



Coins in early Hong Kong: 1903 five-cent coin

Like all other Hong Kong five-cent coins minted between 1866 and 1933, the 1903 five-cent coin was made of silver. It weighed 1.37 grams, which is equivalent to about 0.036 taels, earning itself a Cantonese nickname of “three-six” (as in “3” “6”).

In the early 1900s, fruit and vegetable wholesalers made their bids discreetly by talking in code, using six different Chinese characters to represent the digits 1 to 6. These Chinese characters were “之辰斗馬蘇零” (pronounced in Cantonese as “ji-sun-dou-ma-so-ling”): “斗” and “零” represented “3” and “6” respectively. As a result the five-cent coin was commonly known as “斗零”. This nickname has become so popular that it is still being used even though five-cent coins have been demonetised since 1989.

The 1903 five-cent coin had a diameter of 15 millimetres. It showed the bust of King Edward VII of Great Britain on the front. In 1903, a labourer earned a little more than five cents a day. Five cents could buy two to three catties of rice, or pay for a single-trip fare of the Star Ferry.



The front of the 1903 five-cent coin.

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