

An Artifact Speaks • Artifact Information Sheet

Artifact Name: Abacus and Coins

Time Period of the Original: The first abacus with this appearance is recorded around 1200. Coins of this shape first appeared in the 6th century.

Culture/Religion Group: Ancient China

Material of the Original: Abacus = wood. Coins = metal.

Reproduction? Coins - yes. The abacus is modern, but created in the ancient style, which continues to today.

Abacus Background Information:

As far back as the ancient Babylonians (one of the ruling culture groups from ancient Mesopotamia), people were using boards to aid in counting. These boards had markings or grooves on which beads, metal discs, or pebbles could be moved to keep track of the amounts being counted.

The abacus, which has beads that slide along fixed rods, are first mentioned in Chinese writings about 1200. The abacus in the *An Artifact Speaks* box is called a 2/5 abacus because it has 2 beads on the upper deck and five beads in the lower deck. The Chinese name for this kind of abacus is *suan-pan*. Other styles of abaci include the 1/4, which is popular in Japan, and the 2/4. It is thought that the abacus may have been brought to China by way of Rome along the Silk Road, for small, palm-sized abaci were known to be used by the Romans. Though not invented by the Chinese, the abacus is strongly identified with Chinese culture.

This link will take you to instructions on how to count with an abacus:

- <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/elementary/china/rscs/abacus.pdf>

Coin Background Information:

Like those of other civilizations, the Chinese bartered for goods before metal and paper currency were invented. Common trade goods included silk, tea bricks, crops, and cowry shells. From the Western Zhou Dynasty (11th century-771 BCE) to the end of the Warring States Period (475-221 BCE), a variety of metal coins (copper, bronze, and brass) appeared in different parts of China. Some of the coins were in the shape of spades; others resembled swords or knives; yet a third style was round with a round hole in the center. When Qin Shi Huang united China and established the Qin Dynasty (221 BCE), he made a round coin with a square hole the official coin of the empire. This type of coin is referred to as the *ban liang*. Though variations on this coin were made in later dynasties, this basic shape was seen in coins for the next 2000 years.

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It is said that the round shape of the coin represents heaven and the square shape of the hole represents the earth. The hole in the coin served a very practical purpose. It allowed the coin to be strung. A string of 1000 coins was a standard purchasing unit.

Most Chinese coins have 2 or 4 Chinese characters on them. According to the Museum of Anthropology at the University of Missouri-Columbia, “[The c]haracters...[can] symbolize a wide range of things, such as the name of the kingdom, the mint, the year, the denomination, the monetary unit, or the government bureau that issued it. In the case of Emperor Yong Li of the Ming Dynasty, the character could even be part of a sentence.”

Sources:

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