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The Shamanism Magazine

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We hope you enjoy reading the article. Nicholas Breeze Wood (editor)

On the flip of a coin

Chinese coins have been valued by the tribal people of Central Asia, Siberia and even North America,

Nicholas Breeze Wood looks at their use in divination, decoration and as amulets and charms



Above: Mongolian nine coin divination set and bag. Bag mid-late C20th. The coins are older than the bag and have worn almost smooth through use over time

There has been a very long history of metal coin manufacture in China, stretching back many thousands of years, and coins with holes - perhaps most peoples idea of what a Chinese coin should look like - have been part of the currency for over 2,000 years.

During this long period of use, a lot of semi-magical lore and tradition has been developed in connection with coins. But perhaps their most common non-financial use has been in divination, both within China and beyond, in the surrounding lands of Central Asia.

CHINESE DIVINATION
Probably the oldest regularly used Chinese method of divination still in use, is the I Ching, the traditions of which began to be formalised around 400 BCE, although some authorities say it has been in use for as long as 5,000 years.

In the I Ching, a series of either solid (yang) or broken (yin) lines are determined, and subsequently read to gain understanding.

These lines are traditionally found by tossing three coins into the air and seeing which way up they land. If two or more of the coins are heads, then the line will be yang, and if two or more coins are tails the line will be yin. This process is repeated six times, and the subsequent pattern of six solid or broken lines is called a hexagram.

Once the hexagram has been determined it is looked up in the I

Ching texts (generally called 'The Book of Changes') to show the meaning of each of the hexagrams; so by looking at a series of hexagrams, an answer to the question is achieved.

SHAMANIC DIVINATION

Chinese coins have been valued as a favourite form of divination by Southern Siberian shamans for a very long time too, although they have worked out a separate method of divination.

In her books, the late Mongolian shaman Sarangerel gives various methods of traditional Mongolian shamanic divination, including casting stones, reading cards, the use of sheep knuckle bones and two methods using Chinese coins - one method with five coins, and the other method with nine coins.

Both of the methods of divination she describes are used by the general populace, as well as by shamans.

The readings she gives for each of the five or nine coins used are too complex to go into with this article, but readers who wish to learn the method can read her books. (See the notes at the end of the article.)

USING A COIN SET

If you wish to practice this sort of divination method yourself, or wish to use coins in combination with the I Ching, you don't have to use Chinese coins. If you want to use old Chinese coins, these can be bought fairly easily and cheaply online - eBay will give you a wide choice of them from different periods of history - including fakes!

For the effectiveness of the reading it doesn't matter if they are fakes or real coins. You ideally need well-worn coins, so that they can be shuffled with ease, which need to sit in your hand well and 'feel' right.

It is nice to get a bag to keep your coins safe; this could be made from leather or cloth. If you wish to buy a ready-made bag, many shops who sell ritual objects used for Tibetan Buddhist practice, sell small brocade bags, and these are ideal.

Before you use your coins, you may wish to smudge or clean them in some way. You may also wish to make an offering to the divination spirits - this can be done by rubbing a little vodka or milk on the coins before you begin.

The person asking the question then holds the coins in their hand, blows on them, asks their question and shakes them, as one would shake dice.

For a reading of the I Ching the three coins are simply tossed and allowed to fall heads or tails up.

For a Mongolian coin reading, a stack of the well shaken coins is made - generally in the palm of the right hand.

Once stacked, the two hands are brought together, turned upside down and the coin stack deposited upside down on the palm of the left hand. The coins are now ready to be read.

Each coin is taken in turn from the stack and placed down in a line, often on a special cloth. The line of coins is then read in the order they were placed on the cloth. Each pattern of heads and tails has a specific meaning.

AMULETS AND CHARMS

Chinese coins have a long history of use as magical and symbolic objects. In Feng Shui, coins - either real or fake - are grouped together in auspicious shapes, generally bound together with red cord, and placed at specific points around a building, to help to increase the flow of chi and to attract wealth.

There is also a long tradition in China of making coin-like amulets for luck, good health and prosperity, which, although they resemble coins, are not currency.

These charms were sometimes very finely made, and would be worn around the neck, although

some had small holes in them and were used as buttons, whereas others were made into jewellery.

The designs of these charms often included popular symbols of the dragon and the phoenix (symbolising male and female energies meaning fertility and marriage), together with other animals - horses being popular - or words encouraging fortune such as, 'may the bearer have fortune, luck and health all year round.'

In areas of Siberia, away from the lands where the coins were actually used as money, Chinese coins were used as trade goods.

Amongst the Ulchi people of far Eastern Siberia a bag of coins was generally given as a gift to a shaman asked to do a healing. This was not so much as payment for the healing, more a gift to the shaman's spirits, as the shaman had no way to spend the coins.

Like amulets, the coins could be made into jewellery or tied onto objects. Some shamans coats have coins on them and - like glass beads - they became important trade items, passing between peoples right across Siberia and the Arctic, even getting as far West as the Pacific coast of North America, whose Native peoples greatly prized any form of metal.

Decorative, and with a long history of use in both shamanism and in other ways, Chinese coins make an interesting item to seek out, collect, and use.

FURTHER READING:

The I Ching:
There are many versions of 'The Book of Changes,' the text for the I ching available.

Mongolian Shamanism:
Sarangerel wrote two books, both of which are still available and both of which give Shamanic divination techniques as well as other Mongolian shamanic teachings. The two books are 'Riding Windhorses' ISBN: 0 89281 808 5, and 'Chosen By The Spirits' ISBN: 089281 861 1



Above and right: front and back of an ancient Chinese charm coin



Left: three coins bound with red cord as a Feng Shui amulet

Below: Native American Elk-skin battle armour with Chinese coins and sailors' buttons C19th Pacific North West



Heads - yang

Tails - yin