



# Chinese Export Silver

THE HOTTEST ANTIQUE  
SILVER CATEGORY  
ON THE PLANET YET  
MUCH MISUNDERSTOOD

BY  
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# CHINESE EXPORT SILVER:

## *The Hottest Antique Silver Category on the Planet yet Much Misunderstood!*

In the past two years, when antique Chinese Export Silver pieces have appeared in general silver sales in European and US auction houses, the hammer prices have been up to five times that of a comparable piece of British or American silver—some pieces achieving even more! No other antique silver category has the capacity to deliver such potential return on investment in a relatively short time frame.

*by Adrien von Ferscht*

Yet Chinese Export Silver is a category of master silvermaking that has been long forgotten and to some extent ignored by most collectors, academics, and many silver specialists; a few being oblivious that it exists at all. However, much of the silver that was manufactured in China over the 200 or so years it was produced is of the highest quality—quite a high proportion of it deemed to be museum quality and equalling the

very finest European silversmiths such as Paul Storr, Paul de Lamerie, the Batemans, Matthew Boulton, Sazikov, Gratshev, and Americans such as Paul Revere (Figures 1 and 1a).

The level of craftsmanship that produced Chinese Export Silver was not something that had occurred overnight. It was as deeply embedded as silver was in the psyche of the Chinese. A highly sophisticated system

of small workshops was established, akin to miniature production lines that were operated by highly-skilled artisans who each shared a part in the finished item. The skills were more often than not passed down through families from generation to generation.



*Fig. 1. (Left): A Paul Revere urn, 1791; (Right): a Paul Storr urn, London, 1813. All images are from the author's research database.*



*Fig. 1a. A Chinese Export Silver urn by Lin Chong, Canton, 1825.*

Many of the earliest pieces, some even pre-dating Chinese Export Silver proper, were extremely elaborate and specially commissioned items that were owned by Catherine the Great, Queen Charlotte, and many other European royals and aristocracy. Today, these pieces are found in places such as The Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, and The Royal Collection at Windsor Castle, UK.

Chinese Export Silver is the product of a unique period of world history. It is exactly what its assumed title conveys—silver made solely for the Western market, manufactured by master silversmiths who initially embraced Western forms, later employing a blend of Eastern motifs with Western shapes and styles but always of a quality that will probably never be seen again.

When Crosby Forbes first wrote his book about Chinese Export Silver in 1983, it was thought there were only two hundred items known in the world. This was later reassessed to be two thousand. The reality is impossible to know, but tens of thousands is probably nearer the mark. Perhaps even more, as awareness and interest grows in this particular silver product.

Although I should stress that China has a 1,200 year history of silvermaking, Chinese Export Silver was made between 1785 and 1940 and

can readily be apportioned to three distinct periods of manufacture: 1) The Early China Trade Period (1785-1840), 2) The Late China Trade Period (1840-1880), and 3) The Post China Trade Period (1880-1940). By the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries, the phenomenon we know today as Chinese Export Silver was well entrenched. It happened simply because silver, as a material, was more plentiful in China and the art of silversmithing had been perfected to such a high level. Compared to Western counterparts, silver was relatively inexpensive. This capability was quick to be recognized; merchants and sea captains began to bring silver items as examples to be copied, thus the demand for such items increased. Because of this surge of requests to “copy,” we find a peculiarly Chinese Export Silver circumstance mainly in relation to silver created in the Early China Trade Period.

Often referred to as “pseudo-hallmarks,” most Chinese silversmiths adopted them, but did so unwittingly. Since they were asked to copy items brought from the West, many of which featured British hallmarks, the silversmiths copied the pieces “faithfully,” hallmarks and all! Not fully understanding the significance of the information these marks imparted,

a degree of artistic license was applied; date letters were replaced by a letter that might have been the first Latin letter of the silversmith’s name using *Pinyin* transcribing. Nearly all of the silver created during this period was generally Western forms, sometimes manifesting eccentric anomalies—often inadvertently.

Figure 2 illustrates the mark used by the Canton silversmith Cutshing. While he used several versions during the years 1830-1895, this particular mark was used between 1850 and 1860. At first glance, it could be mistaken for an English hallmark, but on closer inspection we can see the crudeness of the lion, crowned leopard, and monarch’s head. The “k” is meaningless and the insertion of “CU” is an example of artistic license. Figure 2a (right) is another example of a Cutshing mark on the hallmark theme, while Figure 2a (left) shows the simple mark “CUT.” Uniformity was not something marks had all through the Chinese Export Period.

Of the twelve known silversmiths of this first period, the maker who has “celebrity” status is one we simply know as “WE WE WC.” The name of this maker has never been discovered; we will assume it is a “he,” rather than a “they.” He operated in Canton between



Fig. 2



Fig. 2a



Fig. 3



Fig. 3a

1820 and 1880. We can see from the marks that consistency was again not part of his game plan, but the particular peculiarity of this maker and his mark is that it all began when copying a silver piece from the London-based silversmiths William Eley, William Fearn and William Chawner. Perhaps the “F” for Fearn was mistaken for an “E” (Figures 3 and 3a).

During the middle period of Chinese Export Silver making, there is a change in the appearance of silver produced as well as the marks makers used on them. Chinese motifs begin to appear on items—sometimes subtle additions to classical Western forms and sometimes a more blatant disregard for them. It is also during this period that we see more silversmiths appearing. Maker’s marks also changed as some makers began to use marks that combined Latin initials of the maker along with a mark in Chinese characters or ideograms of the actual artisan silversmith that carried out the work under the roof of the master silversmith. This latter mark is known as a “chopmark,” indicating that makers probably ran workshops where several experienced silver makers operated. In fact, it is generally believed that Chinese silversmiths employed more of a production line method with each expert carrying out an essential element until the master silversmith (the man behind the Chinese chopmark) finished it.

Figure 4 shows the mark of Lee Ching, a silversmith who operated initially in Canton and then also in Shanghai and Hong Kong between the years 1840 and 1880. A rather splendid large-lidded tankard was made by Lee Ching circa 1860 (Figure 4a). In a matter of a few years, the classical



Fig. 4a



Fig. 4

Georgian silver has given way to an item that may be Western in its concept as an object but totally decorated in the Chinese style. One could also safely assume this is a commissioned item, given the armorial cartouche. Today, a Lee Ching tankard or mug of this period is worth in the range of \$4,000 and rising. Whereas pictured in Figure 4b we have a Lee Ching presentation jug made in 1870; an interesting mix of what is essentially a Victorian shape decorated with Chinese motifs. Chinese Export Silver of this period is almost always completely covered with decoration; plain polished surfaces were quite rare. This particular piece is from 1870, simply from the inscription “Race Cup, Won by Mr. J. Landerson’s ‘Molly,’ Amoy Races 1870.” Without a



Fig. 4b

definitive inscription, it is quite difficult to precisely date Chinese Export Silver. Date marks were never used, but one can reasonably date an item by the style of the decoration and form in relation to that specific maker.

Wo Shing was a silversmith who operated between 1830 and 1910. A Canton-based maker, Wo Shing later opened in Shanghai towards the end of the nineteenth century. A maker, therefore, that spans both the middle and last periods of Chinese Export Silver. The two marks in Figure 5 (bottom) are from the middle period, so it carries the initials for Wo Shing and the chopmark of the artisan silver maker. Figure 5a, 5b (bottom) illustrates his mark from the last period, incorporating his name, the place of manufacture, and the chopmark.

Another maker who straddles the same two periods is Hung Chong & Co., again originating in Canton and expanding to Shanghai, collectively between 1860 and 1930. Again, the marks show a distinction between the earlier mark (Figure 6) and the Shanghai mark (Figure 6a). Both incorporate the now almost obligatory chopmark. Most Chinese Export Silver therefore



Fig. 5



Fig. 5a and 5b



Fig. 6



Fig. 6b

requires a degree of detective work to determine a fairly accurate date.

The Hung Chong cocktail shaker (Figure 6b) is probably circa 1925. The fashion for cocktails began in the 20s and stylistically, while there is still some overtly Chinese decoration, there is also a hint of art deco and the piece has a planished finish - also deco-related. We also know that Hung Chong ceased manufacturing in 1930. This is highly likely to have been made in Shanghai where there was an established and substantial international set at this time.

The last period of Chinese Export Silver is where we find over seventy known silversmiths operating. As with the preceding periods, maker's marks are equally inconsistent. The most prolific of these makers is Wang Hing. He began life in Canton and expanded to Shanghai and Hong Kong, the latter being where he established



Fig. 6a

an emporium selling all sorts of luxury goods but with a focus on silver. Wang Hing used many variations of maker's marks. Like many of the silversmiths of this period, the quality of the silver was often incorporated into the mark—either “.90” or sometimes “.95.”

Wang Hing is particularly interesting since

we know from journals that Tiffany & Co. in New York had items made exclusively for them by him. The maker's mark in Figure 7 is one Wang Hing reserved exclusively for Tiffany & Co. pieces. Even more interesting is that Tiffany & Co. discovered Wang Hing while traveling in China; the company was not known for silver items until the collaboration with Wang Hing, which lasted some twenty years. Just as Wang Hing marks vary greatly as the small selection in Figure 7a shows; stylistically, so does the work manifest itself in many ways. Dated circa 1885, the grand lidded cup in Figure 7b stands 16 1/2 inches high, the diameter of the stand is 15 3/4 inches, and it weighs 2,179 grams (70.06 toz). The maker's mark pictured in Figure 7c is a typical stamp for Wang Hing of the period. The artisan's chopmark reads “Xi'an.” Part of the main collection

at the Zilvermuseum housed in the Sterckshof castle in Deurne, Antwerp, I recently valued this cup at \$45,000, a similar cup having been sold at Bonhams (London) in 2011, by a lesser maker for \$35,000. Stylistically miles apart from the previous item, Figure 8 is a “tyg” in the art nouveau style made by Wang Hing and marked for Shanghai. As far as Chinese Export Silver is concerned, this is completely without any decoration and is highly polished—though not unusual in the context of art nouveau silver. I began this article stating one can still source Chinese Export Silver, find it at a good price, and achieve up to five times the investment or more. This particular piece was bought in an antique shop in Tel Aviv ten years ago for \$40. It was sold this year at auction in the UK for \$3,000—a seventy-five-fold return!

We glibly refer to familiar makers such as Wang Hing and Hung Chong as “he,” yet invariably there is no he. The majority of Chinese Export Silver maker's marks do not allude to the man behind the mask, as it were. My research has highlighted that this is not unexpected, since the Chinese culture is vastly different to that of the Western world and part of that culture is to have a “trading name” that evokes good luck in the venture to which that name is attached. We need to put this down to culture as it certainly doesn't alter the fact the workmanship is of the highest quality. If we want to equate this phenomenon with Western silvermaking, then perhaps the best comparison is silver made for luxury good stores under the store's hallmarks. Liberty & Co. in London is a good example; an exceedingly sought after mark, yet we know that much of it was made by Wm. Haseler—we highly



Fig. 7

Fig. 7a

regard William Hair Haseler, just as we regard the silver created for Liberty & Co. that came from that manufactory. We would probably be hard pressed to say which is more important to us, the fact it is silver from Liberty & Co. or Wm. Haseler! Wm. Haseler Ltd. had many high-quality silversmiths working for them and the same must have been for most of the Chinese Export Silver makers. We probably just need to readjust our mindset and not refer to “he” when we talk of Wang Hing and other makers; “they” might be more appropriate! In a way, the Chinese makers were probably being more honest; most maker’s marks from the latter third of the nineteenth century onwards incorporated a “chopmark” of the artisan silversmith who physically worked the item. Personally, I feel the enigma all adds to the richness that is Chinese Export Silver.

### Who’s Buying?

So what is causing this explosion of interest? The answer is Chinese middle class and affluent buyers. To understand more, we need to recognize the context of the burgeoning Chinese economy. The facts are staggering:

- There currently are a 150 million middle class and affluent people

in China today. In ten years time, this will have risen to an even more staggering 415 million. The spending power of the Chinese middle class in just two years time will be in the region of a trillion dollars.

- Today, there are believed to be 7,000 billionaires and 125,000 multi-millionaires in Shanghai alone. In Beijing there are 9,000 billionaires. In the whole of the United Kingdom there are seventy-three billionaires. There are fewer than 300 billionaires in the whole of the European Union.
- The number of people in the UK with annual liquid assets of more than \$96,074 is 2.9 million – there are 280,000 millionaires in the UK.
- In just one generation, China will have approximately 1.4 billion middle class compared to an estimated 360 million in the USA and 414 million in the whole of Europe

When Chinese Export Silver appears at auction, there are generally three main sectors of buyers competing



Fig. 7b



Fig. 7c

against each other: online buyers, Chinese collectors and dealers who attend the saleroom, and the Western buyers who are either collectors or specialize in selling. In general, the main salerooms are not the place to pick up a relative bargain—provincial auctions often are though. The internet is another place to find items, but here, too, Chinese buyers are scouting. With a degree of tenacity, good items can be acquired. It is important to stress that most of the buyers of Chinese Export Silver know their subject. Items regularly appear in auction rooms and online that are classified as Chinese Export Silver but are something other—Straits Chinese Silver is one of the culprits, simply because it often carries Chinese maker’s marks.

Although a silver category in its own right and can equally technically be referred to as being “Chinese,” there are silversmiths who, confusingly for us, straddle both categories. It is a complicated silver category in



Fig. 8

as much as it also has three distinct manufacturing periods over the one hundred years it was produced (1835-1935). Many of the silversmiths who were based in China proper as well as in the Straits were effectively creating “Export Silver”—some destined exclusively for the Straits and some for export to the West. Straits silver never attempted to copy Western styles; it was always Chinese and often more likely to be decorated with motifs that were Straits-relevant, and on forms and styles that were definitively Straits in cultural origin – what we might classify loosely as Peranakan. This nineteenth-century lidded Malay bowl is a good example of this category (Figure 9).

### Maker’s Marks - How Do We Identify Pieces?

My research consists of investigating Chinese Export Silver within the context of 1,200 years of Chinese silvermaking. I am carrying this out at the University of Glasgow. Although I am probably only one-third of the way through this work, in tandem I have been compiling a catalogue of maker’s marks that has now been made available as a 53 page download file. Over one hundred makers are featured; the largest reference currently available has just over forty makers and is largely



Fig. 9

based on research carried out over forty years ago. After release of the first edition, it will remain a work in progress, so regular updates and additions are expected. In particular, I am now focusing on shedding light on some of the mysteries behind the maker’s names - who actually owned and ran some of the manufactories behind the marks.

**Adrien von Ferscht** is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Glasgow, Scottish Centre for China Research & School of Culture and Creative Arts, researching: “The History of Chinese Export Silver Within the Context of 1,200 Years of Chinese Silvermaking.” He is considered by many to be the global expert in this highly significant silver category and its rich history.

*This article was written exclusively for Silver Magazine, and the information contained within is a compilation of various articles in the field of Chinese Export Silver written by Adrien von Ferscht, as well as from his extensive research in the field, and/or from his current research at the University of Glasgow, Scotland: “The History of Chinese Export Silver Within the Context of 1,200 Years of Chinese Silvermaking.”*

#### See the website:

**<http://chinese-export-silver.com>**  
The Definitive Global Information Hub for Chinese Export Silver.