decorations made from many coins), and medicinally (extracting zinc from the coins) (Akin 1992:63). It is uncertain when the first Chinese immigrants entered the Yukon, but the total number of immigrants seems to have been relatively small. Census numbers were not recorded until 1901, when six Chinese were noted for the entire Yukon (Library and Archives Canada 1901). The first Chinese immigrants were likely placer miners and prospectors who moved north from previous central and northern British Columbia gold rushes; a few Chinese moved into the southwest Yukon after mining in the Cassiar district of northwestern British Columbia. The Chinese were very active in that area, as detailed by Lai (1978:24) and summarized by Keddie (1981:8). Records of the British Columbia Ministry of Mines (1877:400–401)

show Chinese made up approximately one-third of the thousands of men involved in placer mining in that area between 1874 and 1877. A Chinese “talisman” or temple token coin was identified from the Cassiar placer mining district in 1882 as part of a group of about thirty brass coins strung on a wire. The temple token or talisman was first thought to be up to three thousand years old. However, further investigation revealed it was likely minted between approximately AD 900 and 1900 (Keddie 1981:8, 1990:10). Keddie concluded this coin was likely brought over by Chinese miners or deposited in a First Nations burial that was disturbed by miners (Keddie 1990:10).

It is unlikely that Chinese placer miners entered the Yukon during or shortly after the Klondike Gold Rush, due to public and political pressures of the time. North West Mounted Police Inspector Constantine recounted an event in the spring of 1894 when a party of Japanese and Chinese tried to pass through “Dia-yah” (Dyea) in Alaska Territory to the interior in search of gold. However, after a meeting by a group of approximately two hundred whites, the Japanese and Chinese were not allowed to enter the Yukon. A group of whites confronted the would-be miners and threatened them, saying that if they valued their lives they would not proceed (*British Colonist* 1895:7). The Japanese and Chinese miners did not continue, but it is not clear where they went following the confrontation.

Chinese immigration into Canada starting in the late 1800s was restricted by pressure from the Canadian federal government in response to fears that Chinese laborers were taking jobs away from other Canadians. Policy included passing two laws to restrict Chinese immigration. The first was the “head tax” law passed in 1885 that required every Chinese immigrant to pay a \$50 entry fee, which was a significant burden. However, immigration continued, because a Chinese laborer could earn \$30 a month in Canada compared with \$2 a month in China. In response, the Canadian government increased the tax to \$100 in 1900 and increased it again to \$500 in 1903. This was followed in 1923 by the passage of the Chinese Immigration Act, which prevented all Chinese except consuls, merchants, and students from entering Canada. This act remained in effect until 1947. In summary, it is possible that Chinese coins were tokens retained by Chinese immigrants, but the coins appearing in Alaska and Yukon may have also been exchanged between Russian, British, and American traders and coastal and later interior First Nations people.



Figure 4. Tlingit war vest with attached Chinese coins. Courtesy Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution (cat. no. E9284-0).



Figure 5. Tlingit dancing vest with attached Chinese coins. Courtesy Department of Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution (cat no. E60241-0).

CHINESE COINS IN THE YUKON

BEAVER CREEK COIN

The Beaver Creek coin (Figs. 3, 6) was discovered in the summer of 1993 by Keary Walde of Heritage North Consulting Ltd. while working on a salvage program at KbVo-1 (Walde 1994) near the Alaska Highway in southwestern Yukon. The site was previously identified during an archaeological assessment for planned improvements to the highway near Beaver Creek as part of the Skakwak Project (Walde 1991). This site is located on a well-drained gravel ridge overlooking Enger Creek to the southwest (approximately 15 km southeast of Beaver Creek) and includes concentrations of fire-cracked rock; burned bone; a variety of basalt, obsidian, and chert lithic materials, including microblades; and copper nuggets. This multicomponent site may have had three occupations: a possible early Taye Lake Phase (ca. 3000/2500 BC–AD 400); a possible Aishihik Phase (ca. AD 400–1800); and occupation again during the Bennett Lake Phase (late prehistoric/

early historic period, ca. 1800–1900). The coin may have been associated with the Klondike Gold Rush–era use of a trading trail and/or the Chisana Gold Rush, which began in 1913 (Coutts 1980:104). This site is within the traditional territory of the White River First Nation.

Date and minting location: This coin has four inscriptions on the obverse and no inscriptions on the reverse. The inscriptions read *Yong Le tong bao* (永樂通寶), which means it was cast during the reign of Emperor Cheng Zu of the Ming Dynasty (AD 1403–1424). However, a shortage of copper forced the mints to stop the production of cast coins by 1393 in favor of printed paper currency. Minting cast coins resumed between 1408 and 1410 (Hartill 2005:247). Therefore, this coin was minted between 1408 and 1424. Since there were no mint marks on the coin, it is impossible to confirm where it was minted. It could have been minted in either what would become the capital of Beijing or in Nanking in what is now Jiangsu Province on the east coast (Fig. 1), or at one of the early provincial mints (Hartill 2005:237).



Figure 6. Front (left) and back (right) of Chinese coin discovered in the Beaver Creek area. Scale in cms. Courtesy Government of Yukon.

Interpretation: Based on previous research and the discussions of how long coins were curated, it is unlikely (but not impossible) that this coin arrived in the Yukon earlier than the establishment of the first Russian posts in the late 1700s. Since this coin was found along the western edge of the Yukon, it is also likely that it was carried and/or traded into the Yukon by Tlingit traders. The coin may have travelled inland along the Alsek River drainage from the Dry Bay or Yakutat Bay area. Other trade routes along which the coin might have travelled include the Chilkat or Chilkoot passes north to the Selkirk area, then west to the copper-rich areas of the White River.

A second way this coin could have been brought to this site is through early prospecting and placer mining activities. One possible means may have been a Chinese prospector or placer miner who carried the coin with him during the Klondike or Chisana gold rush. Another remote possibility includes non-Chinese placer miners carrying the coin as part of a common gambling game known as *fan t'an* (or another known as sick) in which the coins were used not as currency but as markers or gaming pieces (Akin 1992:61). Perhaps non-Chinese placer miners who had worked with Chinese laborers in British Columbia or the United States could have played the game with such coins and acquired a few as markers. Chinese laborers may have also worked on the Copper River Railroad from Cordova to Kennicott, Alaska (approximately 150 km southwest of Beaver Creek), which was built between 1907 and 1911.

Function: This coin was likely used for a variety of functions, beginning as currency followed by use as a trade item. It may have also been used as a decoration, perhaps as part of Tlingit armor, as a gaming token, or as a good luck charm. However, the coin also has what appears to be an impact impression on its edge. The impact impression was not caused during excavation and the material, although very old by Yukon standards, is in good condition and relatively strong.

FREGOLD ROAD COIN

The Freegold Road Chinese coin (Figs. 3, 7) was discovered by Ecofor employee Kirby Booker in July of 2011 in the southwestern Yukon during a cultural heritage impact assessment conducted by Ecofor Consulting Ltd, conducted at the request of the Western Copper and Gold Corporation in advance of the proposed extension of the

Freegold Road to provide access to their Casino Mine project. The site (KdVf-7) that contained the coin is approximately 240 km northwest of Whitehorse within the traditional territory of the Selkirk First Nation.

KdVf-7 is located on the southeastern corner of a terrace overlooking the confluence of a tributary to Hayes Creek. This area has a lower section and a slightly higher section, but only the lower section, where the Chinese coin was found, contained prehistoric materials (Fig. 8). Preliminary shovel testing at the site consisted of twelve negative tests and five positive tests. Shovel test #8 contained only the coin, which was found within the top 5 cm of organics and soil, while the remaining four positive tests (within approximately 1 to 7 m of the coin) contained two microblade fragments and ninety-one nondiagnostic lithic flakes, flake fragments, and lithic debris, all from basalt materials. The lithic scatter likely represents a moderate density but small temporary camp site or lithic reduction workshop overlooking the wide valley at the head of the Hayes Creek valley. No other historic material was recovered.

Date and minting location: This coin was minted in China during a long period of peace and prosperity under the rule of Qing (Ch'ing) dynasty emperor Sheng Zu (AD 1662–1722). Emperor Sheng Zu is better known by his reign title of Kang Xi (Kangxi 康熙). The coin obverse has the four-character inscription *Kang Xi tong bao* (康熙通宝), meaning “currency of Kang Xi.” The reverse side has a two-character inscription. The character to the left of the square hole is not Chinese but is written in the Manchu script. This character is the equivalent of the Chinese *xuan*. The Chinese character to the right of the square hole is *xuan* (宣), which is the abbreviation for *xuanhua* (宣化) garrison, which was located in what was then called Zhili (直隶) Province (now Hebei Province), roughly 300 kilometers southwest of what is now Beijing. This garrison only minted coins between 1667 and 1671 (Hartill 2005:291).

Interpretation: Emperor Kang Xi was the longest serving Chinese emperor and also a well-known poet. He wrote poetic verses to accompany the popular publication “Illustrations of Plowing and Weaving.” Emperor Kang Xi also took the names of twenty of the twenty-three operating mints of the time and put them in a specific order to produce a poem that followed a traditional rhyming pattern. These “poem coins” (*shi qian* 诗钱)



Figure 7. Front (left) and back (right) of Chinese coin discovered in the Freegold Road area. Scale in cms. Courtesy Government of Yukon.



Figure 8. The lower section of the landform at KdVf-7 looking northwest. Photo: James Mooney.

were considered to have charm and amulet properties. When strung together in the proper order they are known as “set coins” (*taozi qian* 套子钱). The poem was apparently well-liked and people collected coins from the twenty selected mints and strung them in sets for good luck. If authentic coins were used, they were said to expel evil spirits and prevent fires (Hartill 2005:291). Thus, if this was a “poem coin,” it may have been valued as a good luck charm and may have been part of a twenty-coin set, perhaps first collected and strung together then passed down to younger generations for good luck. However, the date at which this coin was deposited into archaeological context could be a great deal later than the minting dates (Keddie 1978, 1980a, 1980b, 1981, 1982, 1989, 1990). The coin may have been traded to the Russians and then the coastal Tlingit and carried or traded into the Yukon interior through the Chilkat trail, which ran from Dyea to Selkirk (Gotthardt 1988). However, this coin may have been curated and traded for many years as a token or amulet and deposited at the site by Chinese placer miners who may have been in the area in the early to mid-1900s (Gow 2011). Additional



Figure 9. Examples of casting errors in similar Chinese cast coins. Courtesy Ron Cheek, 2011.

investigations into the historic placer-mining records of the Freegold and Carmacks area may provide additional insight into Chinese placer-mining activity in the early to mid-1900s.

Function: The four small holes located between the square hole and edge of this coin may provide more questions than answers. These holes may have been the result of intentional modification required to tack or nail the coin to a door or gate for good luck or perhaps stitched into a garment, basket, headdress, or other item. However, some or all of the holes may have first been the result of casting errors, as evident in many other coins of the same casting technique. Errors during casting (Fig. 9) caused small voids in the molds that produced thin spots and/or holes. These holes often had irregular, rough, jagged edges.

This coin may also reflect the very serious nature of trading and the extreme measures Tlingit traders took to protect trade routes. One use of Chinese coins may have been as a supplement to Tlingit warriors' armor. If this coin was used in armor, then the four holes in the coin would allow it to be stitched in a tight overlapping pattern with other coins to the base material. However, the coins on Tlingit armor collected in the late historic period only show coins stitched into place by the central hole. This attachment would have been weaker and the coins more likely to be torn off.

This four-hole coin may also have been used as a button. A few other coins with what appear to be multiple casting errors were identified in American and New Zealand collections, including two other four-hole examples (see Ritchie and Park 1987:44; Yu and Yu 2004:23).

MARSH LAKE COIN

The Marsh Lake Chinese coin (Figs. 3, 10) was discovered by Todd Kristensen in 2011 in southern Yukon during a cultural heritage inventory conducted by Matrix Research Ltd. at the request of Kwanlin Dün First Nation. The location is approximately 20 km southeast of Whitehorse within the traditional territory of the Kwanlin Dün First Nation and the Ta'an Kwäch'än Council.

The site (JeUn-01) is located on a high ridge that projects northeast from the southern shore of a small lake (Fig. 11). JeUn-01 was initially identified in 2010 (Tourigny and Heffner 2010) as a subsurface lithic scatter; subsequent excavations in 2011 revealed a fairly extensive lithic workshop including a large microblade component, suggesting the site was first occupied over 6000 years ago. The site revealed multiple phases of occupation, including a more recent surface scatter of lithics that extended along the ridge feature. Surface inspection to delimit the boundaries of JeUn-01 revealed the Chinese coin in an eroded sand exposure on the south-east-facing upper slope of the ridge in the immediate



Figure 10. Front (left) and back (right) of Chinese coin discovered in the Marsh Lake area. Scale in cms. Courtesy Government of Yukon.



Figure 11. Aerial view of landform and excavations at JeUn-01 looking northwest. Photo: Ty Heffner, Matrix Research Ltd.

vicinity of small chert and obsidian flakes. No other historic material was recovered.

Date and minting location: Based on inscriptions, this coin was cast in the Qing Dynasty during the reign of Emperor Shi Zong (AD 1723–1735). The inscription on the front is *Yong Zheng tong bao* (雍正通寶) and the back of the coin is inscribed with Manchu characters that represent the word “treasure” and an abbreviation of the Yunnan Province (Hartill 2005:295), which lies along China’s southern border (Fig. 1). Identifying the exact mint date is more difficult, but this particular coin has long feet on the *bao* and was cast at the Zhanyi mint between 1724 and 1727 (Hartill 2005:295).

Interpretation: The southern minting location of the coin has implications for potential trade routes related to its arrival in the Marsh Lake area. Immigrants from southern Chinese provinces may have brought coins and lost them while prospecting in the early 1900s around Marsh Lake. Gold prospecting occurred in the area throughout the early 1900s, and prospectors frequented the Livingston Trail, which runs through the Marsh Lake area. Chinese laborers carried old coins as heirlooms or charms (Akin 1992; Olsen 1983; Phebus 1974), which is evidenced by the relatively large collection of pre-1800 coins uncovered in Chinese structures in the 1858 gold-rush town of Barkerville, British Columbia (Chen 2001).

A second and perhaps more likely explanation is that the coin was acquired by a trader from a southern Chinese port before it was exchanged to Northwest Coast First Nations and on to interior Yukon. One would expect that if the coin had been delivered by Russian traders it would be derived from a northern port or northern interior province (Beals 1980:71). For example, Davis (1996:375) recovered several Chinese coins from the Yakutat area of Alaska and hypothesized on the basis of their northern mint that they derived from Russian traders or passed through indigenous hands across Siberia and down to Southeast Alaska.

While admittedly speculative, the mint location in Yunnan suggests the coin arrived via British or American traders, who were known to purchase supplies in the southern port town of Canton before proceeding to the Northwest Coast (Fig. 1). The Chinese coin may therefore have arrived at the coast via fur traders and then moved through First Nations trade routes along drainages such

as the Taku and Alsek to interior Yukon. This interpretation is supported by the recovery of the coin from the immediate vicinity of several chert and obsidian flakes associated with stone tool maintenance and manufacture.

Function: The coin may have been traded as an item of curiosity and/or decorative piece (Epstein et al. 1980:11) intended for attachment to Athabaskan clothing. The back of the Marsh Lake coin is notably more worn than the front, which may be due to friction if the coin was fastened to a material. Conversely, the wear may be due to differential chemical erosion during taphonomic processes.

CHINESE COINS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

FANTAIL RIVER COINS

In the fall of 2011, two additional Chinese coins (Figs. 3, 12) were brought to Ruth Gotthardt of the Heritage Branch of the Yukon Government by a local resident. This individual found the two coins in a historic mineral exploration town site near the Fantail River on Taku Arm of Tagish Lake just across the border in northern British Columbia.

Date and Minting Location: These two coins have the same inscriptions on the obverse and reverse and were minted during the reign of Kang Xi (Kangxi 康熙). The coins were cast by the Board of Revenue mint, which is located northeast of Tiananmen Square in what is now Beijing between 1702 and 1713 (Hartill 2005:286).

Interpretation: Since these two coins were minted in northern China, they may have been traded to Russian merchants then to Coastal Tlingit traders who moved them into the Tagish Lake area. However, it is more likely these coins were brought into this historic mining site by Chinese placer miners or other placer miners who had contact with Chinese.

Function: These two coins do not show any evidence of alteration that could be used to infer previous use. Since they were found near a known historic mining area, they were most likely brought to the area by Chinese miners and functioned as good luck charms, amulets, or perhaps gaming pieces used during the common gambling game of *fan tan*.



Figure 12. Front (left) and back (right) of Chinese coins discovered in the Fantail River area near Tagish Lake. Scale in cms. Courtesy Government of Yukon.

CONCLUSIONS

Chinese coins discovered in Yukon in 1993 and 2011 contribute to a growing body of Chinese trade items recovered from protohistoric and early historic sites in the North. Little is known of the archaeological context of the recent finds but the discovery of coins at sites with precontact stone artifacts (often in association with neighboring First Nations heritage trails) suggests that they arrived in the Yukon via complex trade networks involving indigenous and foreign partners. From the protohistoric period to the major northern gold rushes, the Yukon experienced a rapid growth in culture contact that expanded Tlingit and Athabaskan trade and brought immigrant workers from around the world to its profitable gold fields. Future research on the coins and their respective sites may shed new light on both the significance of trade goods to First Nations and the role of coins carried by Chinese miners.

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