

Remarks on “Wages on the free market, 1737-1820”

A few sources inform us about market wages, but there are a number of difficulties with the wages mentioned therein. What we find are scattered observations of wages paid in different occupations, in different regions, using different means of payment (silver tael or copper cash), covering different time periods (per day, month or year), and spread over a long period. The most important source used here is Peng Zeyi, *Zhongguo jindai shougongye shi ziliao 1840–1949* (Materials for early modern Chinese craft history), vol. 1, pp. 396–414, which is based on judicial records from the period ca 1740-1820. They are contained in the archival documents of the Ministry of Justice *Qingdai xingbu chao'an* 清代刑部抄案 (Copies of archival materials from the Qing Ministry of Justice) in the collection of the Institute of Economics of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.¹ In total 157 observations of actual market wages could be collected.

Units

Monetary units

In comparison to the quotations of wages paid by the state authorities, we find a greater variance of monetary units in these records. These all pertain to copper cash, the only Chinese coined money in circulation before the second half of the nineteenth century.

The copper cash was actually an alloy of copper, tin, zinc, and lead. The coins had a hole in the middle and could be transported on strings of 100. These again could be bound together in strings of 10. Monetary units for copper cash are:

wen 文 = one cash coin

chuan 串 or diao 吊: strings, normally of 1000 wen.

For bigger transactions, uncoined silver in the form of ingots was used. The basic unit is *liang* 兩 or tael, a weight of ca. 37 gram, but with local variances. The four most common taels

were the treasury tael (*kuping liang* 庫平兩), a measure set by the Board of Revenue, used for official accounts, equivalent to 37 grams silver; the customs tael (*haiguan liang* 海關兩), adopted after the Maritime Customs was established in 1858, and used for tariff, equivalent to 37,68 gram; the Canton standard tael (*Guangping liang* 廣平兩) of 37,57 gram and the

transport weight tael (*caoping liang* 漕平兩), the standard for commuting the tax in rice, equivalent to 36.54 gram of silver (see Peng Xinwei. *A Monetary History of China (Zhongguo huobi shi)*. Translated by Edward H. Kaplan. 2 vols. Bellingham: Western Washington University, 1993, p. 669.)

The decimals of the tael are

qian 錢 = 0.1 tael or mace

fen 分 = 0.01 tael or candareen

li 釐 = 0.001 tael

hao 毫 = 0.0001 tael

The official exchange rate of silver tael to copper cash was 1:1000, but most often market exchange rates were applied in transactions.

¹ Peng Zeyi, *Zhongguo jindai shougongye shi ziliao 1840-1949*, vol. 1, p. 397, note 2.

Since wages were often quoted silver units (tael and decimals thereof), but paid in copper, and the exchange rate is most often unknown, the purchasing power of the monetary unit paid and received is often uncertain.

The monetary units occurring in this database are as follows:

daqian 大錢 (“big cash”). Palace cash of heavier weight and greater copper content than ordinary standard cash. See Werner, Burger, *Ch’ing Cash Until 1735*. Taipei: Mei Ya 1976, p. 12: “Palace cash, *neiting qian* 內庭錢, *gongting qian* 宮庭錢, or *daqian* 大錢. From Qianlong 17 (1752) until Daoguang 11 (1831) and again in Tongzhi in the 12th month a particularly heavy cash of 1.6 mace was cast, composed of 60% copper and 40% zinc. Bushell writes: ‘A number of heavier coins weighing 1.6 *ch’ien* are cast before the new year for distribution among the guards and eunuchs of the palace, made of pure brass composed of 60 percent of copper and 40 percent of zinc; [...]’”. Used in Shandong.

xiaoqian 小錢 (“small cash”). According to Burger, *Ch’ing Cash*, p. 19, this was a designation for debased or forged cash coins. Used in Rehe. See *dongqian*.

jingqian 京錢 (“capital money”). Used in the Mentougou coal mines and Beijing: another reference to “palace money”, or standard cash issued in the capital?

shiqian 市錢 (“market cash”). Other than the official cash, or cash exchanged at other than the official rate?

dongqian 東錢 (“eastern cash”). A unit of account and smaller cash than the standard, used in Manchuria (the “east” refers to the “three east provinces”) and Zhili. The *Decennial Reports* of the Imperial Maritime Customs, although of a later date, refer to this kind of money for the treaty port Newchwang (Niuzhuang 牛莊) in present-day Liaoning province: “The common currency at the port is the cash. 1,000 *tung* (東), or small cash, are called a *tiao*, which is the equivalent of 160 large, or ordinary cash. [...] No such coin as the *tung*, or small cash, exists, but the term is always used. Thus, a purchaser is told that the cost of the article he desires to purchase is, say, 1 *tiao* 500 cash; if he concludes to accept the article, he hands the seller 240 large cash in payment (Imperial Maritime Customs (ed.). I. Statistical Series, 6. *Decennial Reports on the Trade, Navigation, Industries etc. of the Ports open to Foreign Commerce in China and Corea [...]*, 1882-1891. Shanghai: Inspector General of Customs, 1896, p. 126).

Capacity

sheng 升 (“peck”). 1035 ml.

Weight

jin 斤 (“pound”). 596,8 g

Length

zhang 丈. 3.2 m