

History of United States Postal Relations with China

Prior to the War for Independence, trade between the American Colonies and China was channeled through Great Britain. After Independence, U.S. merchants started to deal directly with China, trading for valuable commodities such as silk, spice, tea and wood.

With the increase in trade came an increased need for communication between company outposts in China and their offices and trading partners back in the United States. The local Chinese postal system was inefficient and unreliable. Due in part to isolationist attitudes and a lack of deep-water-capable vessels, China could not be relied on to carry mails. Most mail during the early period was carried privately aboard ships to and from China.

After the First Opium War and the signing of the Treaty of Nanking in 1841, the British set up a system of post offices in strategic port cities to facilitate their trade with China. It was not long before other major powers, including France, Japan and the United States, followed, gradually expanding from Shanghai to other cities such as Amoy, Tientsin and Nanking. Shanghai was a strategically important city, as it was the northernmost deep-water port that could be kept open all year, and served as a conduit for goods from northern China.

Mail to and from the U.S. was sent through the U.S. Consulate in Shanghai, and at first there was no dedicated postal employee. The sorting and sending of the mails was handled by consular employees, who frequently had to stop other duties to handle the increasing volume of mail. As the volume increased, a petition was made and eventually granted for the Consulate to hire a separate paid clerk to sort the mails, with a budget and authorization to hire additional workers as needed.

The following summary of postal receipts in 1885 indicates the relative volume of mails of the different postal services operating in Shanghai in 1885 (from *Imperial China: History of the Posts to 1896* by Major Richard Pratt FRPSL):

British Postal Agency—\$17,259

British Postal Agency (Rent from Private Letter Boxes)—\$1,400

French Post Office—\$13,000

Japanese Post Office—\$14,000

U.S. Postal Agency and Municipal Local Post Office—\$12,000

Shanghai Local Post Office—\$7,200

By early 1900, a vocal and violent opposition to foreigners resulted in the Boxer Rebellion. The first Boxers were members of a secret group loosely translated as “Fists of Righteous Harmony”, who received the name of Boxers by westerners due to their practice of martial arts. This movement was dedicated to halting the increasing influence of foreigners in the daily affairs of governance and independence of China. The Boxers isolated and besieged communities of foreigners in Beijing. A coalition of international forces, including those from the United States, were sent to end the sieges and reassert foreign influence in China. On August 14, 1900, the city of Beijing was occupied by the foreign coalition, who looted the city.

The Boxer Protocol, signed on September 7, 1901, forced heavy restriction on China, including substantial fines, a prohibition on the importation of arms, the destruction of key forts such as the one at Taku, and permission for foreign powers to maintain a presence in additional cities to facilitate trade and communication.

In 1907 the U.S. Postal Agency in Shanghai moved from its offices at the the U.S. Consulate to a separate location at 16 Whangpoo Road. A full-time postal agent, John Darrah, was appointed by the U.S. Postal Service.

The punitive terms, in addition to other factors such as increased focus on Western education and other standards, eventually led to the collapse of the Manchu dynasty in 1911. The next several years were ones of great political turmoil, as entrenched power bases fought against more modernizing ideas.

The admission of China into the U.P.U. in 1913 was not cause enough for the foreign powers to close their post offices. In 1919 the United States introduced sixteen denominations of surcharged stamps for use in the Post Offices in China. The surcharged value was exactly twice the face value of the stamp, reflecting the value of the local Chinese currency which traded at 2-to-1 to the U.S. dollar. Prior to the surcharges, payment had to be made in U.S. dollars for postage stamps, which was an inconvenience to users.

For approximately one year, beginning in October 1921, the overprinted U.S. stamps were withdrawn from sale, because the local currency fell in relation to the U.S. dollar, creating the opportunity for currency arbitrage.

After the close of World War I, provisions were made for the closing of all foreign post offices in China except as specifically provided for in the treaty. Accordingly, the U.S. Postal Office in Shanghai was closed for business after December 31, 1922.

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Timeline of Historical Events

- 1786**
Opening of first U.S. Consulate in China, in Canton.
- 1839**
Mar. 10—Imperial Chinese Commissioner Lin Tse-hsu arrives at Canton, signaling the start of the First Opium War.
- 1841**
Jan. 26—Date of secession of Hong Kong to Great Britain.
- 1842**
Signing of Treaty on Nanking by China and Great Britain, marking end of the First Opium War.
- 1844**
Apr. 16—British Post Office opens in Shanghai
Jul. 3—U.S. and China sign Treaty of Wangshia at Macao, opening five ports of trade for Americans and the residence of U.S. Consuls. Treaty to be renewed after twelve years.
U.S. opens consulate in Amoy.
- 1856**
October—Start of Second Opium War.
- 1858**
Jun. 18—Treaty of Tientsin negotiated between the U.S. and China, which replaces the Treaty of Wangshia. Allows U.S. citizens permission to “frequent the port and cities of Canton and Chau Chau, Amoy, Fuh-chau, Taiwan, Ningpo and Shanghai”
- 1865**
Feb. 17—President Lincoln signs bill authorizing establishment of mail service to China
- 1867**
Jun. 10—Opening of U.S. Consular Postal Service at Shanghai.
Nov. 19—Arrival date of cover bearing first recorded use of “China & Japan Steam Service” oval handstamp
- 1869**
Nov. 22—Arrival date of cover bearing latest recorded use of “China & Japan Steam Service” oval handstamp
- 1873**
Aug. 6—American-Japanese Postal Convention limits American Postal Agencies in Japan to the exchange of mail between Yokohama and Hong Kong
- 1875**
July 1—General Postal Union established. 5c rate applies to mails sent to/from China. China is not admitted as a member, but the rate is applied due to other conventions between China and Britain. 10c rate to Hong Kong in effect until 1877.
- 1887**
Apr. 1—Admission of British Post Office in Hong Kong and its sub-offices and Agencies in China to the U.P.U.
- 1895**
Jan. 1—Opening of Foochow local post office, independent of the Local Post Office in Shanghai.
- 1896**
Mar.—Imperial Decree establishes Imperial Chinese Postal Administration, under the direction of Sir Robert Hart.
Jun. 30—American Consulate at Ningpo closed. Thereafter, according to Pratt, mail was sent to the house of “a reliable American citizen—The Reverend J.R. Goddard”.
- 1900**
Jun.—International coalition of forces sent to China to quell the Boxer Rebellion.
Aug. 14—Entry of foreign forces into Beijing
- 1901**
Sep. 7—Boxer Protocol (Treaty of Peking) signed, setting out terms after Boxer Rebellion
- 1903**
Jun. 1—Rates for covers sent to U.S. from U.S. Postal Agency in Shanghai made equal to U.S. domestic rates.
- 1907**
Oct. 1—U.S. Postal Agency at Shanghai separated from the Consulate at 2 Chinkiang Road and moved to 16 Whangpoo Road. Appointment by Post Office Department of John M. Darrah as full-time postal agent at Shanghai.
- 1911**
Collapse of Manchu Dynasty
- 1913**
China joins U.P.U.
Dec. 20—Washington D.C. issues order denying its sanction of the Darrah overprints.
- 1917**
March—John M. Darrah resigns as postal agent at Shanghai. He is succeeded by Edward H. Everett.
Nov. 2—War Emergency Rate established
- 1919**
Jul. 1—War Emergency Rate repealed
Jul. 1—First Day of issue of the Offices in China currency surcharge overprints (Scott K1-16)
- 1920**
Oct.—Overprinted stamps withdrawn from sale when Chinese currency drops below 2-for-1 with U.S. dollar
- 1921**
Approx. Oct.—Overprinted stamps put back on sale when Chinese currency returns to 2-for-1 level.
- 1922**
Dec. 31—Last day of service of U.S. Postal Agency in Shanghai (office closed at midnight, and declared discontinued as of Jan. 31, 1924). Col. Clyde S. Ford is last Postal Agent.