



Shanghai Local Post: The 1865 Large Dragon Provisionals



Introduction

The purpose of this presentation is to review the history of philatelic comments and research pertaining to the first postage stamps to be printed and used in China, the 1865 large dragon provisionals of the Shanghai Local Post Office. In 1863 the multinational Shanghai Municipal Council opened a subscription-based post office to collect and distribute mails between the foreign settlement in Shanghai and Hong Kong and to deliver local Shanghai letters for both the resident foreign and Chinese populations. The Shanghai Local Post Office soon became one of the most important communications hubs in nineteenth-century China. So, it was not a "local post" by any standard definition.

Many of the standard postage stamp catalogs have tried, and continue to try, to treat these stamps using the same logic applied to other stamps of the world. It simply does not work. The production of these stamps is unique in the philatelic world, the way they were printed one stamp at a time rather than in a sheet format, on paper that was chosen randomly, in over 78 printings using a single forme composed of wood and metal to produce eight different denominations. This in a eight month period between August 1865 to March 1866. A history of the collecting and study of these stamps is certainly merited.

The earliest description of the large dragon stamps appeared in *The London and China Telegraph* of October 10, 1865. Printed in London, with Shanghai dates to August 16, 1865 it mentions:

"The new local postage stamps are great curios, and should be bought up in quantity to send home for the illumination of postage stamp albums. There are four kinds, viz. two candareens in black - four candareens in yellow - eight in green - and sixteen in red. The size, the superficies, as compared with a Hong Kong stamp, is as 528 to 270 - that is to say, they are almost as large again, and exhibit the following expression. In the centre a device intended to represent a dragon, though unmistakable as a caterpillar glowworm. On the top, in English, Shanghai L.P.O. , and the Chinese characters for Shanghai. On the bottom the value, say 16 candareens, and the Chinese characters for *Kungpoo*, and the local designation of the municipal council. On the dexter side the value in Chinese characters, as one *mace* and six *fun*, and on the sinister side, *Shuisinkwan*, Post-office. In use, both scissors and paste are required, the one to clip, the other to effect adhesion. As we say, the local post stamps are curious, figuratives of the time."

The Stamp-Collector's Magazine (London) of January 1, 1866 repeats Maury's November 1865 account of the four stamps first issued. A rendering of the 2 candareens stamp appears in their February 1, 1866 issue (Figure 1). The same article also chronicles and describes the first regular issue of Shanghai Local Post stamps, that was not received in Shanghai until March 1866.



Figure 1. image reproduced in February 1, 1866 "The Stamp-Collector's Magazine" and early forgery based on it.

A more thorough discussion of the stamps appears in the June 1, 1866 issue of the same London magazine and documents the second issue of stamps as well. The information comes largely from "Stampede" who writes from Shanghai under date of March 8, 1866 including:

"Now, as to the stamps. You say they are engraved, but that is not the case, as they are struck off by hand from wooden or ivory, dies, doubtless made here by the natives: in fact, a few days ago, a friend of mine informed me that he went to the post-office for some stamps, and that, not having the ones he required already printed, they struck off some while he waited.

(Regarding the candareen denominations and the 4 candareens "mace" error, print #20, and the second provisional issue): You say truly that there is no such coin as a candareen, it is merely a weight; in fact, the only Chinese coin that I know of is the 'cash,' about thirteen of which are now equivalent to one candareen. Payments in business are here made by weight of silver or gold, and the different weights are as follows: -

1 candareen
10 candareens = 1 mace
10 mace = 1 teal

The teal weighs rather more than one ounce.... In the 4 candareens stamps which I first sent over to you, and one of which I put in my collection, I notice a curious mistake. The Chinese characters on the left are 'Si T'sien Yin, i.e. 4 mace silver, equal to 40c. In the 4c stamps I now send you, however, the "Tsien has been altered to Fun, so that now the Chinese and English values correspond, which they did not before.

.... the 3, 6 and 12c stamps have been issued only lately, I believe, and I should not be surprised to see the colours changed at no far distant period, as at present these three are almost identical in that respect, which must have the effect of considerably retarding the usually quick process of obliterating the stamps at the post-office."

The same issue includes a listing of the new reduced postage rates of November 15, 1865 (Figure 2) that was clipped from the *North China Daily News* and supplied by "Stampede."

LOCAL POST-OFFICE.

It is notified for general information, that since the 15th ultimo, all letters, circulars, newspapers, &c., sent to the local post-office for 'town delivery' are charged at the rate of one candareen each.

To non-subscribers the following rates will, as heretofore, be charged for mail matter dispatched to, and received from, the River, Coast, and Japan ports.

Letters and packages—Native or
Foreign,..... 1 oz. and under 3 candareens.
Do. above 1 .. and under 2 c.z. 6 ..
Do. above 2 .. and under 4 12 ..

Newspapers and printed circulars, 2 candareens.

For every additional or fractional part of an ounce, 3 candareens.

With a view of ensuring security in the delivery of letters, a branch has been opened at Ningpo.

By order of the council,

ALEX. JOHNSTON,
Secretary.

COUNCIL ROOM,
Shanghai, 4th Dec., 1865.

Figure 2. November 15, 1865 Shanghai Local Post Office Rates as reproduced in June 1, 1866 issue of *The Stamp-Collector's Magazine*. The December 4, 1865 notice also mentions the opening of an office at Ningpo.

Jumping forward 30 years, the first major philatelic work on the 1865 Large Dragon issues of the Shanghai Local Post, written by W.B. Thornhill in *Gibbons' Philatelic Handbook of Shanghai* published by Stanley Gibbons in 1895 replete with 8 plates of stamp images. Thornhill showed that the stamps were printed one by one, from a single forme and that all eight denominations were printed from that forme with changes in the surrounding type as needed. Further, he was the first to publish a printing order for groups of the stamps.

John N. Luff, in his series of articles that appeared in the *The American Journal of Philately* in 1897, went much further towards an understanding of the subject and corrected Thornhill's print numbering system. He went a little overboard by identifying some

Regarding the dies used, Luff mentions, "I think we may safely conclude that the centre block was locally engraved on wood and the rest set up from metal type and rules, which could be changed at will, and frequently were." This conclusion seems warranted.

As to how the stamps were printed, Luff concludes, "I believe that the form - i.e., the central block with its type-set surroundings - was placed on a hand-press and the impressions 'pulled' from it, one at a time, just as proof impressions are pulled from dies today, but with far less care, of course, with inferior results. Luff's source was an 1870 article "from information obtained direct from Mr. Adams, the Manager and organizer of the office."

Regarding paper, Luff states, "I find all the varieties listed by Mr. Thornhill, but I cannot agree with his grouping by paper. ... I doubt if much attention was paid to the paper ... whatever was at hand was used." For me, it seems unfortunate that stamp catalog editors continue to list paper varieties of these issue as major numbers rather than second order numbers for this very reason. Publishers would do well not to enforce arbitrary logic when there was no logic at the origin.

Luff went on to try to justify using "groupings" of similar stamps even after admitting that any grouping that may be made of these stamps is, of necessity, arbitrary. These groups did work well as an interim solution before a more exact print order could be determined. Later students, including Lyons F. Livingston (1971) and Dr. Wei-Liang Chow (1996), have distilled Luff's 24 groups and 178 different printings (by eliminating shade varieties and varieties cause by minor slippage of fonts in a more strictly defined printing). The use of presumed groupings is no longer needed since the precise print order has been published by Fortune Wang (2016). Mr. Wang recognizes the 78 prints listed by Dr. Chow and has identified four additional printings that he identifies with a capital letter suffix. Another important observation noted in his book is the fact that several of his stamps show distinct of residual ink from the prior print run. This is important proving evidence of the accuracy of the sequencing.

Two figures on the following page are provided as a handy reference to the Chinese characters and the shape of the Antique, Modern and Roman numerals.



Figure 3. After Dr. Chow's "Stylized Model of Shanghai 2ca Large Dragon Stamp"

yi	一	one	1	2	3	4	6	8
er	二	two						
san	三	three	antique numerals					
si	四	four						
liu	六	six	I	Roman numeral				
ba	八	eight						
shier	十二	twelve	1	2	3	4	6	8
shiliu	十六	sixteen	modern numerals					

Figure 4. Numeral types