

Chinese Match Safes/Vestas

By Neil Shapiro

After the invention of the friction match in 1826, the use of the friction match spread around the world and a number of countries made containers to hold the matches. One of those countries was China.

Today, Chinese Export Silver* holds an important place in the collections of silver aficionados, but not especially in the collection wants of match safe collectors. There seem to be several reasons for this; the lack of information on the subject, the scarcity of supply, the manner of ornamentation, and the difficulty of assigning artistic names to individual pieces, are a few.

In his authoritative research and recently published work, CHINESE EXPORT SILVER, 1785-1940, THE DEFINITIVE COLLECTORS' GUIDE, Adrien Von Ferscht, explores the world of Chinese export silver . While not directly discussing match safes, Von Ferscht, does have some examples of vesta boxes, and by simple extrapolation provides a significant amount of information for collectors of Chinese match safes.

Below are some examples of Chinese silver match safes culled from private collections:





All the images above are easily recognized as vestas by collectors, as they have hinged lids and visible strikers.

The example below is more difficult to visually discern.



According to Von Ferscht it was made by Chén Lian Ji, who worked in Canton, China from 1890 – 1920. It is made of Pak tong, an alloy of copper, nickel, and zinc. Pak tong was widely used by Chinese silversmiths and greatly admired since it did not tarnish as readily as silver.

Another Pak tong safe, without any ornamentation has a mark that has not yet been attributed to a particular maker:



官 guān (blowup of mark)

A vesta that is difficult to attribute to the Chinese is shown below:



It looks very Japanese and if you count the talons on the dragon there are three. Supposedly the Japanese depicted three talons, the Chinese four, and if there are five the dragon was of royal provenance. But Von Ferscht identifies this vesta as the work of Pao Cheng who worked in Hong Kong and Qīngdǎo (or as we know it today, Tsingtao) from 1860-1947+.

One possibility for the Japanese appearance of this vesta lies in the history of Tsingtao which was a German concession for a while and was occupied by Japan until 1922 when it was returned to Chinese rule. (Note: The city is known for its beer and architecture, a legacy of the German occupation.)

The last vesta shown in Von Ferscht's work (below) is credited to Kwan Wo (aka: Kun He) who worked in Canton and Hong Kong, 1875 – 1940.



Both sides of Kwan Wo's vesta



Chinese match safe from the collection of Li Yongjin

So a question is how to distinguish Chinese from Japanese vestas or from other Asian match safes. It is a tricky question since match safes were made by Chinese silversmiths working in various geographic localities, and some are marked and many are unmarked.

Vietnam, Korea, Thailand, Tibet, Burma, Taiwan, Bhutan, Nepal, and other countries all had silversmiths working in their distinctive styles but they also had a significant number of Chinese smiths working there. Add to this diaspora of Chinese silversmiths those Chinese smiths working in the Straits, make it difficult to state where some of the export silver match safes were made and by whom, especially since much Strait silver has Chinese chop marks. (Note: The Straits here refer to the Straits of Malacca, the link between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, the shortest sea route between India and China.)

There is one quality of some Chinese silver that may help identify a vesta as Chinese although there are exceptions with ordinary vestas.

If the match safe has repoussé work it will usually have a double wall (or skin), since China had a large amount of silver and maker's worried less about weight than quality. If the interior of the piece is smooth it probably means that the double wall has been employed and the vesta is of finer quality. I have found many Chinese match safes do not have a double wall, probably meaning they were not the best work.

To illustrate the difficulty in determining whether a vesta is of Chinese origin or from somewhere else look at the safe pictured below.



Side view



Striker



Opening to insert matches

There are no marks and the design does not appear to be distinctly Chinese. It was, however, purchased in China and purportedly to be Chinese in origin.

*This essay examines Chinese Export Silver rather than internally used silver used since it does not seem that the Chinese population ever widely used vestas, but rather made most vestas for distribution to the West. The same might be said of Japanese vesta production.

The question of why the Chinese never embraced match safes for their own use is difficult to answer. Certainly the Chinese wholeheartedly took to the use of tobacco in various forms of usage. They adopted the use of shredded tobacco in the 17th century, snuff in the 18th and part of the 19th century, and at the end of the 19th century, going forward into the 20th century, cigars and cigarettes. All of these forms of tobacco use required igniting the tobacco in some form to enjoy its use.

Did the upper classes use servants to ignite their smoking products? But if so, how did the servants light the pipes, the hookahs, cigars, etc.?

Were the Chinese reluctant to adopt a Western form of ignition for their tobacco use? If that were the case how to explain the interactive nature of the local Chinese smoking culture with broader transregional trends. For example, the importation of the industrial cigarette at the end of the nineteenth century was not a radical rupture with the past but was rather a further manifestation of this earlier adoptions of the tobacco culture.

To expound on this point consider the snuff bottle; originally imported from Europe, snuff and snuff bottles were required accessories for well-connected patricians throughout the eighteenth century. They were frequently used in the elaborate system of gift exchange among the elite. The snuff bottles, an acquired taste from the Europeans, were made from imported jade, Japanese coral, Baltic amber, ivory from Africa, some enamel techniques learned from the European missionaries, and often portrayed images of European subjects. So it is difficult to think of the Chinese being xenophobic in regard to the use of a vesta case to hold inflammable matches.

Thus, the shift in Chinese consumer preferences from pipe tobacco and snuff to the cigarette, 1880 -1937, is regarded as part and parcel of the internationalization of daily life occasioned by China's encounter with Western-style capitalism and modern Euro-American consumerism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The match safe, an adjunct to smoking cigarettes at this time, is nowhere to be found in China, except for export to the West.

To think that maybe the friction match and vesta box was too new an invention for late 19th century Chinese to adopt, consider Christy Miller writing in the 1903 "Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs" in his tri-part article on tinder boxes. Miller writes, "Down to about the year 1830, the tinder box was to be found, almost as a matter of course, upon the kitchen shelf of every home in the land – mansion and cottage alike. ... Yet its disappearance was extraordinarily sudden and complete after the introduction of the friction match, which was an entirely new contrivance for procuring fire. Less than a generation later – almost, in fact, within a decade, the tinder box had become a vague tradition of the past" The tinder box had been used for generations to procure fire for the Chinese.

To further emphasize this point consider this citation from a prominent Chinese match collector, During the reign of Emperor Daoguang (1782-1850) in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), the exotic [foreign] matches first entered China. They were sent as a gift to the emperor and soon became popular among the aristocracy. Many foreign firms made enormous profits from selling the matches. (<https://www.shine.cn/feature/art-culture/1903080810/>). Zhu Ying, "History of fire-making kindles a collection.")

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