

The Roles of Wu Zhu Coins in Facilitating Trade and Cultural Exchange along the Silk Road

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Abstract: The study of the Silk Road by most history scholars has predominantly centered on the exchange of goods and ideas between the East and the West, creating a rich cultural exchange and interaction among people along the route. However, this paper takes a different approach by highlighting the role of Wu Zhu coins and their profound impact on facilitating trade and cultural exchange along the historic Silk Road. Wu Zhu coins likely played a significant role in promoting economic transactions. As a medium of exchange, they facilitated the movement of goods between different regions. Merchants could use these coins to purchase exotic wares from distant lands, thereby enhancing trade along the Silk Road. Moreover, the circulation of Wu Zhu coins also contributed to cultural exchange. The coins themselves may have carried symbolic meanings or designs that were shared and understood by different cultures. This could have led to the spread of artistic and cultural motifs, further enriching the tapestry of cultural interaction along the Silk Road. In short, while traditional studies of the Silk Road have emphasized the exchange of goods and ideas, this paper's focus on Wu Zhu coins offers a fresh perspective on the role of currency in facilitating trade and cultural exchange along this historic route.

Keywords: Silk Road, Wu Zhu Coins, Trade, Cultural Exchange.

1. Introduction

The vast area of Central Asia, which stretches from the Black Sea to the Taklamakan Desert, may not immediately strike archaeologists as a significant location to examine the evolution of the development and history of cities. Nevertheless, within this seemingly desolate landscape, a network of vibrant, lush cities flourished as urban hubs nearly five millennia ago. Through a complicated network of paths known as "the Silk Road," which was initially "created" in 1877 by a German geographer by the name of Ferdinand von Richthofen, the interrelated cities and communities were vital hubs for trade [1]. The Silk Road has been at the "very crossroads of civilization" since the beginning of history [2]. Researchers painted a vivid picture of ancient urbanism on one of the oldest international trading routes, which was both commercially and culturally varied. For two thousand years, this area has served as a hub for pilgrims and merchants, facilitating the transportation and sale of products and goods, and fostering the exchange and evolution of ideas and traditions.

The role played by the Silk Road trade routes was major in enabling trade and cultural interchange between East and West, and **coinage system** served these interactions as a medium. Along the route, different currencies, especially those minted from precious metals such as silver

and gold, were adopted for commercial, diplomatic, and religious purposes. Coin finds often provide real clues regarding everyday life, business activities, and settlement patterns along the Silk Road. Coin finds can provide valuable insights into the business activities and settlement patterns on the Silk Road. Knowing the role of money during the evolution of the Silk Road is crucial to any basis for studies relating to economy, trade, and settlement in the region concerned throughout the Silk Road history [3]. Meng Fanren, an esteemed Chinese scholar in Silk Road archaeology, delves into a series of essays that meticulously examine the scripted coins and wood tablets uncovered in Khotan and Niya. These two cities, once bustling commercial hubs positioned approximately 250 km apart, thrived as vital centers along the Silk Road's southern routeway. Meng convincingly illustrates how much extant literature about various things may tell us about day-to-day life in these cities, including trade, by her careful analysis of those writings. The Chinese contacts with Khotan and Niya are rarely mentioned in ancient Chinese documents from the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD). Further insights into these two cities and Loulan (also called Kroraina) near Lake Lop Nur can be gained from the examination of wooden documents described by Karoshthi in his studies. These documents were the first indication of ongoing cultural exchange along the Silk Road at the end of the second century [4]. Meng also convincingly suggests that Niya and Khotan had significant interactions with neighboring regions. This argument was supported by the evidence highlighted by the distinct Sino-Kharoshthi coins. These coins are notable for featuring Chinese characters on one side indicating their value, while the other side showcases Kharoshthi script that denotes the ruler's designation. The coins in question have been dated by Helen Wang and Hiroshi Kumamoto, early numismatic experts, to the second or early third century [5]. By closely scrutinizing the royal titles and names on these coins and contrasting them with the kings mentioned in historical Chinese records, Meng has made a compelling argument that these coins were most likely minted between 260 and 290 CE. Despite varying estimates of their age, these bilingual coins are a testament to the blending of Kushan and Chinese coinage, concurred by numismatic scholars. They are evidence of how local rulers embraced and adapted diverse cultural influences to establish unique and hybrid civilizations.

2. Coins along the Silk Road

The Silk Road was so long that the majority of merchants engaged in relay trade instead of traveling the entire route. For example, a merchant would buy silk in China, travel west to sell it, then return to buy more goods. This process connected different countries, leading to the need for currency trading due to varying currencies. Most coins had fixed values based on their precious metal content, so currency traders could easily exchange coins of the same weight. This fixed value prevented traders from engaging in speculative behavior seen in the modern Forex market [6]. Previous literature stated that the Silk Road relied on two main currencies: the gold solidus of the Byzantine Empire and the silver drachm of the Sasanian Empire. Minted from precious metals, these coins were perfectly suited for international trade. Numerous drachms and solidus have been unearthed in China, particularly in Gansu in the northern region, buried alongside foreign merchants and officials. In addition to these two major coins, Coins known as "imitation" pieces, which are modeled after well-known imperial coins from the Sassanian, Chinese, or Byzantine empires, have been discovered all across the Silk Road. Naming these coins "counterfeit money" may not capture the full significance of these coins. They were crafted from valuable metals and held inherent value for bartering, even though they were not guaranteed by any imperial authority. Historical records show that prominent Sogdian merchants used authentic royal coins as well as coins that closely resembled Sassanian and Chinese coins. Furthermore, Archaeologists unearthed coins that appear to be a fusion of both Sassanian and Chinese currency [7]. The Sogdians were key traders on the Silk Road, and their language became widely used at trading stations. They acted as intermediaries between

traders from different cultures and were familiar with various coins, which helped facilitate deals between parties that were unfamiliar with the currency systems of one and other. The Sogdians were Iranians who originated in Central Asia, more precisely in the Transoxiana region, which is today a part of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Samarkand was the principal city, a well-known Silk Road city. Along the Silk Road, Sogdian merchants traveled great distances accompanied by translators, settling in regions like Gansu, where tombs containing non-Chinese currency have been discovered [8]. However, there seems to be a significant gap in previous Silk Road literature about the role of the world's earliest coin – **Wu Zhu Coin**.

Wu Zhu (五銖) coins hold a fascinating place in Chinese history, especially amidst the Han dynasty. At around 118 BC, Wu Zhu coins were introduced to replace the previous San Zhu (Three Zhu) coins. These new coins aimed to standardize currency and stabilize the economy, following the previous replacement of the Ban Liang (半兩) cash coins. The name “Wu Zhu” derives from “five zhu,” with each zhu signifying a weight unit from ancient China that is equal to 100 millet grains. The introduction of Wu Zhu coins marked a significant development in establishing a standardized exchange rate between bronze coins and gold. Specifically, 10,000 bronze Wu Zhu cash coins were deemed equivalent to 1 Jin of gold [9]. This is essential for them to function as an intermediary in the Silk Road trade. Unlike the San Zhu coins, the Wu Zhu coins can only be minted by the central government, which means they were guaranteed by the Chinese imperial authority, hence, suitable for international trade [10].

During the Han dynasty, Wu Zhu coins were crafted using a sophisticated overlapping casting technique. Each coin weighed approximately 3.25 grams, with inscriptions of the Chinese character “Wu Zhu” adorning the face of the coins. It is remarkable that these coins were made for a further 500 years after the fall of the Eastern Han dynasty, and continued to be produced under succeeding dynasties until the Sui dynasty. The Wu Zhu coins, known for their remarkable longevity, hold the record for the longest period in which coins were minted in human history, spanning an impressive 736 years from 118 BC to 618 AD. This extraordinary duration makes them stand out as truly unique among coins. The early Wu Zhu coins were distinguishable by their unfiled edges, while later series featured filed edges. Additionally, the Jun Guo Wu Zhu coins, which were produced under the central government's command, included a rim around the square center hole on the reverse side to prevent metal scraping. Changing from unfiled to filed edges was not a trivial improvement because it preserved Wu Zhu coin's integrity in terms of its value. The Wu Zhu coins with unfiled edges were more likely to be worn and damaged, thus affecting their actual value and circulation in the market. However, the improvement of filed edges could reduce such wear, enabling the Wu Zhu coins to maintain a stable value during long-term use and circulation. A more expansive, interconnected economic system was able to incorporate local and regional marketplaces using widely recognized coins. This made it easier for capital, products, and services to travel great distances and connect Chinese traders with the larger Silk Road network. As the record shows, Wu Zhu coins have circulated for centuries and have significantly contributed to China's monetary system, demonstrating resilience over centuries and bearing witness to historical changes. In addition, its economic value, Wu Zhu coins featured inscriptions and images reflecting the culture, religion, and political authority of the issuing dynasties. As they traveled along the Silk Road, they facilitated cultural exchange and influenced artistic and numismatic practices. Therefore, they not only served as a major currency use in the Silk Road, but also forged connections between civilizations and facilitating cross-cultural interactions along the Silk Road route. Local mints along the Silk Road copied these coins, often adding their own unique variations in writing and design. These are evidence that the circulation of Wu Zhu coins played a significant role in promoting the exchange of knowledge, technological advancements, and cultural traditions. Therefore, Wu Zhu coins stand as a powerful symbol of the lasting bond between East and West, transcending mere

economic transactions. Some may even say that Wu Zhu coins served as ambassadors of artistic synthesis and culinary traditions that left an enduring legacy on the history of this ancient trade route. During Zhang Qian's second mission to the Western Regions around 116-115 BC, a substantial delegation comprising 300 individuals was assembled. This delegation carried an impressive number of gifts, including tens of millions of coins and fine silk, which were presented to the kings of the Western civilizations [11].

3. Challenges and limitations

The Wu Zhu coins from the Western Han Dynasty (around 118 BCE) have a captivating history. However, when utilizing them as primary sources for understanding trade and cultural exchange, we need to consider several limitations: First, Wu Zhu coins circulated for an impressive 736 years, from 118 BCE to 618 CE, making it challenging to pinpoint specific historical contexts or events associated with individual coin issues. Second, approximately 900 types and 1,800 variants of Wu Zhu coins have been documented. These variations include unofficial variants produced under Emperor Wang Mang's Xin Dynasty (9-23 CE). The wide range of diversity makes it challenging to generalize about their use or interpret specific instances. Third, the use of Wu Zhu coins provides evidence of economic transactions, yet it lacks detailed information about the specific goods exchanged or the cultural interactions involved. While they were utilized along the Silk Road and even reproduced for trade, there is still a need to uncover more specific details. And lastly, the primary function of the Wu Zhu coins was to facilitate trade as a form of currency. However, the limited inscriptions on the coins, using early forms of Chinese characters, resulted in a lack of detailed contextual information. In short, Wu Zhu coins provide crucial insights into the Silk Road history, but to fully grasp historical contexts and cultural interactions, researchers must utilize additional sources and interdisciplinary approaches. It is imperative to consider these factors when interpreting the significance of Wu Zhu coins in broader historical narratives.

In addition to the primary source challenges, we are facing some Archaeological challenges as well. Numismatics, the study of coins and currency, encounters various challenges in archaeological discoveries and interpretation. Coins are usually unearthed in isolation from their original context. To understand the purpose, use, and significance of coins requires considering their archaeological context, such as the site, associated artifacts, and historical events. Therefore, researchers need to emphasize "contextual numismatics," which examines coins within broader material culture and historical frameworks. For example, it is essential to determine the age of coins in order to interpret their historical context. But not all coins are self-dating (e.g., those with mint dates), Archaeologists then need to utilize the principles of stratigraphy, the examination of associated artifacts, and historical records to meticulously pinpoint the chronological placement of coins, both in relation to each other and within a specific timeframe. In addition, coins usually showcase a variety of symbols, portraits, or inscriptions, and understanding their meanings demands specific expertise in iconography, historical context, and cultural symbolism. Therefore, researchers need to collaborate with experts in ancient languages, epigraphy, and art history to ensure proper interpretation.

4. Conclusion

The Silk Road served as a key conduit for the transportation of priceless precious metals, serving as more than just a commerce route. The Silk Road unequivocally conveyed these metals to distant markets, leaving a lasting impact on economies along the way. Additionally, the exchange of coins via the Silk Road facilitated widespread cultural diffusion. Wu Zhu coin, one of the world's earliest coins played an important role in the Silk Road and fostered the transfer of ideas and innovation, leading to substantial advancements in art and technology, which was evidenced by Sino-Kharoshthi

coins - featuring Chinese characters on one side indicating their value, while the other side showcases Kharoshthi script that denotes the ruler's name and title. In future research, it's important to consider that while Wu Zhu coins were widely traded along the Silk Road and Zhang Qian presented thousands of them as gifts during his visits to the western regions on behalf of the emperor, interestingly, none of these coins have been discovered in those areas. Up to now, they have only been unearthed in the Xinjiang area. Hopefully, this paper will generate enough interests in Wu Zhu coins within the archaeological community, inspiring further investigation.

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