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MAIL CARRIERS OF CHINA

BY

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LETTERS POSTED in the Han Dynasty with the Imperial Chinese Relay Postal Service about the commencement of the Christian era, or, to put it more plainly, over two thousand years ago, were in those old bygone days less likely to have gone astray than they are to-day. For the time and date received, and despatched, from one stage to another, was noted on the cover, by the use of one of the twelve characters used in those days to represent a period of time of two hours, *Tsze* (子) 11 p.m. to 1 a.m., *Chiu* (丑) 1 a.m. to 3 a.m., *Yung* (寅) 3 to 5 a.m., *Mour* (卯) 5 to 7 a.m., *Zung* (辰) 7 to 9 a.m., *Tzu* (巳) 9 to 11 a.m., *Wu* (午) 11 a.m. to 1 p.m., *Wri* (未) 1 to 3 p.m., *Sung* (申) 3 to 5 p.m., *You* (酉) 5 to 7 p.m., *Shih* (戌) 7 to 9 p.m., *Hui* (亥) 9 to 11 p.m., or such other phrases as, *Jih-Chung*, (日中) "The sun is in the middle of the sky," *Ji-Hsia-Pu*, (日下晡) "The time for taking the evening meal," with the names of the stage masters and couriers who had handled the letter from one stage to another also being recorded on the cover. Mails were sorted and despatched according to their importance by the faster or slower means of transportation, important despatches being sent by horse-back relays, known as *Yih*, the riders being famous for their ability to change horses without alighting; while mail sent by coach was called *Chu*. (局) Unimportant third-class mail was despatched by foot runners and known as *Pu*. As time went on, the term *Yih* (驛) became the general accepted term used for postage and in order to make its meaning more complete, another character *Chan* (站) was added, and the term *Yih-Chan*, (驛站) or now romanised *I-Chan* (驛站) became the general term used for the relay Postal Service. Mail despatched on the water-ways by boat was known as *Shui-Yih* (水驛)—water stages.

The rulers of the T'ang Dynasty, issued and enforced a strict set of rules on postal procedure and laid down the minimum punishment to be meted out to couriers and post stage masters found guilty of breaches of same. For instance eighty strokes of the bamboo were the minimum punishment as specified by Imperial decree for a courier who failed to deliver a letter on time; for failing to despatch an urgent military document, the stage master or clerk responsible would be strangled; for mis-directing a letter to the wrong stage, bamboo or a year's imprisonment.

Couriers riding

on horse-back were bamboosed according to the weight of any unofficial goods they were found to be carrying. Government officials were the only persons other than post stage masters and couriers who were allowed to lodge at the relay postage stations.

Strict enforcement of these decrees brought into being the private postal agencies called *Ming Hsing Chu*, (民信局) Post Office for Civilians, now romanised *Min Chu* (民局) and still in operation in some provinces.

In the twelfth century, Marco Polo travelled along some of these postal routes on his journey to and from the capital, which he describes in the book of his travels as all leading to and from the city of Cambaluc, capital of Cathay (the site of which is close to the now Peking).

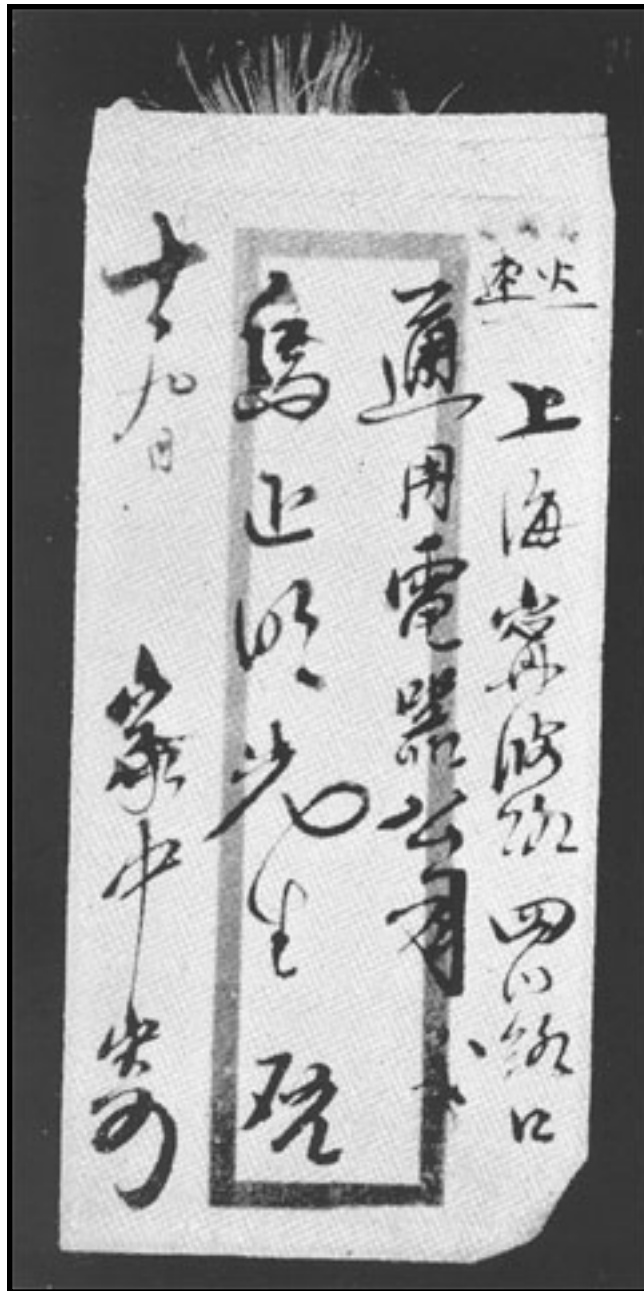
" These many roads and highways ran leading to a variety of provinces, one to one province, another to another, and each road was known by the name of the province to which it went. The messengers of the Emperor, in travelling from Cambaluc, be the road whichsoever they will have found at every twenty-five miles of the journey, a station which they call *Yamb*, or, as we should say, the Horse Post House, and at each of those stations used by the messengers there was a large and handsome building for them to put up at in which they found all the rooms furnished with fine beds and all other necessary articles in rich silk, and where they were provided with everything they could want. Even if a king were to arrive, he would find himself well lodged at some of these stations. Moreover, there were posted some four hundred horses standing ready for the use of the messenger, at others there were two hundred, according to the requirements and to what the Emperor had established in each case at every twenty-five miles, or at the most thirty miles. You would find one of these stations on all the principal highways leading to the different provincial governments and the same is the case throughout all the chief provinces subject to the great Khan, even when the messengers have to pass through a roadless tract where neither house nor hostel exists. Still then the station houses have been established just the same, excepting that the intervals are somewhat greater and the day's journey is fixed at thirty-five to forty-five miles instead of twenty-five or thirty. But they are provided with horses and all the Emperor' messengers come there from what region they may find everything ready for them.

" It is a fact that on all these posts taken together, there are more than three hundred thousand horses kept up specially for the use of the messengers and the great buildings that have been mentioned are more than ten thousand in number, all richly furnished on a scale so wonderful and costly that it is hard to describe it. Also at the great Khan's orders there had been established between those post houses at every interval of three miles a little fort with some forty houses round about it in which dwell the people who act as the Emperor's foot-runners. Every one of those runners wear a great wide belt set all over with bells so that as they run the three miles from post to post their bells are heard jingling a long way off, and thus on reaching the post the runner finds another similarly equipped and all ready to take his place who instantly takes over whatsoever he has in charge and with it receives a slip of paper from the clerk who is always at hand for the purpose, and so the new man sets off and runs his three

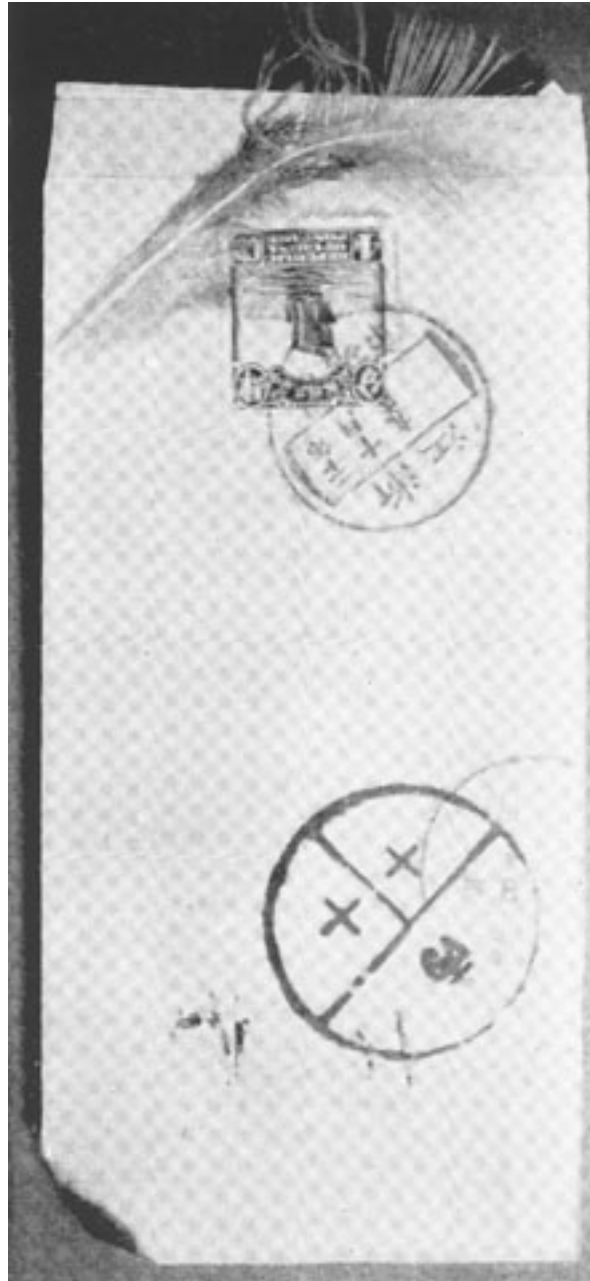
miles. At the post station he finds his relief ready in like manner and so the post proceeds with a change at every three miles. In this way the Emperor who has an immense number of these



The open Cover of a Letter forwarded fifty years ago through the Min Shin Yu or Min Chu is seen [above] and also displays the Company Chop requesting that the Reply be handed to the same Office.



Another Cover showing a Feather protruding from the Back and three burnt Spots on the upper right Corner denoting Emergency. No Carrier ever mislaid this Sort of Letter for Fear of bad Luck.



Another Cover with Feather and burnt Corner (Sign of Emergency), in most Cases it carried bad News.



Photographs by
R. I. Fernandez, A.R.P.S.



Stamp issued by the local Municipal Post Office of Shanghai in 1890.



An Overprint on a 1890 Stamp commemorating the Jubilee in 1893.



Two Cent Stamp of Shanghai issued in 1890.



One Cent Stamp issued by the Municipal Post Office of Shanghai in 1890.

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runners, receives despatches with news from a place ten days' journey off in one day and night or if need be, news from a hundred days' off in ten days and nights. In fact, in the fruit season, many a time fruit gathered in the morning at Cambaluc shall reach the great Khan at Shangtu, a distance of ten days' journey, in the evening of the next day. The clerk at each of the posts notes the time of each courier's arrival and departure and there are often other officers whose business it is to make monthly visitations of all the posts and to punish those runners who have been slack in their work. The Emperor exempts these men from all tribute and pays them besides. Moreover, there are also at those stations other men equipped similarly with girdles

hung with bells who are employed for express when there is a call for great haste in sending despatches to any governor of a province or to give news when any baron has revolted or in other such emergencies, and these men travel a good two hundred or two hundred and fifty miles in a day."

After the Yuan Dynasty stages where no horses or coaches were kept and where messages were carried on foot only were called *Pu*. In each *Pu* there were five to ten runners and one post-master. These runners were specially selected and were noted for their strength and fast running ability. Each runner was supplied with a weapon and rain-coat and a leather belt with little bells hanging on to it which they strapped around the waist. As they ran, the bells tingled out a warning to all the other traffic on narrow pathways to stand still or pull aside and make way for the Emperor's messenger, for to cause obstruction to a stage runner brought swift and terrible consequences.

During the Ching Dynasty stages both on the land and water were all well connected, even to far away Mongolia, Korea, Thibet and Annam. The first foreign mails came to China by sailing ships trading with Hongkong and Canton, and were brought on to Shanghai by coastal ships or junks.

When the port of Shanghai was opened in 1843 to foreigners as a Treaty Port, a temporary postal agency was established at the British Consulate with the Consular staff handling the mail for the local residents. This, to the dissatisfaction of the Consular staff, carried on until the early sixties when a Packet Agency was opened under the control of the Hongkong Post and housed in the old Gaol. The junior Consular Officials absolutely declined to have anything further to do with the sorting of letters or making up of the mail. Shanghai was asked to bear its share in the upkeep of the Packet Agency and the Shanghai Council contributed for a few years the sum of \$2,500 a year. The Council later complained that the Shanghai Agency was badly managed, that the staff was insufficient and badly paid, and considered themselves absolved from the agreement by breach of the understanding, and demanded the return of half of the \$2,500 that they had paid.

A local Post Office which had been mooted for some time, was at last established. The rates were set at Tls. 55 per annum for firms having branches in the outports or in Japan and Tls. 48 for others. Non-subscribers paid four candareens per ounce. For some time it hardly paid its expenses mostly owing to foreign subscribers kindly posting so much mail matter free of charge to oblige Chinese non-subscribers, and shipping agents increased the loss by forwarding letters free instead of refusing them and referring them to the Post Office. Following the procedure set in other parts of the world, the

local Post had stamps designed and printed in England at the cost of £100 and were first issued in March 1866, the rates being charged in Mexican dollar cents instead of candareen tael cents. Such large orders of mint stamps were received from stamp collectors and London dealers that

an order was issued by the Council in 1889 that stamps were only to be sold to residents for actual use, but six months later the order was cancelled. In the same year a rule was made that all postal matter must be repaid and the system of subscription was abolished. This was made necessary through subscribers sending mail for non-subscribers, sometimes to oblige, but in some cases actually charging money for doing it. Clubs and hotels too, paying only the usual annual subscriptions, were in the habit of forwarding mail for non-subscribers and hotel visitors, while the use of the letter boxes by subscribers for posting unstamped letters made it difficult for the Post Office to distinguish what was from non-subscribers, forwarded all to their destination at their own loss.

In 1885 the local Shanghai Post started to expand and an agreement was made with Nanking to operate a local post there as a more or less joint concern. Mails from Shanghai were distributed free of charge in Nanking and Nanking mails arriving in Shanghai were distributed in a similar way. An honorary receiver was appointed in Nanking who was in charge of dividing the expenses of the local Nanking post between the post subscribers of the port.

The increase and ever-growing traffic caused the need for the issue of special Nanking stamps and a proposition was made at first to the local Shanghai post to overprint the Shanghai stamp with the word "Nanking." The local Shanghai Post asked too much, fifty per cent., on the eventual sale of these stamps and no agreement could be reached. The Nanking Committee then decided to issue their own stamps which were first issued in 1896.

In the late eighties, Shanghai local post had established an agency in Foochow which operated until 1894, when that port also caught the stamp issuing fever along with the other Treaty Ports and published the following notice:

" Foochow Post Office, 1894. ---

The above Office will open on the first of January 1895 and the Shanghai Postal Agencies in this port and the Anchorage will be closed at this date. There-ore the stamps of the Shanghai local post will not be accepted anymore for franking letters. Until the arrival of the new stamps, booklets of \$1.00 and over will be issued. These booklets must accompany all letters or parcels to be sent by post and must be sent to this Office where the amount will be registered in the book.

By Order of the Committee"

Spreading still further afield, the local Shanghai Post established an agency in Amoy where its stamps were in use until 1895 when Amoy issued its own stamps. The opening of further agencies by the Shanghai local post was blocked in the middle nineties, when the China Treaty Ports, all attracted by the lure of easy profits, commenced to issue their own stamps; Hankow,

Chungking, Chefoo, Kiukiang, Ichang, Chinkiang, Foochow and Nanking all issued special stamps for use in their own ports. The river port of Chinkiang specialized in issuing unnecessary speculative issues with intentional errors and overprints and double overprints.

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Wuhu, another important Yangtze river port, owed the establishment of the local Post as well as the issue of various unnecessary stamp issues with intentional errors of that port, to the private initiative of a certain Mr. Gregson who unfortunately considered the matter as a financial enterprise to make money out of. It was on account of his behaviour chiefly that the Treaty Port stamps were eliminated in 1898 from collectors catalogues.

Tientsin was the only Treaty Port of importance that did not issue its own local stamps, although there were cases of stamp labels having been privately printed and sold as " Tientsin " stamps in order to defraud stamp collectors.

In 1896 the Imperial Chinese Post and outgrowth of the Customs Post was coming into its own and the local Treaty Port post offices and foreign national postal agencies established in certain Treaty Ports for the convenience of their nationals stationed there in the absence of an officially recognized Chinese Post Office, for neither Shanghai stamps or any other Treaty Port stamps could frank correspondence addressed to foreign countries, were asked to close. Neither the foreign consuls, the Chamber of Commerce nor the ratepayers of Shanghai thought it would be wise to close at once until a truly national Post was established, with the result that the local posts carried on. Peking then brought pressure to bear on the river and coast-wise shipping companies, and in 1897 the local steam-boat companies informed the local Treaty Port Post Offices that they could no longer carry any but the Imperial Government mails for inter-ports in China. The Shanghai ratepayers left it with the Council to decide on the course of action and an agreement was made with the Chinese Imperial Post to transfer in October 1897 the local Post staff and all strictly postal plant with the exception of postage stamps printed for the local post to the Imperial Post. The other Treaty Ports had no alternative but to follow suit and all local Treaty Post Offices were soon replaced by the Imperial Post Office. The foreign postal agencies continued until 1922 when they were all closed, with the exception of a few Japanese offices in Manchuria.

In the early sixties after the Foreign Representatives took up their residence at Peking, it was found convenient to arrange that the Customs should undertake the responsibility of making up and distributing the mails, a practice which, for the overland service during the winter months, involved the creation of a postal department in the Customs House at Shanghai, Chinkiang and Tientsin, and to facilitate the despatch of Customs documents, postal departments were gradually opened in all Customs Houses.

The growing importance of the service thus quietly built up and its convenience for regular communications with Peking and between Treaty Ports were not only appreciated by the foreign public but were also recognized by the Foreign Administrations having postal agencies

in China.

In 1878, China was formally invited to join the Postal Union, and although stamps were issued in that year by the Customs Post, no definite steps were taken until after the Chefoo Convention when the Decree of March 20, 1896, appeared. This Decree created an Imperial Post Office for all China to be modelled on Western lines, the management to remain with the Customs. This Imperial decision in no way abolished the Ichan the Imperial Government Courier Service ; it only gave final Imperial sanction to a new vast undertaking.

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Within one month of the inauguration of the service, China formally notified her intention to become a member of the Postal Union and from January 1, 1897, undertook the necessary obligations in respect of Union mails handed to her for distribution.

Actual adhesion to the Convention, however, was postponed ; as years passed and China came more into touch with other countries, it became necessary to conclude postal agreements with various countries. These agreements were based as far as possible on the regulations of the Union Conventions so that the way was well prepared for final entry into the Union as soon as the time for this step was considered ripe. Internally, all was not clear sailing ; the four cent rate for domestic letters was found too high to break up competition on the part of the long established native agencies—*Min Chu* (民局)—whose rates were considerably cheaper. At the instigation of the Chinese Imperial Post Office with a view to strangle the *Min Chu*, the Government issued a decree forbidding Steam Ship Companies to carry *Min Chu* mail under penalty of losing their franchises. Postal rates were also tentatively reduced to one cent in 1902 and although these low rates put some of the native agencies out of action, postal hong were still entrusted by the public with the transport of drafts payable to bearer, silver sycee and heavy parcels of merchandise and letters possessing some intrinsic value over the land routes and on the water ways by native boats. Later the Chinese Imperial post realised that the *Min Chu* agents could be of great assistance in the delivery of mails and the *Min Chu* was officially allowed to function in some places but under strict control of the Post Office. For instance all mail had to be sent forward by the Post Office, the *Min Chu* being allowed special rates for their Club Mails. For instance, the I.P.O. rate for a one-pound parcel from Chungking to Chengtu in 1910 was 15 cents while the *Min Chu* Private Postage Agency rate was four cents per pound. Letter rates of the I.P.O. by 1910 were up to three cents which was not excessive and was urgently wanted to improve the Postal financial position, and with a view to assisting the Post Office in its competition against the Ichan Imperial Relay services. These services, which had been attached to the Military Board from times immemorial, were by an Imperial Decree of about 1910 transferred to the supervision of the Ministry of Post and Communications, and in the same year suitable arrangements were made in Kiangsi Province with the provincial authorities for the transport along postal lines of all official correspondence to and from the various *yamen* of the province hitherto dealt with by the Ichan, and it was not unreasonable to expect at the time that other provinces would follow suit. Some time

afterwards, in 1911, the control of the Post Office was taken from the Customs and transferred and placed under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Posts and Communications.

The revolution of that year was soon under way and postal work was affected even in such outlying districts as Urga, Mongolia and Tchwafu in Chinese Turkestan. The Confederate Government system not having been established in some places, a temporary diversion of authority resulted in attempts to change the organization of the Post Office and to exercise an effective control over its working system. New designs of stamps were proposed, offers for financing independently of the Peking Directorate General were made and when certain office censors were forced the Post Office, however, stood its ground, and to the advantage of the service and public alike all parties shortly realized the inexpediency of interference and the Post Office preserved inviolate its independence.



[Above] is a counterfeit Stamp, a Copy of an Imperial Chinese Government Issue of 1870 and used until 1895 when Formosa was ceded to Japan.



Counterfeit Copies of Stamps issued by the Imperial Maritime Customs in 1882.



Counterfeit Copies of Stamps (issued in 1894 by the Imperial Chinese Government in Commemoration of the sixtieth Birthday of the Empress Dowager.



Photographs by
R. I. Fernandez, A.R.P.S.



On this Page are seen genuine Stamps as issued by the Chinese Imperial Post in 1902 to 1910 with forged Overprints. The Overprints read horizontally "Provisional Neutrality" and vertically "Republic."
The upper Photograph shows clearly that the forged Overprint was stamped over the Postal Cancellation Mark.

Photographs by
R. I. Fernandez, A.R.P.S.







Genuine Stamps with forged Overprints.



A genuine Overprint for Comparison. [above]



Genuine Stamps with forged Overprints. [above and below]

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A Copy of a freak Print from a Chinese Catalogue.



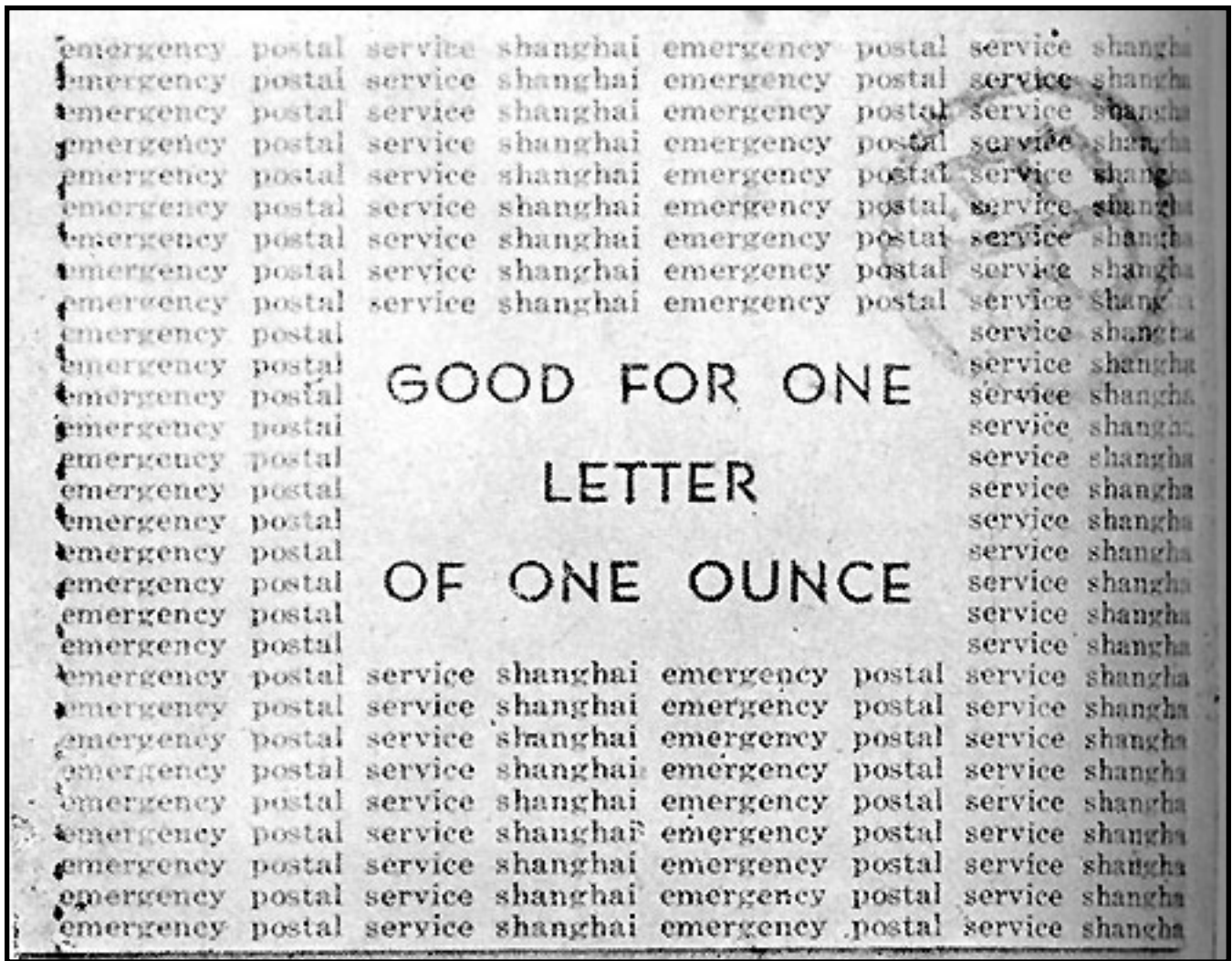
A genuine Stamp with a forged Airmail Surcharge overprinted vertically.

EMERGENCY POSTAL SERVICE
SHANGHAI

5 COUPONS FOR \$1.00

EACH GOOD FOR ONE LETTER
OF ONE OUNCE

[Above] is the Emergency Booklet issued by the Shanghai Municipal Council in the 1927 Postal Strike.



An Emergency Postal Stamp for a one Ounce Letter as issued by the Shanghai Municipal Council in 1927.

An important question at a time when North and South were not yet reunited was the superscription of stamps. Aiming at impartiality and at serving public interests only, it was decided by the Ministry to surcharge the stamps with a sign of neutrality and the characters *Lin-shih-chung-lih* (臨時中立) meaning "*provisional neutrality*" were impressed horizontally on certain denominations, and the stamps were placed on sale at Foochow. Objections were immediately raised, however, and the stamps were withdrawn when the governments of Peking and Nanking arrived at an agreement a few weeks later, the stock of unsurcharged stamps being then vertically surcharged with "*Chinese Republic*" "*Chung-hua-min-kuo*, (中華民國)" and these remained in issue until the stocks were exhausted. At the same time, to avoid waste, the stock already impressed "*Provisional Neutrality*" were overcharged with the new superscription "*Chinese Republic*" and issued with the rest. Their appearance at Nanking and Hankow, however, was disapproved of in certain quarters and they were almost immediately withdrawn.

With the passing away and replacing of the centuries old Imperial Dragon standard with the five barred of the Republic of China and the embargo on Customs revenue by the Foreign legations, almost simultaneously caused the stoppage of the three million taels annual subsidy to the Ichan Imperial Relay Service. Deep-rooted centuries old hold was eliminated and so passed the world's oldest and one of the largest civil services of all times.

Historians will most likely prove in some future date that the gradual replacement of the Ichan by the Western style postal service from 1865-1911 hastened the downfall of the century old Dragon Standard. It was not through their lack of foresight that the Imperial Palace had withheld from 1876 to 1897 for over twenty years the recognition of the Customs Post Service. The Ichan was far more than just a Post Service. From times immemorial the services had been attached to the Military Board, all roads lead to Peking. They were the nerve arteries of China through which the Emperor's Intelligence Service passed all their information on treasonal conduct, rebellion, and disasters on to the Capital ; news of events happening a thousand miles from Peking would be known sooner there than at places only one hundred miles across country from the affected area. Small bodies of well-trained troops could move quickly to points of threatening trouble, apprehend the culprits and whisk them to Peking before the locals and their confederates knew what had happened. At times of rebellion the service of the Ichan came under strict censorship, disrupting communications among the rebel ranks in all centres.

The closing of the Ichan was without doubt a great national loss, it was the invisible chain that had helped to hold a nation, better described a continent, with as many dialects and language difficulties as Europe, together in a common bond of craftsmanship, literature, art and learning.