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TEN TAELS MORE TO THE FUND OF THE MUSEUM

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A silver ingot from the collection of the Fersman Mineralogical Museum has turned out to be a yamb, an ancient Chinese coin. Its description and information obtained from its marking stamps are presented. 4 color photos.

As an old English castle is unthinkable without ghosts rambling about its vaults, so any decent museum inevitably keeps some things of unclear history and purpose. One of such artifacts in the collection of the Fersman Mineralogical Museum was a curious silver ingot with the shape resembling a little boat (*Photo 1, 4*).

None worker of the museum had any notion of this article; it seemed likely that the ingot had been here from the earliest times. The entire absence of data on this specimen gave grounds to suspect that it had come here together with collections transferred to the museum by the government in the 1920s. The only characteristics of the ingot, that were revealed during an inventory of precious metals in the museum collection by a commission with participation of specialists of the State Depository of Valuables (Gokhran), were its weight (about 368 g) and fineness (silver 960). Its size is 62 x 40 x 40 mm.

The intent of this ingot was revealed by chance. The mineralogical museum with its exhibits related to the history of the last decades of the Russian royal dynasty was invited to an exhibition held in Copenhagen.

It was a chance to see the sights of the Danian capital, including, of course, the huge Historical Museum. Wondering over enfilades of the halls with Paleolithic tools, Viking barks, interiors of Middle Age dwellings, and posters of the fascist occupation period, it is easy to get lost and pass by the richest royal collection of coins and medals. It seems likely that this happens with many visitors; so, when I came to the halls where this collection was exposed, the local security guard was bored all alone. The showcases were crammed with treasures of all the times and nations, from Antic coins resembling golden grains to Sweden sealed copper plates weighing as much as 40 pounds. All of a sudden, something familiar, a pair of silver boat-shaped ingots, flashed in one of the showcases. The inscription on the label informed that they had been used as coins in China from

the early 18th through the early 20th centuries.

Sometimes later, we managed to learn more about these coin-ingots. Their principal peculiarity is the vivid individuality. There are no pair of absolutely identical ones among them. They were strongly different in shape and weight (value) and were issued in different times and in different China provinces by different silver stores, trading houses, jewelry firms, and banks. Among them there are square, rectangular, saddle-shaped, and rounded («drums») ingots, as well as «little boats», «flowers», etc. They vary in weight from several grams to almost 2 kg. Their value is expressed in taels that correspond to approximately 37 g silver, being commonly correspondent to 1, 3, 4, 5, 10, or 50 taels. In one form or other, they were in use in China during almost 1000 years. A custom to determine the value of silver ingots by their weight and metal purity led to the fact that foreign silver coins that came to China beginning from the 16th century were estimated according to the same principle. This approach made it possible to avoid denominations common for copper and paper currencies and to do them one of the most stable moneys in the world history.

These ingots are known under various names. The Chinese *liang-bono* and *yuan bao* gave rise to the Russian *yamb*. In Germany, they are named *Packsattelmunzen* («saddle-shaped moneys»). In Kyrgyzstan where they were also in use and mentioned in the *Manas* epos, they were named, depending on the weight, *tai tuyak* («horse's hoof») or *koi tuyak* («ram's hoof»). In the modern literature, they are referred to as *sycee*, from the Chinese word for raw silk, because their surface is often covered with very fine lines resembling silk in the structure.

But let us return to the yamb that found its place in the collection of the Fersman Mineralogical Museum. As follows from its weight, its value corresponds to 10 taels. For information on its origin, We had to appeal to specialists and got the help of Steven Tai, a

collector and researcher from Taiwan, and of Nina Vladimirovna Ivochkina, the custodian of the Far East collection of the Department of Numismatics of the State Hermitage, the museum where the world second (only to the Chinese one) collection of yambs (700 specimens) is kept. Our joint efforts allowed to reveal the following. Our yamb was manufactured in the last years of government of the Tsin dynasty (1889–1913). One of the stamps in its hollow says that it was cast by a Beijing bank named Tszuyi Shen, which can be approximately translated as «multiplying [the riches]» (*Photo 3*). This yamb is very similar to analogous ingots with a value of 10 taels, that were issued in the metropolitan province of Chaili (Hebei) in the late 19th century

Another stamp (damaged) contains a specification (typical for yambs) of a high quality of the silver used. «Shi tsi se», such the inscription was probably engraved on it, which may be translated as «the fineness is quite high». As is known, Chinese yambs were famous just for the purity of the metal they contained.

Small circle stamps (*Photo 2*) that are on the outer side of our ingot are traditional images of a round Chinese copper coin with a square hole, that was used as a goodwill symbol of enrichment and prosperity. This symbol was very widely used in folk patterns, in articles of applied art, and even in ancient assignments of the 11th century.

It is difficult to appreciate now, how valuable this find from the museum collection is.

Even experienced collectors say that the market price of yambs is still developing, and different dealers can sell analogous articles at prices differing by an order of magnitude. There is an evidence that one and the same yamb with a value of 50 taels, but in an extremely bad state, was bought in 1995 at a price of nearly \$1,000 and was resold two years later already at \$20,000.

What is undoubted, it is that the price of yambs is far from to be limited by the cost of their contained silver. An evidence for this statement is an existence of numerous recent imitations. Yambs have already long become a numismatic rarity, because most of them were melted to silver coins and adornments.

But even in the times when the silver equivalent of yamb was only appreciated, 10 taels were a serious sum of money. In the late 19th century, one silver tael corresponded to 1500–2000 copper coins. For our yamb with a value of 10 taels, one could purchase then more than 400 liters of rice, a true treasure in the permanently starving China of that time. As a whole, as opposed to copper coins that were used for everyday purchases, yambs served as a currency for large bargains.

Poverty was described in China as follows: «He has never taken a yamb in his hands.» However, we (workers of the museum) have already not assigned to this category of people.