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CHINESE AND THE HONG KONG POST OFFICE

In studying the postal history of Hong Kong, it is noticeable that Western researchers have very little information about the postal habits of the great mass of the population – the Chinese who served as cogs in the wheels of trade, who started their own businesses, or rose to prominence as compradors or councilors. The Chinese population soared, particularly after cession of the New Territories in 1898.

Material for study is very limited, or at least unrecognized, and the first stage is to identify and enumerate what is known. To establish the Chinese relations with the official post office will be difficult, but the following questions must be raised:

- 1) To what extent did the Chinese population avoid the use of the British Post Office, preferring to maintain its customary channels for mail?
- 2) To what extent could Chinese be served in their own language by the Post Office?
- 3) To what extent did the Post Office work in Chinese, rather than English?
- 4) To what extent was the Post Office willing to acknowledge Chinese as a language of commerce?

As is well-known, the Chinese government came very late to the idea of a postal monopoly. A speedy and secure government postal service (the I Chan) existed, but the public had to attend to the transmission of their own correspondence through travelers, friends, business contacts, or private letter agencies. These last were known as 'Min Hsin Chu' and were very well organized, and presumably, profitable, in the populous areas of the south, especially in coastal cities.

The central feature of this system was that the sender did not prepay the cost of carriage. A letter typically had half the fee prepaid, the second portion to be paid to the carrier or courier who delivered it. An extremely high degree of reliability was achieved and valuables were routinely sent over distances. In the major ports, following the California Gold Rush of 1849, the export of coolie labour became a mighty business. These expatriate Chinese sent their savings back to their villages, again using these reliable letter agencies or 'Hong's'. Such remittance covers are still found today.

How were these letters transmitted? We have a clear description of the process from the Postmaster-General of the Straits Settlements in 1897:

"... The shops have their branches in China. The collector goes round the country districts in the Straits collecting the letters and small sums of money from coolies. He makes the letters into a bundle addressed to himself at a Treaty Port and posts it, buys a bank draft, and proceeds to China. On arrival he claims the packet of letters and the money and starts on his errand of distribution. He obtains an Acknowledgment of each payment and hands it on his return to the Colony, to the remitted. A collector generally makes three or four round trips a year, and is rewarded by a small percentage on the amount entrusted to him..."

There is no obvious evidence for letter-shops handling Chinese correspondence in Hong Kong prior to Sir Robert Hart's erection of an Imperial Post Office for China in 1897. Having carefully surveyed the Letter Agencies operating in the Treaty Ports (there were more than 200 in Shanghai!), Hart insisted that they register with the Chinese Post Office, while the major coastal shipping lines were induced to sign an agreement under which they would refuse to carry letters inter-port unless they had Chinese stamps. The co-operation of Macau and Hong Kong was also requested, and the Hong Kong PMG took the step of also licensing Letter Hong's soon thereafter.

There are two types of Chinese mail from Hong Kong which seem to be traceable from the 1890's on. The first of these is correspondence, perhaps remittance mail, through Clubbed Packet letters. The Clubbed Mails exceeded normal weight limits, and such covers sent through the Post Office (typically to San Francisco) carry huge frankings.

The second type of letter is a so-called "native cover", identifiable due to its red band or its vermilion firm chop, usually bilingual. We know from government records that from 1902 more than 20 Hong Kong letter agencies took out licenses, and that they maintained their own carriers until 1909. Scrutiny of these red-band covers reveals that some letters apparently sent from Hong Kong are in fact crossing into the postal system there. The "chop" of the Chinese business may identify it as a letter-writing agency. From the two types of correspondence it will eventually be possible to recreate the list of licensed agencies and estimate what proportion of Chinese correspondence was handled this way.

Prior to 1898 the Hong Kong post office took little note of the needs of its Chinese population, but in that year two new branch offices were opened, at Kowloon and the other at Western Branch, serving largely Chinese merchants near the Canton and Macao wharves. In the New Territories, where more than 100,000 new citizens had no official postal services. Naturally, existing channels were maintained, but evidence of such correspondence is still lacking. We do know that the New Territories had dual administrative HQs at Tai Po and on Cheung Chau Island, for which adapted CDS cancels are known showing index letters TP and CC from 1908 and 1910, respectively. In 1912, the Postmaster's report announced the opening of nine new offices, under the supervision of police sergeants. The very misleading information in the reference books on both openings and the allocation of canceling devices needs to be updated. Philatelic material is, alas, almost non-existent.

Finally, the growing recognition of Chinese as a working language within the Post Office can be proven by the evidence of penciled instructions to delivery postmen found on post cards from the 1880's to 1920's. A more formalized system was in use c. 1917-35, when each postman was given a personal "chop" based on the Thousand Character Poem, a Confucian classic. A formal "Chinese Branch" had come into being by 1912, presumably to deal with Clubbed Mails and bagged correspondence with Canton. Procedures evolved up to the Second War allowing Chinese chops to be used on special handling mail and on post office forms, and at all times solely Chinese addressing was permitted for local and international mail matter.