

# Made in China, even then

A mining project deep in the Yukon interior unearths a 17th-century Chinese coin

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This summer, archaeologists clearing the way for a new mining project deep in the Yukon interior unearthed a 17th-century Chinese coin—providing further tantalizing proof of a trade route hundreds of years old linking First Nations peoples with Chinese markets and seagoing Russian merchants.

Dug up at a traditional lookout spot high above a valley some 200 km north of Whitehorse, the coin was minted between 1667 and 1671 at the Xuanhua garrison, northwest of Beijing, during the reign of the Emperor Sheng Zu of the Qing dynasty. It subsequently travelled across the Pacific, then through mountain passes controlled at the time by the Tlingit First Nations, a passage that offers a fascinating glimpse into the business relations binding Russian traders with both China and Canada's pre-colonial North. Those visiting Russians offered First Nations traders such goods as tobacco, glass beads, tea, kettles and coins in exchange for sea otter, fox, beaver and other pelts, furs that in turn appeared for sale in China, says James Mooney, an archaeologist with Ecofor Consulting, who was on the dig that uncovered the coin.

Indeed, these coins were common on the northwest coast by the 18th century—this is the third found in Yukon—and were often sewn into armour worn by Tlingit warriors. That may explain this coin's unusual punctures, at each corner of a central square hole, which may have been made to ensure a securer fit on a tunic. Russian traders may not have been the first to arrive here, either: Mooney describes old indigenous accounts of arrivals wearing long “many-coloured silk” robes, their heads shaved in the front, the hair on the back “plaited into tresses”—perhaps the Chinese themselves.