

U.S. Postal Agency in China – By Alex Gill

China was an important trading destination at the time of the American Revolution. Trade was centered around the port of Canton under control of the British East India Trading Company. Between 1784-1785, American ship Empress of Asia made the first successful round trip in the China trade.

Following the British victory in the Opium War of 1840, the island of Hong Kong was opened to foreign trade to several Chinese cities including Shanghai through the Treaty of Nanking. In 1844, an American consul was appointed to Amoy, China. American traders played a key role in the China trade with their clipper ships. Through the American consulate, an American settlement started in Shanghai in 1847. The settlement maintained a geographical commercial advantage over the French and British as it was located downstream and was the first anchorage point met by arriving vessels.

The British held control of mail service through the post office in Hong Kong and mail was both expensive and unreliable. In 1865 the United States Post Office was first authorized to offer mail service to Asia and a mail contract was awarded to the Pacific Mail Steamship Company on August 28, 1865. By 1867, the company built four steamships and launched their first route. The route was run between San Francisco to Shanghai via Yokohama, Japan.

A standard 10-cent rate was established for mail from the United States to Asia. In 1878, Universal Postal Union (UPU) rates were applied, and the rate was reduced to 5 cents. While other nations overprinted stamps for use in post offices abroad, it was not until May 24, 1919 the United States did so. Washington Franklin stamps (Scott No's 498-99, 502-04, #506-10, 512, and 514-18) were used with overprints to double the value of the stamp being overprinted, with overprinted values ranging from 2 cents to \$2 (Scott K1-16). The first overprinted stamp was issued on May 24, 1919 with sales in Shanghai starting on July 1. Two stamps, Scott K17 & K18 were issued in July of 1922 and overprinted in Shanghai. These were released late due a shortage of stamps that did not arrive from the United States.

It was possible to obtain stamps with or without overprints in Shanghai, depending on how the customer paid. If the stamps were bought with U.S. currency, stamps would be issued without overprints. If stamps were bought with Chinese currency, then overprints would be issued. The Chinese overprints were issued in limited quantities and were only available for sale in Shanghai until 1922 and for a brief time in Washington D.C. afterwards and are highly collectable today.



US Scott K1-K16



U.S. Scott K17 (overprinted in Shanghai)



U.S. Scott K18 (overprinted in Shanghai)