

CHINA'S FIRST STAMPS

By NICK A. CUTAJAR

In China the postal system is a very early development of the government. There are historical records of a horse posts operated by the central government during the Western dynasty (1122-772 B.C.). This system, usually referred to in China as "post station" had already become quite efficient and well-developed by the time of the Ching dynasty (221-207 B.C.). However, since the 'post station' system was solely available to convey government and military despatches, the public could not use it.

During the latter period of the Ching dvnasty (1644-1911), the Imperial Maritime Customs started the modern Chinese Postal Service, and began to accept mail items from the public. Consequently, the first Dragon Customs issue of three stamps was released in 1878.

THE CUSTOMS DRAGON ISSUE

The Customs issue of postage stamps consisted of three stamps with denominations of 1 canadrin, 3 canadrins and 5 canadrins; the Dragon formed the basic design known world-wide as the Customs Dragon Issue, and usually also referred to as the "Large Dragon Stamps", because the size of the image area of these stamps is larger than that of the 2nd Customs Dragon issue which was released later. It is to be noted that a canadrin is one-hundredth of the Chinese ounce of silver, China's currency at the time.

THE DESIGN

The Dragon on the first Customs Issues symbolized the imperial power in ancient China and it was featured on stamps as the Chinese national emblem. The stamps appeared in three different colours: 1 canadrin in green, 3 canadrin in red and 5 canadrins in orange-yellow. The dragon in the design appears to be playing with a pearl, and the English word "CHINA", was inscribed at the top, inside the frame. Chinese characters, translating "Great Ching court" are inscribed in the upper left and right corners. The right panel contains Chinese inscriptions for "post office", while the right panel refers to the face value of the stamps. In the lower two corners are printed the Arabic figures 1, 3 and 5 with the English word, "CANADRIN" or "CANADRINS" in between.

CLASSIFICATION

The Large Dragon stamps were printed by the Chinese Customs Statistical Department in Shanghai. Classification of these stamps depends on type of paper, image area and the dates of issuance. The first types were printed on thin paper with no watermark, the interval between two stamps being 2.5mm, and are usually referred to as the "Large Dragon Thin Paper Stamps".

In 1882, stamps with a wider margin were issued. This same paper was used for the first two values, but the French half-transparent pelure paper was used for the 5 candarins stamp. The stamps were printed 4.5mm apart, thus obtaining a wider margin than that on the first issues. This heavy paper was utilized the following year with the space between any two adjacent stamps being 2.5mm.

Perforation differences provide two classes, namely "thick paper smooth perforation" and "thick paper rough perforation". The Statistical Department of the Chinese Customs used a perforating machine with a $12\frac{1}{2}$ perforation, but due to constant tear and wear, the needle of that perforating machine gradually became blunt giving a rough perforation to later issues of the thick paper stamps.

PRINTING PLATES

For each denomination of the Large Dragon series, a mother die was carved, from which similar medal dies were cast; twenty-five of these casts were assembled to form the plate. It seems at first glance that stamps of the same denomination printed by these printing plates of individual dies are identical in patterns, strokes of the Chinese characters, and in the figures. But on closer examination, one observes that each individual die has its own characteristics, with broken lines and scars helping in the identification.

It is interesting to note that after the completion of the first printing (and any subsequent printing from the dies), the plate was dismantled into individual dies and stocked separately. When a new printing was required, these dies were once again built up into a plate of 25 dies, with no attention being given to the previous setting of the dies. Consequently, there were different plates for each new printing, giving rise to different printed sheets.

Research has so far ascertained the existence of at least seven different plates for the 1-candarin stamps, fifteen types of plates for the 3-candarin stamps, and seven plates for the 5-candarin stamps.

VARIETIES, QUANTITIES AND CIRCULATION

Varieties of the Large Dragon stamps are not many, mostly involving plate-varieties, perforation, type of paper and minor constant flaws, the most spectacular being an extra semi-circle beside the "3" at the lower-left corner of the fourth die of the 3-candarin stamp, printed on thick paper since the twelfth plate. According to a report by a Chinese specialist, the quantity of stamps printed of all three values from all the printings amounted to just over a million.

According to statistics based on postmark impressions, the Large Dragon stamps were used in fourteen localities, namely, Peking, Tientsin, Shanghai, Newchang, Chefoo, Chinkiang, Ningpo, Ichang, Hankow, Kiukiang, Amoy,

Taku, Wuhu and Wenchow, which indicates that the Customs Post Service laid more emphasis and offered a more efficient postal service in northern China at that time.

The first Customs Dragon stamps were the first postage stamps issued by modern China. A glance reference in "Stanley Gibbons Overseas Stamp Catalogue 1" under the heading of 'China' will provide a better insight into the postal history of China. Thus although 1878 is described as the year ushering the first Chinese stamps, it might be appropriate to clarify that earlier, in 1865, stamps were also issued for use by the Shanghai local postal service operated by the Municipal Council of the city.

The Chinese Imperial Post Office was established by a decree of March 20, 1896. The Twentieth Century saw further developments, in the postal service, as a result of political upheavals. Today the Chinese empire is composed of the People's Republic of China and the Chinese Nationalist Republic, better known as the Republic of China, or Taiwan.

Taiwan has taken up the initiative this year, to commemorate the centennial of the first official Chinese stamps with a full-scale International Exhibition, ROCPEX TAIPEI '78, to be held between March 20-20. It will actually be the first International for China and will award medals for every class according to the judging by an international jury.

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