

# History in Objects

## Historic Chinese Presentation Silver Pieces

HUANG CHAO\*, ZHAOSU\*\*

**ABSTRACT:** Presentation silver is one of the most enduring forms of the art of silver-making, which succeeds in blending style and aesthetics with a pure human need to express appreciations or to offer congratulations. For the sake of scholarship, so little attention has been paid to the Chinese presentation silver pieces with some crucial historic figures that firmly connect the history of China with internationally its engaged past. This article will introduce such silver pieces of three people that would shed new light on the material cultural history about silver and some relevant people and events. We hope this paper will be the beginning of many to focus specifically on historic silver pieces so that we gain a better understanding of the roles they play in the undocumented history of China and its study.

**KEYWORDS:** Undocumented History; Chinese Presentation Silver; Chinese Export Silver; Maritime Customs.

The term “presentation silver” may be applied to any silverwork given to commemorate persons, occasions and achievements. Generally, such silver tends to be visually representative of the undocumented history in some way. In America, especially after the Civil War (1861–1865) when silver had been discovered in significant quantities in the Western frontier, wealthy captains of industry

became somewhat obsessed with this kind of silverware, in particular from manufacturers such as Tiffany & Company and Gorham. It commemorated the realization of railroad or bridge-building projects, or events such as world’s fairs, in the one-of-a-kind forms of monumental loving cups, vases, plates, trays, plaques, and punch bowls<sup>1</sup>. In the book *Marks of Achievement: Four Centuries of American Presentation Silver*, this highest form of the master silversmith’s art – from Colonial New England’s ecclesiastical silver to the modern-day Super Bowl trophy – is a testament to the entire history of America’s interests and values. Particularly since the 1960s, with the scholarly rehabilitation of Victorian-period silver, there has been a renewed appreciation of presentation silver as an optimal way to embody the superlative attainments of 19th-century design<sup>2</sup> along with the people, events or achievements it commemorates.

\*Associate Professor at the Institute of Sino-Foreign Relation History, Jinan University, Guangzhou, P. R. China, and specialist in metallic antiquities and the China Trade, such as paktong, pewter and Chinese Export Silver. He published *The Research on Chinese Paktong and Its Transmission to Europe during the 18th and 19th Centuries* (2016).

Professor Associado no Instituto de História das Relações Sino-Estrangeiras da Universidade de Jinan, Guangzhou, na República Popular da China, e especialista em antiguidades metálicas e Comércio da China, incluindo liga metálica chinesa (paktong), peltre e Prata Chinesa de Exportação. Publicou *Pesquisa sobre a Liga Metálica Chinesa Paktong e a sua Transmissão para a Europa durante os séculos XVIII e XIX* (2016).

\*\*Freelance scholar, private collector, and expert of Chinese Export Silver. Residenting in Shanghai, P.R. China.

Acadêmico freelancer, colecionador privado e especialista em Prata Chinesa de Exportação. Reside em Xangai, na República Popular da China.



Memorial standing silver cup to the Fletcher Sims Brockman couple, ca.1915.

Presentation silver is one of the most enduring forms of the art of silver-making. This silver succeeds in blending style and aesthetics with a pure human need to express appreciation or offer congratulations; in so many words, it can be said to massage the human ego in a politically correct manner. Perhaps the most significant fact behind this category of silver is that it first arrived on stage – in the context of America at least – in the late Qing and ensuing Republic eras of China. In public and private museums and collections around the world, the extant Chinese Export Silver standing cups, vases, plates, trays, and punch bowls are relics, if you will, of this phenomenon, and they exist in significant numbers. Museums in Guangzhou and Shanghai provide good examples: they contain rare pieces – for they are by default singularly unique items – on display and in storage. Chinese Export Silver is a specific category of presentation silver because of the inscriptions borne on the items and the historical reasons for their presentation. Some of these items were specially commissioned, bespoke pieces, but most were selected from the existing stock of Chinese silversmiths, makers or jewellery dealers and then either adapted in some way or simply dedicated with an added inscription. It was customary for patrons to ask the silversmiths, makers or dealers to engrave the objects with inscrip-

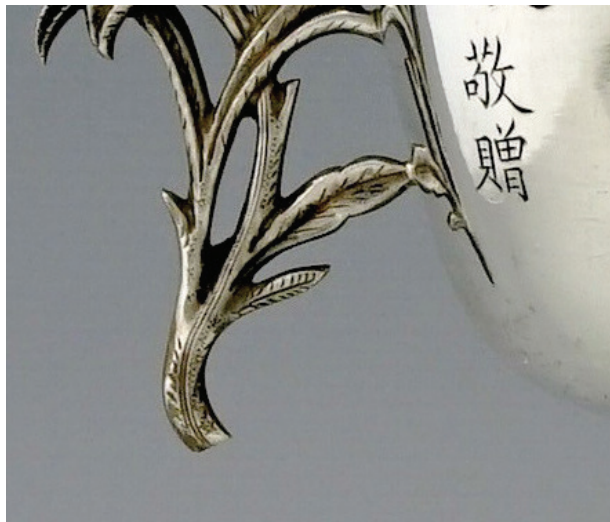
tions, but some extant pieces clearly demonstrate the adding of inscriptions by the owner, sometimes long after item was acquired. This article focuses on two types of late-19th and early-20th century Chinese presentation silver: silver presented by organisations or institutions and silver presented by individuals for a personal reason. The following examples belong to the latter type, with the former type relating mainly to sporting events such as horse<sup>3</sup> or boat racing.

The first piece is a commemorative standing silver cup from Wang Zhengyan (王正廷, 1882–1961) and his wife to Fletcher Sims Brockman (1867–1944) and his wife. Mr Wang is regarded as the “Father of China’s Olympics” – he was a diplomat and social activist in Republic-era China and was concerned with getting China to successfully join the Olympic Games. This standing cup was made by the notable Beijing silver retailer/maker *baocheng* (寶成).



Hand drawing portrait of Mr Wang Zhengyan.

## ARTE



Detail of the Chinese term "jingzeng"



Detail of the Chinese term "huicun".

From the inscription in Chinese characters one can ascertain who received and who presented the cup. Mr Brockman was an American and a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church (South). He served the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in China from 1898 to 1915, first as a Foreign Secretary in Nanjing and then from 1901 as the first General Secretary of the Chinese Young Men's Christian Association, based in Shanghai. He also helped to organise the National Christian Council of China<sup>4</sup>. Almost certainly, the Wangs ordered this presentation piece to commemorate their friendship with the Brockmans

during the American couple's stay in Shanghai. Four larger Chinese characters were engraved on one surface of the cup, reading "*huanyun chuiyin*" (還雲垂蔭). The meaning is somewhat obscure: "*huanyun*" literally means "returning by clouds" but was probably meant to indicate that the Brockmans would be going back to America, while "*chuiyin*" which literally means "situated under the tree" almost certainly meant to indicate that Mr Brockman, as the founder of the Chinese Young Men's Christian Association, had laid a solid foundation for future generations. The two phrases aptly summarise his contribution in China and how he would be taking the cup back to his homeland as a lasting memorial.

The terms "*jinzeng*" (敬贈) and "*huicun*" (惠存) are often seen on Chinese presentation silver, conveying the sentiments "respectfully presented" and "please save", respectively. Other words, such as "commemoration" (*jinian*, 紀念), would often come already inscribed on the middle of one surface of each piece, so that the buyer might be able to purchase the silver in advance and have it engraved with the appropriate congratulatory wording and names at a later date.

Occasionally, however, there are silver items lacking any reference to an event or period of time, making them difficult to accurately date. In such circumstances, the only viable way to pinpoint a possible date is by judging the item stylistically. Shows an enamelled silver incense-stick holder that was presented to Horatio Bates Hawkins (aka. *hajinsi*, 哈金丝, 1884–1972), a high-ranking American functionary in the Chinese Maritime Customs Service who worked in several Chinese custom houses. Only two phrases were engraved on the silver: "Commissioner Hawkins Please Save" and "Chinese Team Members in Santuao Customs [aka. Fu'an Customs 福海關] Respectfully Presented". No mention is made on the silver of the date, but a search in the archives of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service reveals that Mr Hawkins worked in Fujian Province from 1932 to 1935: as a Deputy Commissioner in Xiamen Customs (1932–



## ART



Applied enamel on silver incense-stick holder presented to Mr Horatio Bates Hawkins in ca.1936.



Hand drawing portrait of Mr Horatio Bates Hawkins.

33), in Santuao Customs (1934), and then another final year in Santuao Customs after a year spent working outside the Customs Service (1935). This silver incense-stick holder was probably given as a memorial gift by his staff at Santuao Customs when he was due to leave in 1936. The enamel is too fragile to be worked, so to avoid breaking the brittle material the inscriptions were engraved on silver slips soldered to the item's base. This prestigious piece was ordered from the local silversmith/maker *baozhen* (寶珍) in Baishi County (白石鎮) near the Fu'an River. In Republic-era China, Baishi County and Sanduao were both crucial places for manufacturing enameled silver wares. Many of the silver utensils were for export, inasmuch as they were often presented to people leaving China, and this intended purpose is often reflected in a more hybrid style or a more traditionally Chinese style for use by locals in meeting the needs of the foreign community. At the time, both of these places were centers for foreign trade, and it was second nature for locals to know how to please foreign clients.



Inscriptions on the base of the incense-stick holder.



## ARTE

Another American also serving in Fujian as Deputy Commissioner, prior to Mr Hawkins, was the well-known Lester Knox Little (1892–1981) who later served as the last Inspector-General of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service for the Republic of China. He held the position in Fujian from 1922 to 1924, in charge mostly of the Old Customs (*changguan*, 常關) of the Xiamen Customs Service.

A silver tea set was purchased by Mr Little's staff in the Old Customs and presented to him as a commemorative silver piece before his departure for another port in China. Few silversmiths, makers or retailers were able to produce hollowware or large pieces in Xiamen at that time, so Mr Little's colleagues had to acquire the set from Shanghai, where it had been manufactured by the silversmiths/makers *baocheng yuji* (寶成裕記), from Shanghai Silver & Jewellery Deals Guild for the Great Nine Brands, and *tianbao* (天寶). The teapot was made by the former, the two cups by the latter. Each of the cups was engraved with two phrases – “Xiamen Old Customs Respectfully Presented” (廈常關敬呈) and “Deputy Commissioner Please Save” (副稅司惠存) – totalling just ten Chinese characters, so the useful information that can be gleaned is quite limited. The inscriptions on the outer rim, however, show a similar format to the aforementioned incense-stick holder, reading “Dear Deputy Commissioner Mr Li Please Save” and “All Staff in Old Customs of Xiamen Respectfully Presented” (副稅務司李大人惠存 廈常關全體職員敬呈). From this, one can be sure that the set of tea wares was given to Mr Little by his staff in Xiamen Customs.

In his book<sup>5</sup> Neville John Iröns mentions a unique traditional table-screen with a mounted presentation silver plaque, which serves as the third example. The inscription on the silver translates as the date 1 January 1940. This was presented to a Mr Yu Guodong (榆國棟) by seven of his friends on his appointment in Dalian as Consul to Denmark that year, and it bears all the usual delightful Chinese wishes for prosperity and



Hand drawing portrait of Mr Lester Knox Little.



Silver tea set presented to Mr Lester Knox Little in ca.1924.

official advancement. It is recorded that Poul F. Elm, one of the Danes of the East Asiatic Company living in China at the time, held the post of Danish consul in Dalian from 1939 to 1947<sup>6</sup>; Yu Guodong was almost certainly the Chinese name given to Poul F. Elm. He was appointed in 1939 and yet would only take up his position as Consul in 1940, which is the probable rea-

## ART



Detail of the marks of silversmiths/makers on the tea wares.



Inscriptions on the outer rim of the tea set.

son why the silver is engraved with the date 1940. No further records under either the Danish or the Chinese name could be found, however, in recently published textual materials. This mounted piece of presentation silver is, in and of itself, clear evidence that the so-called Chinese Export Silver was in fact consumed mainly by the Chinese, and the term “Chinese Export Silver” had often proved misleading since its began being used in the 1960s. Unfortunately, the plaque does not carry a retail silversmith/maker’s mark, but as the place of presentation was Dalian the silver object most likely originated in Beijing.

The last piece of silver is an example of a piece of Chinese presentation silver containing a clear congratulatory sentiment, as it celebrated the forthcoming wedding of the Mollands. The original inscription on the silver dish, “睦蘭 先生 太太”, means simply “Mr & Mrs Molland”. Once again there is not an exact date available for this object. It is known that C.E. Molland, from Britain, worked in the Chinese Postal Service of Qiongzhou, Guangdong and Jiangsu between 1915 and 1941 and had a long tenure as the Jiangsu Postal Commissioner. News of the wedding was reported in *Millard’s Review of the Far East* in 1920 with the entry reading as follows:

“On Monday, November 22, the marriage took place at Nanking of Captain C.E. Molland of the Postal Service, Nanking, and Miss Tatiana, youngest daughter of General and Mrs Ivanoff, at the Da Shih Chiao Church, Nanking.”<sup>7</sup>

The dish was likely to have been presented to the new couple at the end of 1920 by three Chinese friends: Yu Guangzao (于光藻), Zhong Xiangfu (鍾香甫) and Wei Zhongyi (維鍾義). The names of the presenters of silverware were not always included in the inscriptions, which sometimes mention only the cause for celebration or commemoration, be it a birthday, promotion, etc. It is usually not problematic to find out the original date of a presentation silver, but to uncover the identity of the presenter or presenters is not always possible.





Silver dish presented to the Molands to commemorate their wedding ca.1920.

Chinese presentation silver is, by default, commemorative. Many of us have probably seen it, but few of us perhaps have realised that this is an exceptional category of 19th and 20th century silver from China capable of recovering facts about undocumented events. Just as for the new America's Cup – the Super Bowl trophy – silver has always been the preferred medium of choice for commemorating im-

portant events. In China, essential “custom-made” trophies, rewards, tokens and even utensils of appreciation and commemoration were adopted by Chinese people in 19th-century Chinese port cities simply as a result of having observed and assimilated the habits of the foreigners resident in those cities at that time. Such presentation pieces were usually given by local groups, organizations or even individuals to

foreigners – mostly Americans as in the previous examples – working in China, not only in appreciation, but also as a means to demonstrate, perhaps, that the Chinese might too be perceived as sophisticated and knowledgeable in Western ways – imitation is the best form of flattery. All this was very indicative of the trade and quasi-colonialist phenomenon that dominated many Chinese port cities – most of the treaty ports in some shape or form – in the lat-

ter half of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The curious penchant for forming clubs and institutions was a very 19th-century colonialist trait, particularly where the British were concerned. This, in turn, promulgated the whole concept of “commemorative” presentations. What existed in these ports was being replicated in the new Crown Colony of Hong Kong, which in the context of so-called “Chinese Export Silver” is one and the same thing: China. **RC**



## NOTES

- 1 Helen Sheumaker, Shirley Teresa Wajda. *Material Culture in America: Understanding Everyday Life*, Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2008, p. 411.
- 2 Ross Fox. Design, Presentation Silver and Louis-Victor Fréret (1801-1879) in London and Montreal, *Material Culture Review*, 2008(67), p. 26.
- 3 This author recently published a paper about a silver horse-racing trophy from early colonial Hong Kong called the Hunters Plate, a very early item of presentation silver in Hong Kong – see Huang Chao. “Hunters Plate: A Qing Dynasty, Silver Racing Trophy from Early Colonial Hong Kong” in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society Hong Kong Branch*, 2018(58), pp. 137–153.
- 4 Martha Lund Smalley. *Fletcher Sims Brockman (1867–1944)*. [http://www.bdcconline.net/en/stories/b/brockman-fletcher-sims.php, accessed 11th May, 2017].
- 5 Neville John Iröns, *Silver & Carving of The Old China Trade, The House of Fans London and Kaiserreich Kunst Hong Kong*, 1982, pp. 118–119.
- 6 Christopher Bo Bramsen, *Peace and Friendship: Denmark's Official Relations with China 1674–2000*, Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2000, pp. 104–106.
- 7 Thomas Franklin Fairfax Millard, John Benjamin Powell, John William Powell. “Men and Events” in *Millard's Review of the Far East*, No.14, Millard Publishing Company, 1920, p.721.