

The Australian story behind two Tibetan facsimile ‘re-strikes’: 1950 ten srang and 1947 five sho

Barrie Newman

An unusual alliance between three South Australian numismatic entrepreneurs and the Dalai Lama in 1977 resulted in the issuing of facsimile strikings of two Tibetan coins despite the entrepreneurs wanting to produce an entirely new coin. It was in January 1977, following widespread publicity on the plight of the Tibetan refugees who had fled Tibet from Chinese oppression in 1959, that the directors of a South Australian-based company decided to try and raise funds for the Tibetans-in-exile by producing and selling a commemorative coin with the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet’s effigy on the coin.

The company, Pacific Promotions Pty Ltd, had already had success in marketing commemorative coins for the governments of Western Samoa, Tokelau and Fiji (which countries received royalties from the sales of their commemorative coins) and was in the process of designing commemorative coins for Nepal and the Solomon Islands. The directors believed that they could offer similar arrangements for the Dalai Lama, particularly as collectors worldwide would be attracted to buying a unique coin and, in so doing, assist financially the thousands of Tibetan refugees now living in India.

The company had difficulty in getting support to strike such a coin from the mints

it had been using to strike coins, the Royal Australian Mint and the Singapore Mint, due to possible political ramifications. The directors also approached the Perth Mint and other major mints, and met with a similar response. It looked as though the project would not get off the ground.

In the meantime, however, the company had already cut a likeness of the Dalai Lama on to a die hub and the directors had arranged a meeting with the Dalai Lama at his enclave in Dharmasala in northern India for 26 April 1977, to discuss the proposal (Fig. 1a).

The directors recommended that although it was to be classed as a commemorative coin and would not be circulating currency, to appeal to collectors it would be necessary for it to be legally recognised by the Dalai Lama’s Government-in-exile and to be redeemable for its face value in Dharmasala.

The Dalai Lama was very interested in the submission but advised the directors that under no circumstance could he countenance a coin being authorised and issued by his Government-in-exile, even if it wasn’t going to be circulating currency. He stated, ‘I and my people are guests of the Indian Government and we do not intend to create any discord with India



Figure 1a. Die hub of the effigy of the Dalai Lama. The date, 30 3 77, is punched around right of rim.



Figure 1b. Copper sample, struck from the die hub, shown to the Dalai Lama on 26 April 1977.

whatsoever. The Indian rupee is the legal tender for our people living in exile in India, and it would be rude of me to take it upon myself to issue another form of currency, no matter how trivial. Anyhow (he laughed) you have made me look too young and I am much fatter now!' (Fig 1b).

After further discussions, he said that he would, however, be prepared to approve re-strikes (using new dies) of some of the coins that he himself had authorised when he was ruler of Tibet, before the Chinese Communist troops invaded Tibet in October 1950. The directors advised the Dalai Lama that they would consider his suggestion of producing re-strikes for sale, however, in view of the difficulties they were facing in getting a mint to produce any coins for him, it was unlikely to proceed further.

Following their return to Australia, the directors decided to continue to approach various mints around the world and, finally, the Valcambi Mint, a private mint in Switzerland, advised that it would

be prepared to produce coins for the Dalai Lama.

Further unrest in Tibet, amid revelations that most of the temples and places of worship and learning had been destroyed by the Chinese communists, spurred on the directors and they decided to go ahead and produce a facsimile coin of one of the Tibetan coins approved and issued by the Dalai Lama before the Chinese occupation. As they knew they would be unable to obtain any actual dies, a 1950 Tibetan 10 srang coin was purchased from an Australian dealer and sent off to Valcambi Mint for assessment as to whether it would be able to accurately copy this coin. If deemed suitable, Valcambi was then to provide quotations for die production, striking costs and advise on finishes and packaging arrangements (Fig 2).

Circumstances for issuing such a coin looked favourable and it was decided that it would be necessary for further discussions to be held with the Dalai Lama



Figure 2. Obverse and Reverse of original 1950 Tibetan 10 srang billon coin.



Figure 3. Lead striking of the 10 Srang reverse received from Valcambi Mint for approval.

to finalise all arrangements. This was arranged for 21 May 1978 and, almost one year after the first visit, the Dalai Lama approved the issuing of facsimile strikings of the 1950 Tibetan 10 Srang coin. He also advised a detailed description of the Reverse of the coin:

The design depicts a pair of Mongoose facing a banner of victory over disharmony.

The pair of Mongoose represents prosperity, with each vomiting precious stones into a tray. The banner consists of three animals – one animal represents the offspring of the Sea Shell and the Crocodile, another, the offspring of the Fish and the Otter, and the third, the offspring of the Garuda and the Snow Lion. Each offspring symbolises the perpetuation of harmony and unity over the forces of discord, represented by each of the three pairs of animals, which are natural enemies.

At the head of the banner is Tibetan wording indicating the date of the coin—the 24th year of the 16th Cycle (there are 60 years to a Cycle and the 16th Cycle commenced in 1927).

The Dalai Lama stated that the obverse was a symbolic representation of

Tibet, comprising those elements which mostly depict Tibet—three snow covered mountains and a Snow Lion. Also depicted are the moon and the sun. The lettering around the outer edge of the coin indicates its denomination with official Tibetan Government wording.

The Dalai Lama’s written authorisation, was sent to the Valcambi Mint in Switzerland. This was quickly followed up with lead samples, firstly lead pressings of the punches taken from the new dies manufactured by the Mint (showing the relief as a negative) and then lead strikings from the dies before they were hardened, for the Dalai Lama’s approval (Fig. 3).

In order to appeal to collectors who would not normally be interested in restrikes or facsimile coins, it was decided to reproduce the 1950 10 Srang in gold and silver proofs as well as an uncirculated cupro-nickel version. (The metal of the original coin was billon, a mixture of silver and copper). The gold proofs were produced in 12 carat gold (50% gold, 50% silver, with a trace of copper to darken the alloy and give it a more golden colour) and the silver proofs in .925 sterling silver. The gold and silver proofs were encapsulated and supplied in plush-lined boxes with Certificates of Authenticity (Fig. 4). The



Figure 4. Gold and silver proofs (with presentation cases and Certificates of Authenticity) of the 1950 Tibetan 10 srang facsimile coins produced by the Valcambi Mint.



Figure 5. Obverse of uncirculated cupronickel 10 srang.



Figure 6. Printing block of official emblem of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile.

Tibet's exiled Dalai Lama authorizes coins

By David T. Alexander
Numismatics in the 1970s contains a number of bizarre elements, from the "coins" of such entities as Leonard Casley's "Hutt River Province" and the John Chulines Ross items from the Cocos-Keeling islands to Proofs of remote Caribbean islands. It should come as only a minor surprise to see walking like Banquet's ghost the numismatic relic of the vanished independence of Tibet, the Himalayan theocracy ruled by the Dalai Lama until the 1959 invasion by Communist Chinese forces. According to Nelson Eustis, Adelaide, South Australia, the exiled 14th Dalai Lama, ousted from Tibet by the communists in 1959, has authorized the issue of Proof gold and silver "coins," with cupronickel un-

circulated pieces completing the issue. The Valcambi private Mint in Balerna, Switzerland is striking the pieces, whose design is identical to that of the base silver 10 srang issued during the early reign of the reincarnated Bohisattva in 1948-49. These silver pieces bore a central obverse design of mountains with a lion in the foreground. Creating two major varieties were the astronomical symbols above the peaks, either a two-sun variety or one presenting both sun and crescent moon. This last type is the one resurrected for the exiled leader's 1978 issue. There were 14 Dalai Lamas in Tibet before the Red Army takeover; the 13th, Thupten Gyatso died in 1933. His successor Tenzin Gyatso, held to

be the next incarnation of Avaloki Tesvara, god of mercy, known as Chenrezi in Tibetan, was recognized as a child living in China in 1938. The Republic of China was heavily involved with Japanese invasion and communist insurgency at this time, and General Ma Pu-feng was offered the better part of a half-million dollars to release the child, who was then installed in the great Potala in Lhasa as Dalai Lama in 1940. The first Red incursion led to the flight of the young ruler, but a treaty cobbled up the

next year allowed his return until the final communist push into Tibet in 1959. The Dalai Lama and an estimated 80,000 of his subjects exiled Tibet, and most today are still residents of northern India. The exiled Dalai Lama has been heard from before in numismatics; in the mid-1960s a Franklin Mint-struck series in a variety of alloys including gold and Franklinium II portrayed the ruler on crown-sized medals marketed by the New York-based International Numismatic Agency with the title "Crown of Liberty." According to Nelson Eustis, the new issues are coins of a government in exile, wrongfully driven into exile but still possessing the sovereign power to strike coins. The Valcambi firm is reportedly striking 500 Proofs in .500

fine gold; 2,000 .925 fine silver Proofs; plus 5,000 Uncirculated cupronickel pieces for April release. The 32.3 millimeter pieces are priced at \$150 in U.S. funds for the gold, ordering limit one per customer; \$25 for the silver, limit two; and \$3 for the cupronickel pieces, no limit. Prices for the Proofs include handling and air mail delivery; the cupronickel price represents surface mail despatch. All Proof pieces are accompanied by a "certificate of authenticity" signed by the Dalai Lama. Handling sales are Tibetan Coin Distributors, Box 961, GPO, Adelaide, South Australia 5001. Nelson Eustis is known to many collectors as distributor of Western Samoa's coinage.



Artist's plaster model for the exiled Dalai Lama's reissue of Tibet's 1948-49 10 srang, now to be struck in .500 gold, sterling silver and cupronickel by the private Valcambi Mint, Balerna, Switzerland.

Figure 7. Editorial on Tibetan Restrikes, Coin World, March 7, 1978.

cupro-nickel uncirculated coins were supplied in clear hard-plastic cases (Fig. 5). Maximum mintages were set at: gold 500, silver 2000 and cupro-nickel 5000.

To facilitate the handling of the coins, the business name, Tibetan Coin Distributors, was registered by the three directors and a letterhead, featuring those words (also transcribed in Tibetan) was produced. The Dalai Lama's office provided art-work of the official emblem of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile and also the Dalai Lama's signature for use on the Certificates of Authenticity (Fig. 6).

Using photos from the lead strikings supplied by the Valcambi Mint and a photo of the Dalai Lama, the restrikes were then advertised in leading world numismatic newspapers, journals and magazines as well as the major newspapers in Australia, and some editorial coverage was also given to the Issue (Fig. 7).

Initial orders looked promising and the Valcambi Mint was authorised to go ahead with a first small production run and to dispatch them to Adelaide for distribution as soon as practicable. The first restrikes were received from the

Valcambi Mint on 23 June 1978 and, as further orders came in, additional orders were placed with the Valcambi Mint to strike more coins. Total quantities struck and delivered to the company in Adelaide by Valcambi Mint for the 10 srang were: gold proofs 226, silver proofs 550 and cupro-nickel uncirculated 2000.

With a number of orders emanating from collectors in the United States of America and the long lead time from concept to delivery of the finished product, it was thought necessary to quickly proceed with a second Tibetan restrike to keep up the momentum with collectors. The second coin selected was the copper 1947 5 sho, a smaller but quite interesting coin, and the directors also decided to reproduce this coin in 12 carat gold, sterling silver and this time with copper proofs. Like the first restrikes, approvals and authorisations had to be obtained from the Dalai Lama, and the original coin and the authorisations had to be sent to the Valcambi Mint which, in turn, produced lead strikings for approval. The second coin was then advertised in coin papers and magazines, similarly to the previous Issue (Fig. 8).

1947 TIBET PROOFS



Authorized by His Holiness the
XIVth Dalai Lama of Tibet

First ever proofs of this unusual 5 Sho copper coin featuring the three mountains and snow lion symbolising Tibet. Struck by the Valcambi Mint.

250 only GOLD PROOFS
1000 only SILVER PROOFS
2000 only COPPER PROOFS



Reverse and obverse of the
Tibet 1947 (Y-28) 5 Sho

Limited Offer
Due to small mintage please order immediately. Your remittance will be returned immediately if sold out.

First Ever Copper Proofs
These are the first ever Tibet & copper proofs. Gold, silver, and copper proofs have the same diameter, 29.6mm, all with reeded edge.



Certificates of Authenticity
The Gold, Silver and Copper proofs will each have a numbered Certificate of Authenticity signed by His Holiness, the XIVth Dalai Lama of Tibet testifying to the metal content of the specially struck proofs.

The Gold Proofs
The Gold proofs are .500 fine, gross weight 13 grams, reeded edge, supplied in a deluxe Swiss hinged-lid case, gold lettered. The Valcambi Mint in Switzerland is highly renowned for its beautifully frosted gold proofs. Mintage 250.

The Silver Proofs
The Silver proofs are Sterling silver .925 fine, gross weight 11 grams, reeded edge, supplied in a Swiss hinged-lid case with gold lettering. Beautifully frosted and mintage 1000.

The Copper Proofs
The Copper proofs will be supplied in a hard plastic slide-lid clear view case. The coin insert will be suitably inscribed. Mintage 2000.

"I authorized this 1947 coin when I was ruler of Tibet. I do not recognize the Chinese occupation of my country and I consider I have every right to order the 10 srang proof strikings."

(Statement by His Holiness the XIVth Dalai Lama of Tibet made at Dharmasala on 9 November 1979)

Order immediately from:
Tibetan Coin Distributors
G.P.O. Box 981, Adelaide, So. Australia

ORDER FORM

Prices in US currency

To — **TIBETAN COIN DISTRIBUTORS**
G.P.O. Box 981,
Adelaide, South Australia 5001
(118 King William Street).
Telephone 212-3576

Please send me the following Tibetan coins

_____ Gold 5 Sho Proof at \$190 \$ _____

_____ Silver 5 Sho Proof at \$33 \$ _____

_____ Copper 5 Sho Proof at \$18 \$ _____

ADD HANDLING/REGISTERED POST OF \$3 FOR EACH COIN ORDERED
(If airmail required add \$4 per coin) \$ _____

Total enclosed \$ _____

Name _____

Address _____

PRICES

GOLD PROOFS \$190
SILVER PROOFS 33
COPPER PROOFS 18

A charge of \$3 per coin is to be added to the above prices for handling and registered post. If airmail required please add \$4 for each coin.

Allow up to ten weeks for

Figure 8. Newspaper advertisement, *Coin World*, July 29, 1980.



Figure 9. Gold and silver proofs of 1947 Tibetan 5 sho facsimile coins produced by the Valcambi Mint.

Maximum mintages for the 5 sho were set at a lower figure than for the previous coin: gold 250, silver 1000 and copper 2000 and the first small run of the 5 sho restrikes was delivered to Adelaide on 11 August 1980. Total quantities struck and delivered to Pacific Promotions by the Valcambi Mint for the 5 sho were: gold proofs 90, silver proofs 500 and copper proofs 1000 (Fig. 9).

It was interesting to note the inclusion of the two coins as restrikes in the Krause and Mishler Standard Catalog of World Coins 1982 edition under Tibet/CHINA. The 5 sho was given the numbers Y # 28.1a (copper), Y # 28.1b (silver OMS) and Y #28.1c (gold OMS), while the 10 srang was shown as Y # 29b (copper-nickel).¹

Unfortunately sales of the restrike facsimile coins were insufficient to provide any meaningful returns whatsoever, and the project was discontinued a few years later. Obviously, these Tibetan restrikes were not of major interest to numismatists, the designs were not interesting enough (particularly the 5 sho, with only lettering on its reverse) and even the introduction of gold, silver and copper proofs did not seem to appeal to collectors. Unsold coins remaining were: 1950 10 srang restrikes—120 cupro-nickel uncirculated and

the 1947 5 sho restrikes—7 gold proofs, 266 silver proofs and 802 copper proofs.

A few years later Krause and Mishler dropped the entry of the re-strikes from their Catalog of World Coins, now only showing a note after each denomination:

5 Sho—Note

A modern medallic series dated 16–21 (1947) exists struck in copper, silver and gold which were authorized by the Dalai Lama while in exile. Refer to Unusual World Coins 3rd edition, Krause Publications 1992.

and,

10 Srang—Note

A modern medallic series dated 16-24 (1950) exist struck in copper-nickel, silver and gold which were authorized by the Dalai Lama while in exile. Refer to Unusual World Coins 3rd edition, Krause Publications 1992.²

These replica coins were referred to by the Dalai Lama as restrikes and advertised as such. While this project was not financially successful, and the restrikes were of little appeal to collectors, they do, however, have a place in Australian numismatic history. They reflect the beginning of an era when comparatively modest Australian entrepreneurs could seek out small and often poverty-stricken nations, and in this case a government-in-exile, offering them a supply of funds in the form of royalties based on sales of coins. It is unlikely that such small companies could now compete against the large global organisations that dominate this industry today. The story of how three

Adelaide directors approached the Dalai Lama, a man revered by many westerners as a great diplomat, is unique. While these restrikes were originally shunned by many collectors, and today over thirty years later collectors are still averse to these types of products, they are a legacy of the integrity of the Dalai Lama and the enthusiasm of Australian numismatic entrepreneurs of a past era.

References

1. Krause and Mishler 1982 Standard Catalog of World Coins.
2. Krause and Mishler 1996 Standard Catalogue of World Coins 23rd Edition – “TIBET” pages 2030 and 2031.

Barrie Newman is Executive Director of The Adelaide Mint, which company took over the numismatic business and stock of Pacific Promotions Pty Ltd on 3 February 1982. Barrie is a past President and currently Secretary of the Numismatic Society of South Australia and is on the JNAA Editorial Board. Barrie was one of the three directors involved in the production of the Tibetan restrikes and was appointed to directly liaise with the Dalai Lama after their initial meeting with him. adelaidemint@bigpond.com