

CHINA'S 1912 DEFINITIVES

Synopsis

September 2026

Importance

China's Imperial government was overthrown by the revolution of 1911 and the Republic of China was quickly established. The Director General of Posts (DGP) did not have the ability to create new stamps, so it chose to overprint existing stamp; initially using the phrase "Provisional Neutrality." The second overprint added "Republic of China" to negate the "Imperial" concept of the first set. Due to their short life and limited use, these first two sets are very important.

This exhibit is the second or third largest assemblage of these stamps in private hands. The Beijing Postal Museum has a fabulous array of preproduction items and large multiples. No archival material is available for collectors.

Justification for One-Frame Treatment

Most of the face values of the first two sets exceeded existing rates and never saw non-philatelic use. Some used examples were favor cancelled for philatelists. The 3¢ is reported on cover, but I have never seen a non-philatelic example. One is on display in the Philatelic Museum in Taipei's main post office building in Taiwan.

For the other three sets, covers with the workhorse values (½¢ to 20¢) are included in this exhibit to illustrate the then available services. Use of values of 50¢ and above was limited to parcels. Some values that exceeded or did not fit existing rates seldom saw non-philatelic use. No express stamps were prepared because that service continued to be handled in a different way. See Scott E3-E8 and CSS E3-E7. International mail was handled in China by the foreign Treaty Port post offices until it joined the UPU in 1914.

Difficulty Factor

The exhibit contains both basic stamps and overprint varieties, many of which are scarce to very rare. Basic stamp varieties arose due to plate wear and plate retouches. This gives rise to the scarcity of those included in this exhibit.

Knowledge and Research

Some of my insight into the thought processes of the DGP was obtained from Post Office Circulars. Circular #279 of Feb. 13, 1912, explained the February 12th abdication of Emperor Pu Yi and tentatively put forward the proposition that existing Imperial stamps could continue to be used without overprints. This idea was quickly quashed by the new republican government. It also promised that new stamps would be available soon, which did not happen until the Republic started again overprinting existing stamps in March 1912.

Circular #282 of Feb. 22 is interesting because it elaborates on the lead-up to the issuance of the Foochow Provisional Neutrality and announced the soon-to-be issued ROC Overprinted Provisional Neutrality.

Several Statistical Department Overprint varieties on the 1¢ CIP are listed in some catalogs, but they are bogus and are not included herein.

Selected Bibliography

Maxwell, H. James, ed. China Stamp Society Specialized Catalog of China to 1949. Kansas City, MO: The China Stamp Society, Inc., 2010 through 2021, pp. 43-49.

Prize Selections from the ROCPEX Taipei '81. Taipei, Taiwan: Directorate General of Posts, 1982, pp. 597-99.

Report on the Workings of the Chinese Post Office for the First Year of the Chung-Hua Min-Kuo (1912), Shanghai: Supply Department of the Directorate General of Posts 1913.

Report of the Chinese Post Office for the Tenth Year of the Chung-Hua Min-Kuo (1921), which incorporated a Historical Survey of the Quarter-Century (1896-1921). Shanghai: Supply Department of the Directorate General of Posts 1913.

China's 1912 Definitives

The 1912 definitives were issued following the Revolution of 1911, which ended the Ching Dynasty (1644-1911). Caught unprepared, and careful not to align itself with the Dynasty or the Revolutionary Forces, the Directorate General of Posts (DGP) instructed the Customs Statistical Department at Shanghai (CSD) to overprint some values of the Waterlow and Sons Chinese Imperial Post issue of 1900 (CIP) with characters meaning "Provisional Neutrality" in black or red. What followed was a rapid proliferation of overprinted stamps with a dazzling array of basic stamp and overprint varieties. This exhibit is of the issued stamps. The presentation is chronological:

- ◆ Foochow Provisional Neutrality (few delivered to post offices)
- ◆ Republic of China Overprinted Provisional Neutrality (some sold; few used)
- ◆ Statistical Department Overprint
- ◆ Commercial Press Overprint
- ◆ Waterlow Overprint

Rates From August 10, 1911 to November 30, 1920

Date	Domestic			Domestic Service Fees				International			International Service Fees			
	Local	Letter	Single					Letter		Single	UPU Countries			
	Each 20g.		Postcard	Reg.	A.R.	Exp.	Reg. Exp.	First 20g.	Succ. 20g.	Postcard	Reg.	A.R.	Exp.	Reg. Exp.
8/10/11	.01	.03	.01	.05	.05	(1)	(2)	.10	.06	.04	.10	.10	(1)	(1)
9/1/14	.01	.03	.01	.05	.05	(1)	(2)	.10	.06	.04	.10	.10	.12	.22

(1) Service not available (2) Would have used the special 10¢ Express stamp

Chinese cancels typically number the year from the founding of the Republic in 1912. The year 1912 is denoted with the character *yi* for "one" or *yüan* for "first year." To convert to the Gregorian calendar it is necessary to add eleven where the Arabic numeral "1" was used for the year.

Significant Items have thicker outline borders. 

Character *yüan* 元

FOOCHOW PROVISIONAL NEUTRALITY

When the stamps were issued January 30, the new government objected to the wording and they were immediately withdrawn. A few shipped to Foochow City were sold during the first eleven days of February, hence the name. Philatelic covers exist. They were overprinted in sheets of 48 (8 x 6), except the 3¢ which was 25 (5 x 5).



* certificates on reverse