

SIAMESE PORCELAIN GAMBLING TOKENS

A summary of the history of Siamese porcelain gambling tokens (also called *pee*) is provided below and includes origin, usage, characteristics, and museum holdings.

Porcelain gambling tokens were used in Thailand in the 19th century and early 20th century in the official licensed gambling establishments owned by Chinese. Chinese businessmen had set up gambling houses in Bangkok and Ayutthaya as well as the border areas between Burma, Laos and Thailand, where gambling was as popular as it was in China. Porcelain tokens of various denominations were issued for use as gambling chips by the individual gambling houses. The tokens (also called *pee*) were made in the Dehua kilns in the Fujian Province of China and brought to Siam for use as gambling chips. Later, due to the scarcity of small denomination coinage, they were widely accepted as small currency exchange within their respective districts. The main period of their use was between 1821 and 1875, although they are said by some sources to have first appeared as early as 1760. Most of the tokens have Chinese characters on the obverse indicating the name or brand name of the issuing establishments (referred to as *Hongs*) and on the reverse the denomination of the token expressed in Chinese characters, and/or the name of the *Hong*.

The tokens come in many designs, colors and shapes as well as a variety of denominations. Round tokens predominated, but shapes also included square, pentagon, hexagon, octagon, "coin" shape, oval, rectangular, triangle, rhombus shape, fruit shapes, star shape, lozenge shape, fish shapes, and animal shapes. All the tokens are flat with the average size varying between 1.3 centimeters to 2.5 centimeters, and with the width between 3 and 7 millimeters. Embellishment on the obverse included Chinese characters, animals, fish, fruits, symbols, portraits, and Thai script. They were issued in Siamese monetary denominations expressed in Chinese characters

and ranging from one *solot* (1/112 of one baht/*tical*) to one *chang* (80 baht/*ticals*). Other denominations issued were: 1 *att* (1/64 baht), 1 *phai/sieuw* (1/32 baht), 1 *song phai/siek* (1/16 baht), 1 *fuang* (1/8 baht), 1 *salung* (1/4 baht), 1 baht/*tical* (4 *salung*), and 1 *tamlung* (4 baht/*ticals*). The majority of the tokens were issued in the lower denominations.

The wide variety of different designs issued is estimated to number between 8,000 to 10,000. To counteract forgeries the designs were changed periodically by the gambling houses. Although porcelain was chosen for the tokens because it was not produced in Thailand, it was not long before counterfeits were ordered directly from the kilns in China. In an attempt to overcome this problem the *Hongs* frequently withdrew their tokens and exchanged them for new issues.

In addition to porcelain, gambling tokens were also made of other materials including clay, earthenware, glass, tin, lead, brass, bronze, copper, silver, and mother of pearl. Fake porcelain tokens have also been produced for the tourist market in Thailand. One way to detect fakes is to check for the absence of glaze on the reverse. Genuine porcelain tokens are glazed on all sides, while some (but not all) of the fakes are glazed on one side only.

In 1875 the government prohibited the circulation of the gambling tokens to facilitate introduction of the government's flat metallic coinage. However, their use was not banned in the gambling houses. In 1907 the government prohibited gambling everywhere except in Bangkok. In 1917 gambling was prohibited in Bangkok as well, bringing to an effective end the use of tokens as a medium of exchange. Consequently, porcelain gambling tokens were in use primarily during the period between the early 1800's through 1917. However, they actually remained in circulation for a longer period of time and were reportedly still used well into the 20th century. While clandestine gambling dens continue to operate in the environs of

Bangkok up to the present day, porcelain gambling tokens are no longer in use in them.

The following museums have significant holdings of Siamese porcelain gambling tokens in their collections: The National Museum, Bangkok; Bank of Thailand Museum, Bangkok; American Numismatic Society Collection, New York (acquired the Ramsden Collection of Siamese porcelain tokens); The National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden, Netherlands; The Kultur- und Stadthistorisches Museum, Duisburg, Germany; and The British Museum. The tokens (real and fake) can also still be found in the antique shops and stalls of Bangkok's Chatuchak Market.

Representative Selection of Siamese Porcelain Gambling Tokens






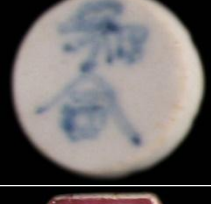

A representative selection of gambling tokens from the collection of this writer are described in some detail in the following chart. This selection consists of twenty-one (21) Siamese porcelain gambling tokens in a variety of shapes, issuing entities, denominations, and décor. Shapes include circle, rosette, hexagon, octagon, triangle, oval, and rectangle; denominations are *fuang*, *salung*, *pai*, *song pai*, and other.

Indicated in the chart below are the following: Ceramics Catalogue number of token, image of front of token illustrating name of issuing *Hong* (Chinese gambling establishment) or other identifier, description including the denomination on the reverse of the token, the shape, and the diameter (D) in centimeters of each token.








Qing: mid 19th century - Dehua kilns in Fujian Province, China.

Provenance: the gambling tokens at Ceramics Catalogue No. 257 - 6 to 15 of 21 were acquired by the previous owner from one of the oldest and most reputable Stamp and Coin Dealers in Bangkok on Silom Road.

C-257 (1 of 21) to C-257 (7 of 21)



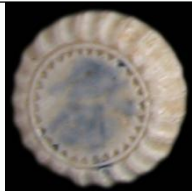




NUMBER	NAME OF HONG OR IDENTIFIER	DESCRIPTION	SHAPE	D: CM
C-257 (1)		Chinese character <i>Yu</i> (Jade) incised in underglaze blue, red shaded fluted sides; on reverse denomination incised in red glaze – one <i>phai</i> (1/32 baht).	Rosette	1.5
C-257 (2)		Chinese characters (4) molded on green glazed ground – includes <i>Sheng Fang</i> (Abundant – way, region); molded rosettes around perimeter; on reverse 2 molded birds and remnants of red glaze.	Circle	2.2
C-257 (3)		Chinese characters (2) molded – translated as “Jointly Prosperous,” groove at perimeter also molded; on reverse denomination incised in underglaze blue – <i>fuang</i> (1/8 baht).	Circle	1.9
C-257 (4)		Portrait of Chulalongkorn molded, plain fluted sides; on reverse denomination incised in underglaze blue – one <i>phai</i> (1/32 baht).	Rosette	1.6
C-257 (5)		Chinese character <i>Yu</i> (Jade) molded, red edged molded groove at perimeter; on reverse denomination in underglaze blue – <i>song phai</i> (1/16 baht).	Circle	1.7
C-257 (6)		Chinese characters (2) in underglaze blue on plain ground – translated as “Suitable Harmony;” denomination not indicated, reverse plain.	Circle	1.9
C-257 (7)		Chinese characters (4) molded and glazed red on green glazed ground - <i>He Yuan Gong Si</i> (Harmonious Source Company), red filled groove at perimeter; on reverse denomination in underglaze blue – <i>salung</i> (1/4 baht).	Hexagon	2.2

(Continued)

C-257 (8 of 21) to C-257 (14 of 21)				
NUMBER	NAME OF HONG OR IDENTIFIER	DESCRIPTION	SHAPE	D: CM
C-257 (8)		Chinese character (1) molded on plain ground – <i>Chun</i> (Spring, Life), molded groove at perimeter; on reverse denomination incised in underglaze blue – <i>fuang</i> (1/8 baht).	Triangle	2.0
C-257 (9)		Chinese characters (2) molded – <i>Tian Fa</i> (Growing Increase [of profit]), blue edged molded groove at perimeter; on reverse denomination in underglaze blue – <i>fuang</i> (1/8 baht).	Circle	1.9
C-257 (10)		Chinese characters (2) molded - translated as “Prosperous,” green glazed molded groove at perimeter; on reverse denomination incised in underglaze blue – <i>salung</i> (1/4 baht).	Circle	2.2
C-257 (11)		Chinese characters (4) in underglaze blue on plain ground; on reverse denomination in underglaze blue – <i>salung</i> (1/4 baht).	Circle	2.3
C-257 (12)		Chinese characters (4) molded and glazed pink on green glazed ground - <i>He Yuan Gong Si</i> (Harmonious Source Company), pink filled groove at perimeter; on reverse denomination in underglaze blue – <i>fuang</i> (1/8 baht).	Hexagon	2.0
C-257 (13)		Chinese characters (2) incised in underglaze blue on plain ground – <i>Hecai</i> (Together Wealth); on reverse denomination incised in underglaze blue – <i>salung</i> (1/4 baht).	Hexagon	2.1
C-257 (14)		Chinese characters (4) molded and glazed green on plain ground – <i>Shiheyitian</i> (History of one day); red filled molded groove at perimeter; on reverse two Chinese characters in red glaze.	Octagon	2.2

(Continued)

(Continued)

C-257 (15 of 21) to C-257 (21 of 21)				
NUMBER	NAME OF HONG OR IDENTIFIER	DESCRIPTION	SHAPE	D: CM
C-257 (15)		Chinese characters (2) incised in underglaze blue – <i>Leili</i> (Plough profit); blue edged molded perimeter; on reverse denomination in underglaze blue – <i>fuang</i> (1/8 baht).	Octagon	1.7
C-257 (16)		Chinese character (1) molded on plain ground – <i>Xing</i> (Progress), molded groove at perimeter; on reverse denomination incised in underglaze blue – one <i>phai</i> (1/32 baht).	Rectangle	1.6
C-257 (17)		Chinese characters (2 in blue - indecipherable, molded rosettes around center, fluted sides; on reverse denomination in underglaze blue – <i>song phai</i> (1/16 baht).	Rosette	2.4
C-257 (18)		Chinese characters (4) molded and glazed black – <i>He Cai Bi Qian</i> (Peaceful Riches and Secret Money), black edged molded groove at perimeter; on reverse molded character and jarlet.	Circle	2.1
C-257 (19)		Chinese characters (2) large in underglaze blue on plain ground – translated as “Suitable Harmony;” on reverse denomination in underglaze blue – <i>fuang</i> (1/8 baht).	Octagon	2.3
C-257 (20)		Chinese character (1) molded on plain ground – <i>Qian</i> (Money and indicative of a denomination of 1 <i>salung</i> (1/4 baht), molded groove at perimeter; on reverse Chinese characters (2) molded white and underglaze blue.	Circle	2.4
C-257 (21)		Chinese characters (2) large in underglaze blue on plain ground – translated as “Suitable Harmony;” on reverse denomination in underglaze blue – <i>salung</i> (1/4 baht).	Oval	2.5

Siamese Porcelain Gambling Tokens – Front and Reverse

C-257 (1 to 21 of 21 - Front)



C-257 (1 to 21 of 21 - Reverse)



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