

China's 1939 U. S. Constitution Commemoratives: Through-the-Line Usages

Synopsis

September 2026

Subject

This is a postal history study of this issue which was despised by the Japanese occupiers of China. The Japanese tried to prohibit their use. They disliked the U.S. flag side by side with the flag of the Republic of China. They were also angered by the map which did not reflect areas of China occupied by the Japanese where they had established puppet governments. These and other factors explained in the exhibit gave rise to the scarcity of the material. Most of these types of uses are extremely scarce.

Presentation

The material is grouped into (a) places of transit within Japanese occupied China (e. g. Shanghai), (b) special routes of egress from China (e. g. via Hong Kong, Indo-China, the Trans-Siberian Railroad, the Burma Road), and (c) other makeshift methods of egress from China (e. g. smuggling or posted at sea).

Difficulty Factor

Although philatelic usages can be found, this exhibit focuses on the much scarcer commercial usages. One extremely scarce domestic use is included.

This exhibit does not contain usages for the route through Sinkiang which, to my knowledge, can only be found in philatelic museum collections.

Knowledge and Research

This exhibit disproves statements contained in the Chan² and Ma³ catalogs that these stamps were not allowed to be used in the occupied areas of China; and the statement that "When these stamps reached Shanghai, they were not allowed to be sold publicly."²

Place names are given in Wade-Giles Romanization.

The title page map is used with permission from the author.

Selected Bibliography

¹ Maxwell, H. James, ed. China Stamp Society Specialized Catalog of China to 1949. Kansas City, MO: The China Stamp Society, Inc., 2010 through 2021 editions, p. 72. (scan included)

² Chan, Shiu-Hon, ed. Colour-illustrated Stamp Catalogue of China (1878-1949). 3rd ed. Hong Kong: MFI Services Asia, Ltd., 2010 Vol. 1, pp. 86-87. (scan included)

³ Ma Ren Chuen, ed. Ma's Illustrated Catalogue of the Stamps of China. 1st ed. Shanghai: Shun Chang & Co., 1947, and all subsequent editions, p. 98 of the 1998 edition. (scan included)

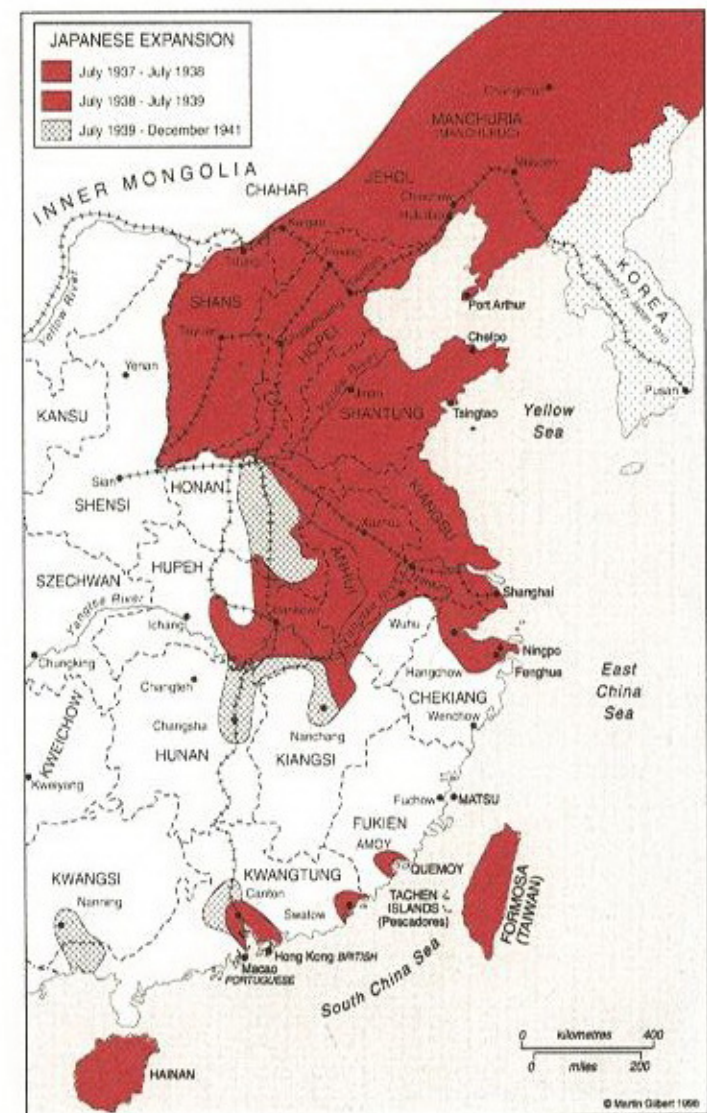
China's U. S. Constitution Commemoratives: Through-the-Line Usages

On July 4, 1939, China issued four stamps commemorating the 150th anniversary of the U.S. Constitution. The Japanese attempted to prohibit their use in the occupied areas and, after Pearl Harbor, even visited stamp shops and collectors to confiscate the stamps. In 1931 Japan had conquered northeastern China and created the puppet state of Manchukuo. The Japanese were angered by the map on the stamps which still showed Manchukuo as part of China and by the presence of the United States flag next to China's flag.

Japan had invaded China in 1937, but the Japanese let the Chinese continue to produce the stamps. Shanghai fell in November 1937, and Canton, the last remaining seaport, fell in October 1938. Thereafter, China was almost completely isolated from the rest of world. By 1939 China was divided into "Occupied China" and "Free China."

These covers were mailed from within, or evaded or transited, Occupied China. Most covers are international because this did not endanger the recipient.

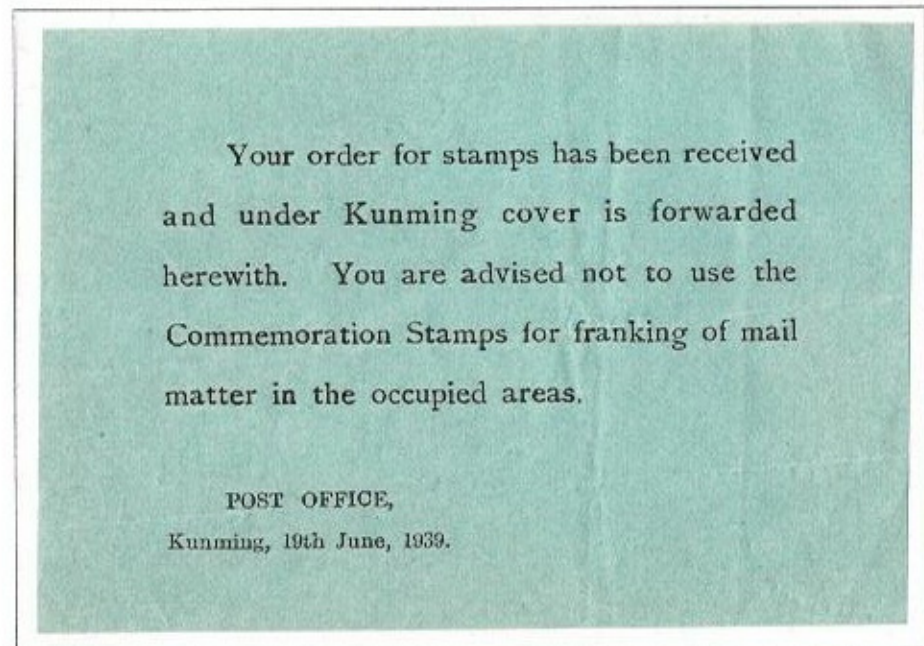
To circumvent the blockade, Hong Kong provided international airmail connections until it fell in December 1941. Surface mail from western China went by rail through Indo-China, until the Vichy French agreed to close that route in June 1940. Some mail from Free China went via cities in Occupied China. Various deceptions were used to send mail from Shanghai. Some mail went west on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. In the south, the coastal province of Fukien, with its many estuaries, was ideal for smuggling to Hong Kong. Some mail was hand carried by individuals and posted at sea. In the spring of 1940 the Burma Road was reopened.



One by one all the seaports fell.

PLAN OF ORGANIZATION

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Instructions from Kunming advised against use in Occupied China.



Die Proof of engraved portion of design

Issue Date:	July 4, 1939	Quantity	2,000,000 each
Sale suspended:	March 31, 1940	Sheet size:	100 (10 x 10) with gum
Demonetized:	May 1, 1940	Perforation:	Gauge 12
Without plate numbers or printer's imprints			
Printing process:	Engraved, with flag by offset lithography		
	First Chinese stamp printed using two processes.		
Printer:	American Bank Note Co. (appears below frame in Chinese)		

INTERNATIONAL RATES DURING THIS TIME FRAME

Date	Postcard	Letter		Fees to UPU Countries			
		First 20g.	Succ. 20g.	Registered	A.R.	Express	Reg. Exp.
2/1/36	.15	.25	.15	.25	.25	.50	.75
9/1/39	.30	.50	.30	.50	.50	1.00	1.50

An airmail surcharge was applied based upon the route taken, airline(s) involved, and destination.

Via Hong Kong — several airports in Free China had flights to Hong Kong

Chengtu, Chungking, Kunming, Kweilin, Kweiyang, and occasionally the military airports in Wuchow and Namhung, had flights, or connecting flights, to Hong Kong. Mail traveled by rail to airports with a connecting flight.

Hong Kong was a major international aviation center until it fell to the Japanese in December 1941.



Aug. 30, 1939, Kiangling, Hupeh Province, \$1.50 airmail to USA, by surface to Chungking, then air via Hong Kong Sep. 10.



In August 1938 the Nationalist Government moved from Hankow to Chungking.

Eurasia Aviation Corp. had routes to Hong Kong via Chengtu, Chungking, and Kweilin, or via Kunming, Chungking, and Kweilin. Flights shown with solid lines were terminated when Hankow fell in October 1938. Lines shown with dashes continued in operation. Hostilities terminated service in September 1939, but it resumed in early December 1939. The route to Hanoi was not reopened until June 1940, after these stamps were invalidated, and was abandoned in September 1940.

Chinese National Aviation Corp. (CNAC) flew from Chengtu via Chungking, Kweiyang, Kweilin to Hong Kong. It also flew from Kunming via Kweiyang, Kweilin to Hong Kong. Service from Chungking via Kweilin was twice weekly and the planes took off at night to better avoid the Japanese. This was increased to four times per week in January 1940.



Nov. 13, 1939, Chungking, Szechwan Province, \$4.50 airmail to USA, via Hong Kong Nov. 17. Flown on CNAC, intending to connect with Pan American Airways China Clipper flight via Manila, Guam, Wake, Midway, Hawaii, and San Francisco.



Dec. 14, 1939, Shasi, Hupeh Province, \$8.50 airmail to USA, by surface to Chungking Dec. 21, then by air via Hong Kong Dec. 24.



Mar. 19, 1940, Chungking, Szechwan Province, 75¢ airmail only to Hong Kong, arriving there Mar. 21, then by surface to USA. Flown on either Eurasia or CNAC.

Via Indo-China Route—by rail from Kunming via Hanoi to port of Haiphong



Sept. 26, 1939, Penghsien, **West Szechwan Province**, 50¢ surface to Canada, via Chengtu Sept. 27, Chungking Sept. 30, Kunming Oct. 5, Hanoi R.R. Oct. 9, and Haiphong Oct. 11, received Nov. 15. Indo-China censor's tape tied by 'Ouvert par L'Autorite Militaire.'



Chungking and Kweiyang were connected to Kunming by road.



Aug. 31, 1939, Kweitchow, **Kweichow Province**, 25¢ surface to New Zealand, via Kunming Sept. 4 and Hanoi R.R. Sept. 7. New Zealand purple censor's mark.

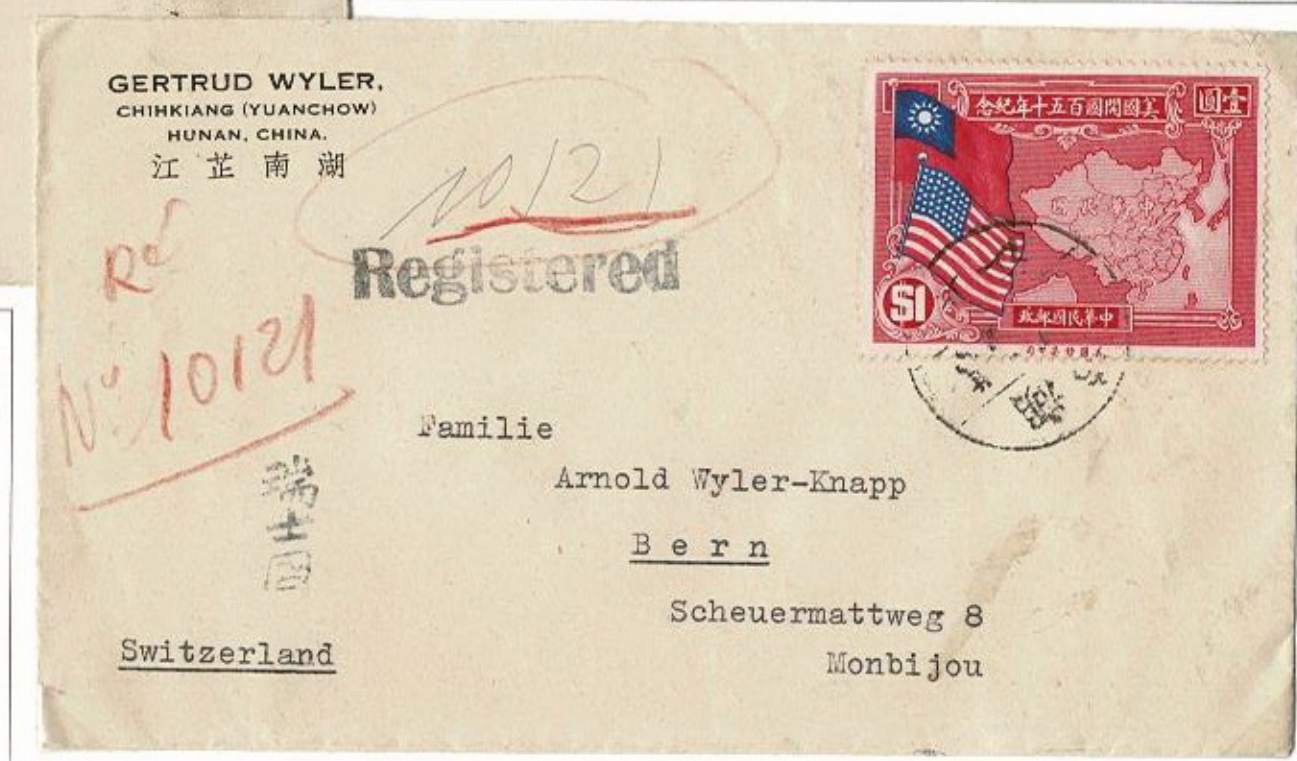


Oct. 13, 1939 Mengtsz, **Yunnan Province**, 50¢ surface to USA, via Hokow Oct. 19 and Hanoi R.R. Oct. 20. Indo-China censor's tape tied by 'Ouvert par L'Autorite Militaire.'

After the last of the seaports fell in 1938, most surface mail from western China went via Indo-China until the Vichy French closed this route in June 1940.



Aug. 22, 1939, Yungning (Nanning), **Kwangsi Province**, 25¢ surface to Singapore, via Hanoi R.R. Aug. 27 and Lang-Son Aug. 27.



Feb. 2, 1940, Chihkiang (Yuanchow), **Hunan Province**, \$1 (50¢ surface + 50¢ registration) registered surface to Switzerland, via Kunming Feb. 2 and Hanoi R.R. Feb. 8, rec'd. April 11.

From Free China Via Occupied Cities



Aug. 14, 1939, Kuliang, Fukien Province, 25¢ surface to USA, via Changlo, Fukien, Aug. 14, Shumchum, and Hong Kong. After Canton fell on Oct. 21, 1938, mail for Hong Kong and international destinations was **secretly transited through Shumchum**, in Kwangtung Province, to a sorting center established in Hong Kong by former employees of the Canton post office. The Japanese shutdown Shumchum in Oct. 1939 and a new secret transit point, which operated until Feb. 7, 1941, was created in a small fishing village named Shayuchung.



Nov. 24, 1939, Chengchow, in north central Honan Province, 50¢ surface to USA, east via the Lunghai Railway through **occupied Kaifeng** (fell June 6, 1938) and south at Suchow by railway through **occupied Nanking** (fell Dec. 13, 1937) to occupied **Shanghai**, and by ship to the USA. Chengchow, an important railroad juncture, fell Oct. 1941, but was not an occupied city until April 20, 1944 during the Japanese ICHIGO offensive.



Sept. 29, 1939, Wuchow, in eastern Kwangsi Province, 50¢ surface to USA, via **occupied Canton**, with Oct. 5 (disguised censor's chop shown here in insert) and Oct. 6 transit cancel on reverse. Except for censoring, it would not have been the practice for mail to remain in a post office for two days.



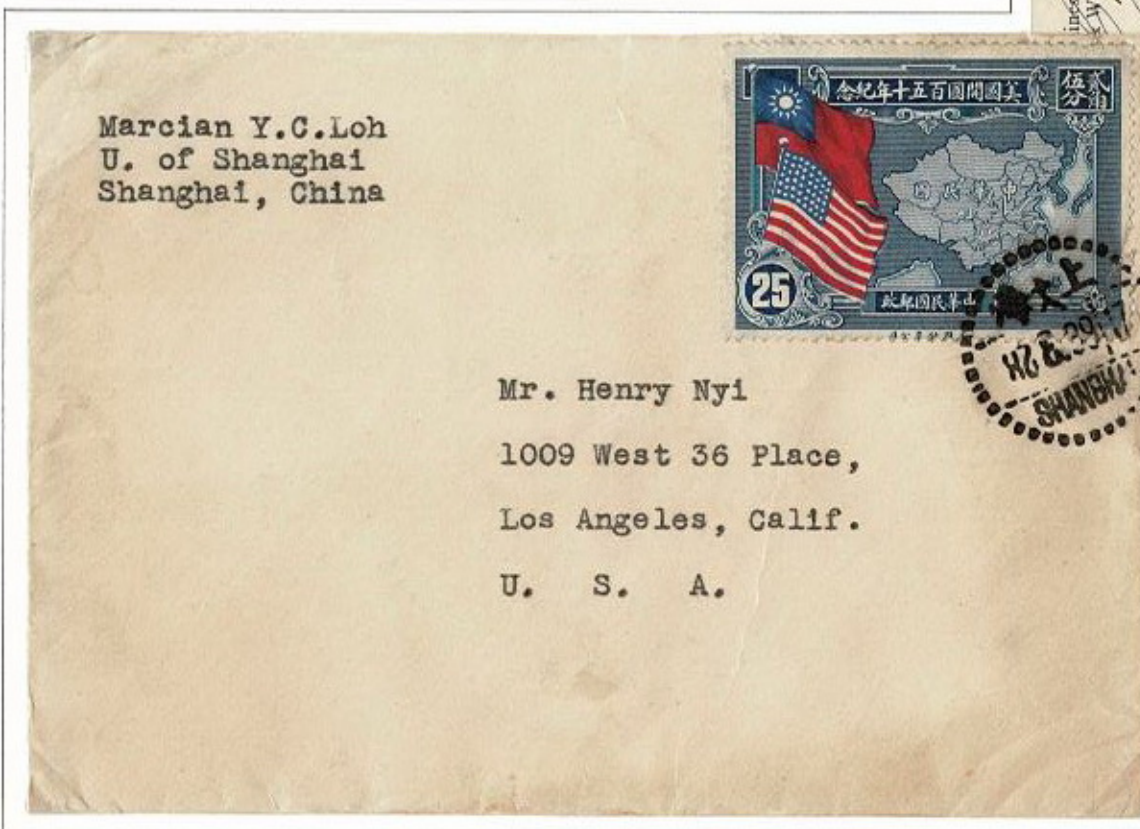
April 13, 1940, Yuanchow (Chihkiang), in western Hunan Province, \$1 registered surface to USA, via **occupied Shanghai** May 16 (transit cancel on reverse), received June 10. Purple domestic route chop specifies "Via Chian to Shanghai." Chian is in Kiangsi Province.

Occupied Shanghai's Defiance

The city's defiance was easier because international mailbags were taken directly from the post offices to a ship at a pier or to an airplane at an airport. Sometimes plain bags and plain trucks were used to disguise the contents.



April 6, 1940, Shanghai sub-office 11 on Fukien Rd. in the British settlement (center characters at top denote sub-office), \$1 registered surface to USA, received April 30.



Earliest Shanghai Use—Aug. 28 (inverted), 1939, sub-office 18 on Avenue Joffre in the French settlement (center characters at top denote sub-office), 25¢ surface to USA.

Inside Kiddies Series—Cop
Walsky Ltd., Shanghai, C



Postcard—Nov. 7, 1939, Shanghai main post office in Chinese area (center character at top denotes philatelic section), 50¢ surface to Yugoslavia.

Prior to December 1941, foreigners in the international settlements openly defied the Japanese. Outside the settlements the Japanese dominated the life of the Chinese. Shanghai's main post office was in the Chinese area.

Existing covers prove that the Constitutional Commemoratives were available at the philatelic and some regular windows at some post offices in Shanghai.



Feb. 12, 1940, Shanghai main post office in Chinese area, \$1.30 registered surface overweight to Switzerland, received Mar. 5.



Feb. 10, 1940, Shanghai sub-office 26 on Seymour Rd. in British settlement, \$2.25 airmail to Switzerland, first by sea to Hong Kong, received Feb. 17, and Imperial Airways beyond.

Occupied Shanghai's Defiance



Jan. 30, 1940, Mamoi (Free China), 10 miles down river from Foochow, \$1 registered surface to USA, via occupied Shanghai Feb. 9, received March 7.



Domestic Use—Nov. 16, 1939, Tongluoyi, East Szechwan Province (near Chungking in Free China), 13¢ (8¢ on reverse) registered surface to occupied Shanghai, received Dec. 15.

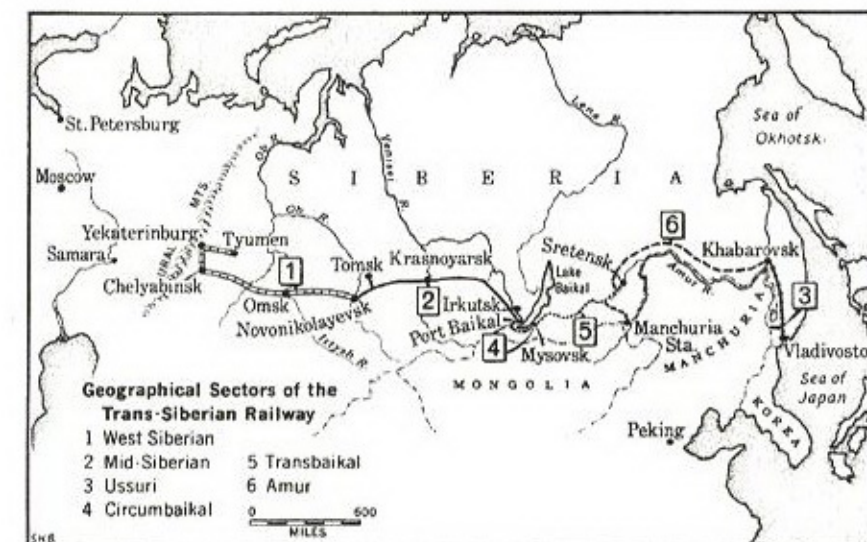
Collectors throughout China could obtain the stamps from the Directorate General of Post supply division. In August of 1939 it was moved from Kunming, Yunnan Province (Free China), to the then unoccupied French settlement in Shanghai. In December 1941 the Japanese occupied the remainder of Shanghai.

Via Trans-Siberian Railroad

Mail from northern Occupied China could go by rail north from Peking, Nanking or Shanghai to Harbin (Moukden), in Manchukuo, and connect with the Trans-Siberian Railroad west to Moscow and on to Europe. Hankow, occupied since October 1938, was also connected with this route by rail through Peking.

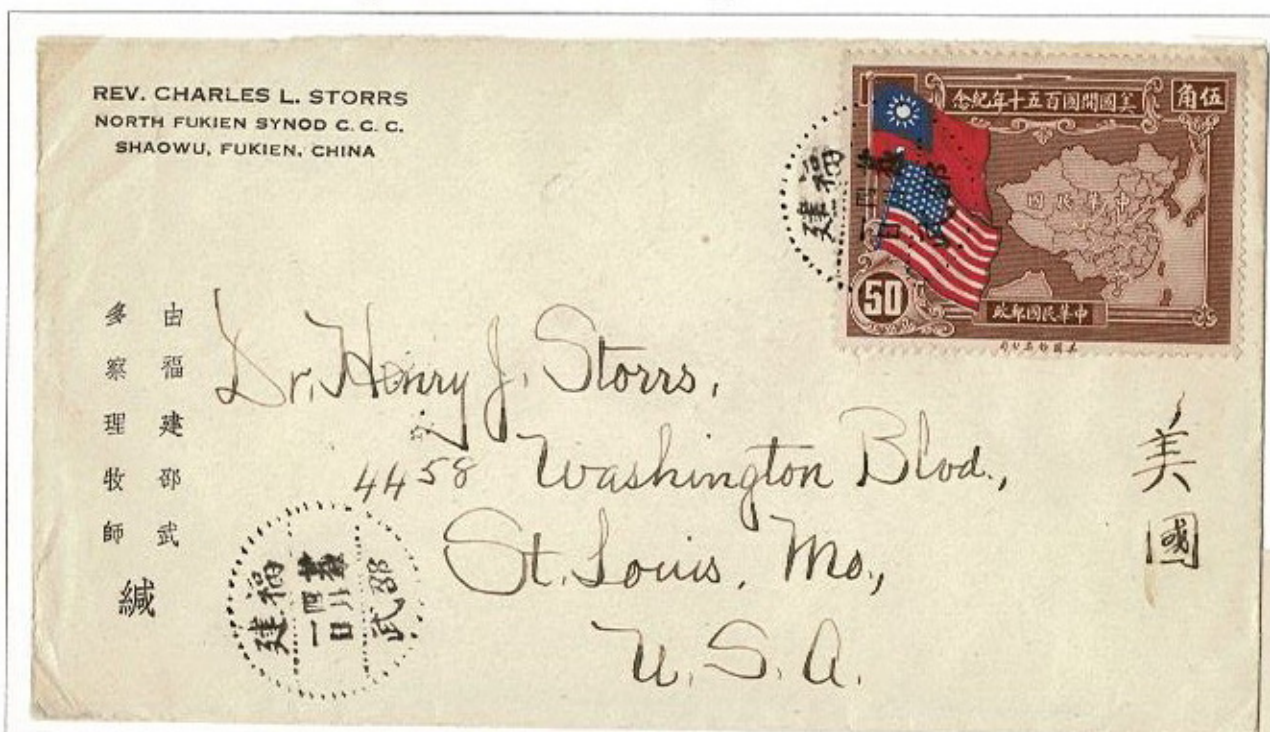


Jan. 4, 1940, Shanghai (main post office in Chinese area), \$1 registered surface to Nazi-Occupied Austria (addressed as Germany), received Jan. 28. This route to Germany was only open until Germany invaded Russia on June 22, 1941.



Fukien Province Smuggling

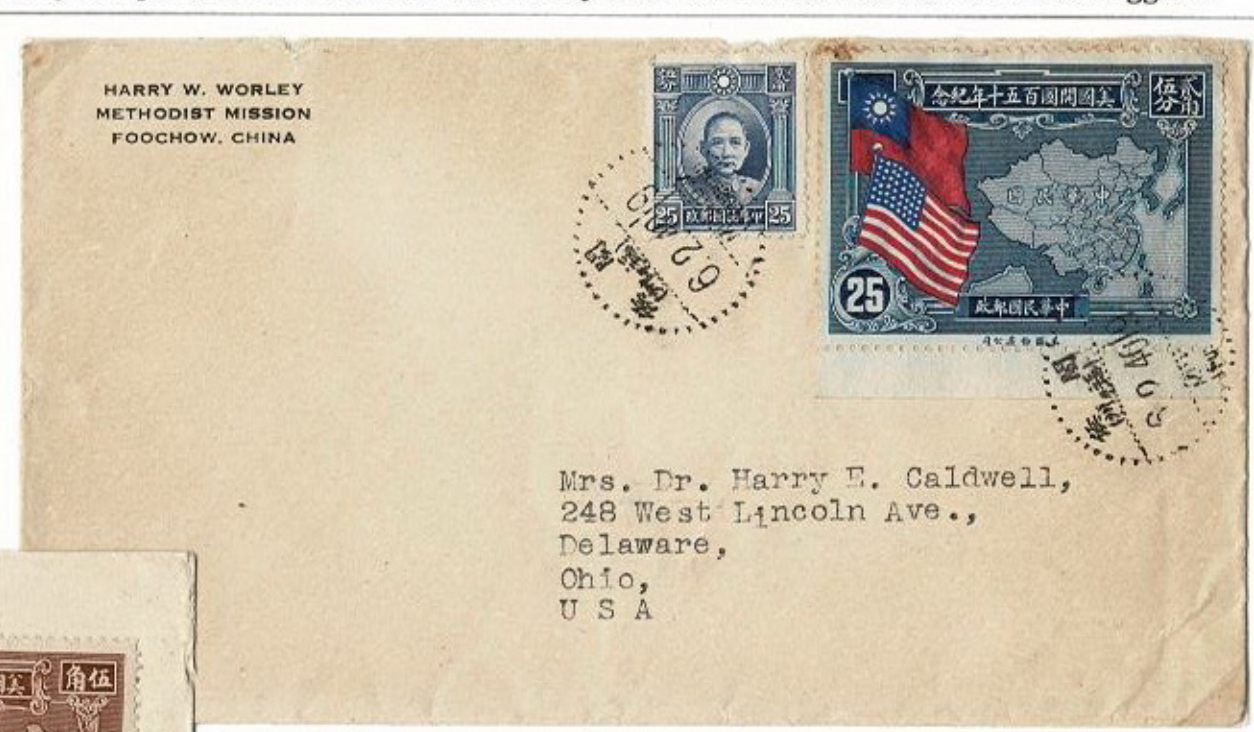
The commercial center of Amoy, the capital and seaport of Foochow, and the river port of Mawei all fell in May 1938.



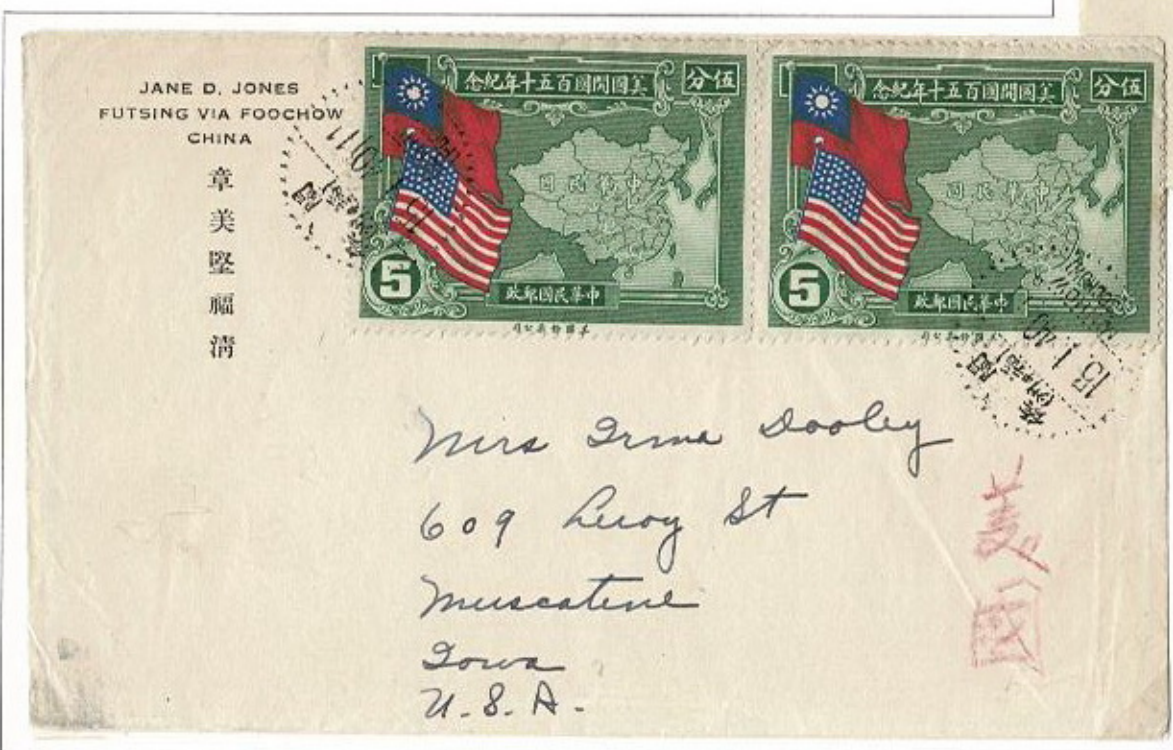
April 1, 1940, Shaowu (137 miles NW of Foochow), 50¢ surface to USA. Two characters at right mean United States.



The Min Chiang River flows through the seaport of Foochow. The Japanese did not have many troops in the area and sometimes they were lax. At other times mail was smuggled.



Feb. 6, 1940, Foochow, 50¢ surface to USA.



Jan. 15, 1940, Foochow P.O. serving Futsing (25 miles SSE), 10¢ printed matter to USA.



Mar. 4, 1940, Mintsing overstrike on Sieu Huang Tau undated rectangular letter box cancel, 50¢ surface to USA. Mintsing is 30 miles upriver from Foochow.



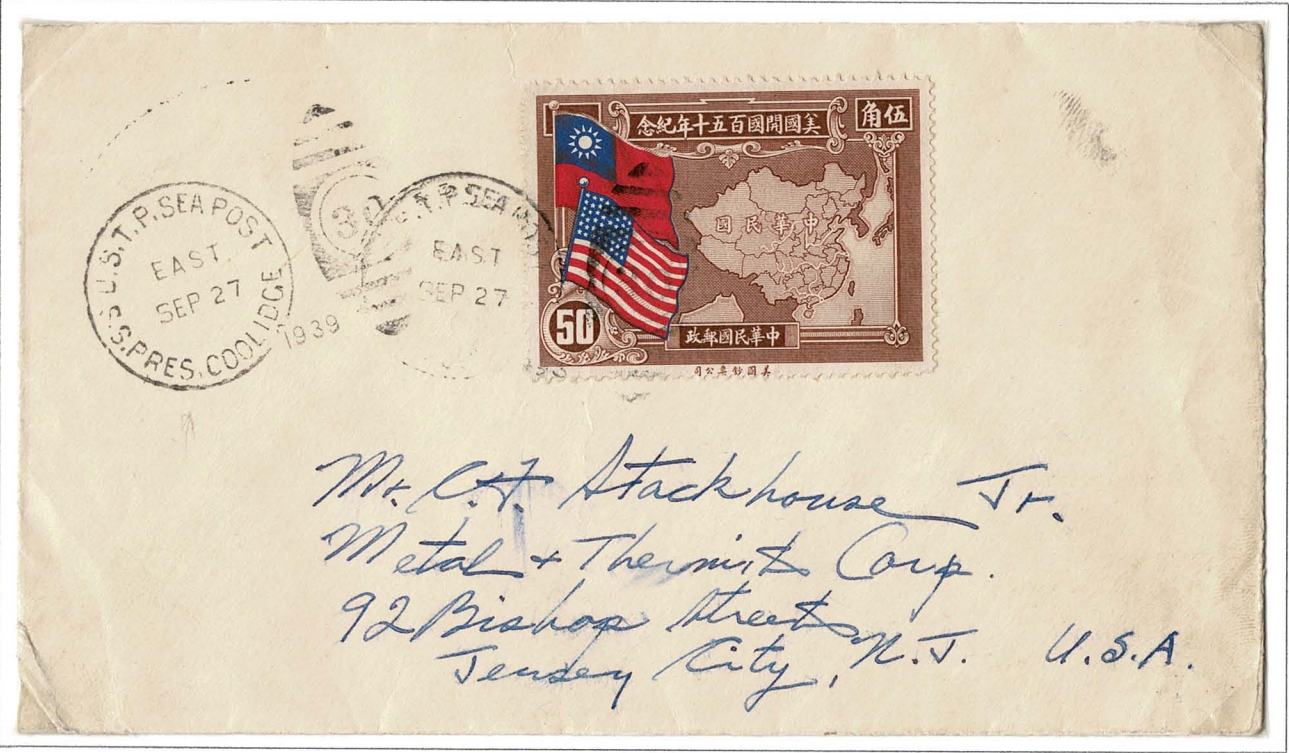
Dec. 4, 1939, Changlo (15 miles SE of Foochow), 50¢ surface to USA, via Foochow.

Posted At Sea (Paquebot)

People could take mail aboard ships and post it at sea.



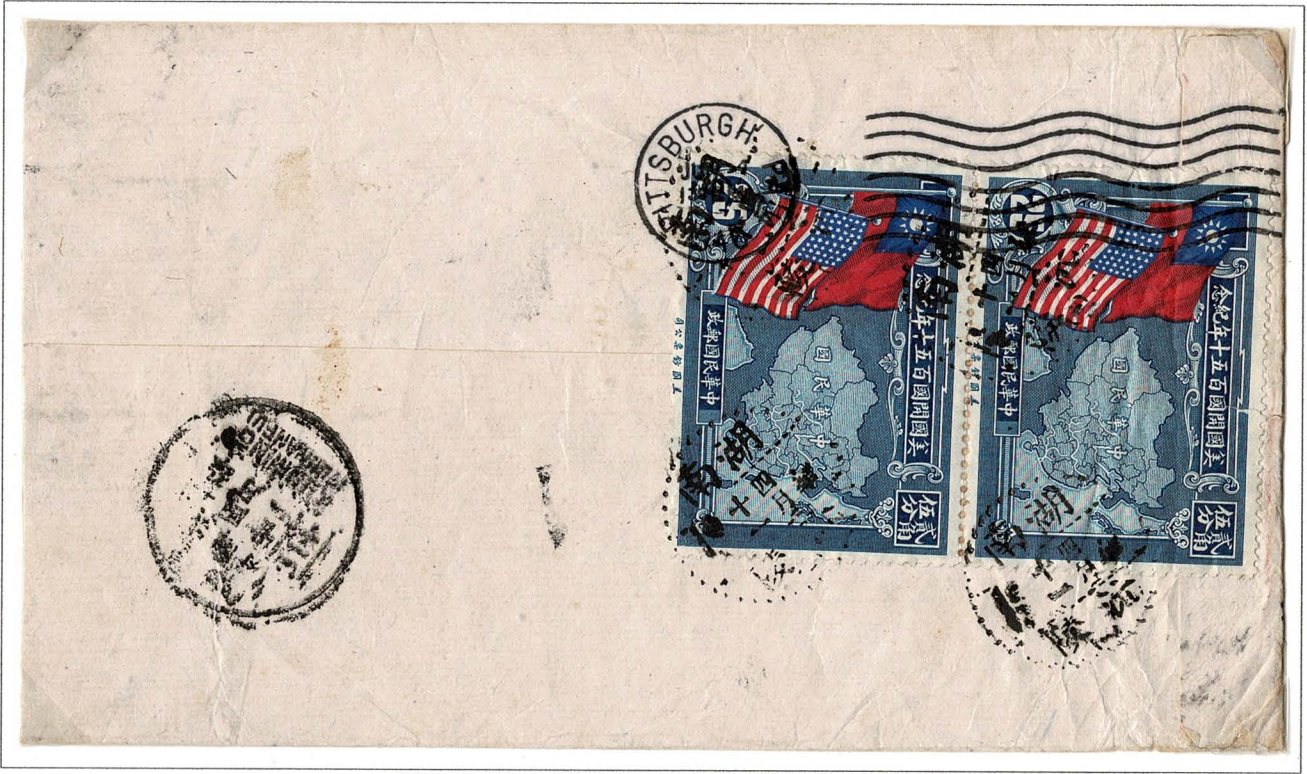
Oct. 12, 1939, posted onboard a U.S. Navy vessel with a 3¢ U.S. commemorative. Short 2¢ for the proper rate, it was “Returned For Additional Postage” to Shanghai where the 50¢ Constitutional Commemorative was added on Oct. 13. It could have originated in Foochow since that is the sender’s return address.



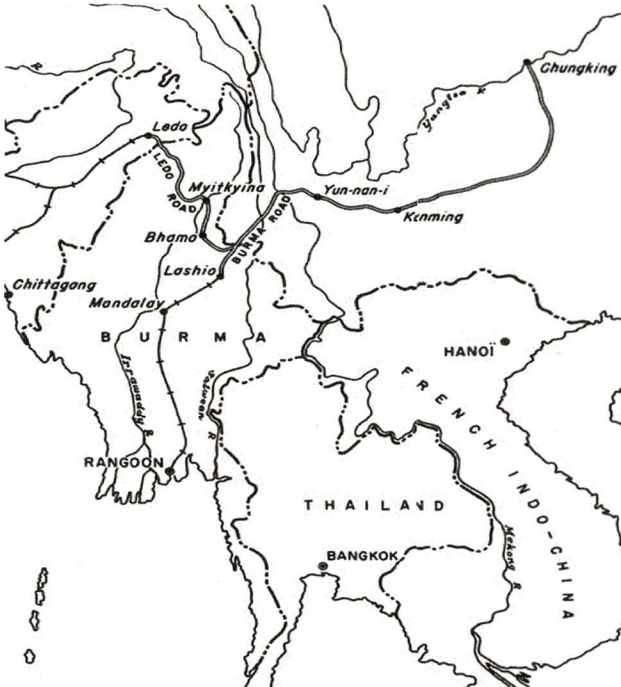
Sept. 27, 1939, U.S Trans-Pacific Seapost, S.S. President Coolidge, East, vessel 30 cancel on 50¢ surface to USA. By 1939 the Japanese held all the major seaports. Probably taken on board at Shanghai since that is the sender’s return address.

Via the Burma Road

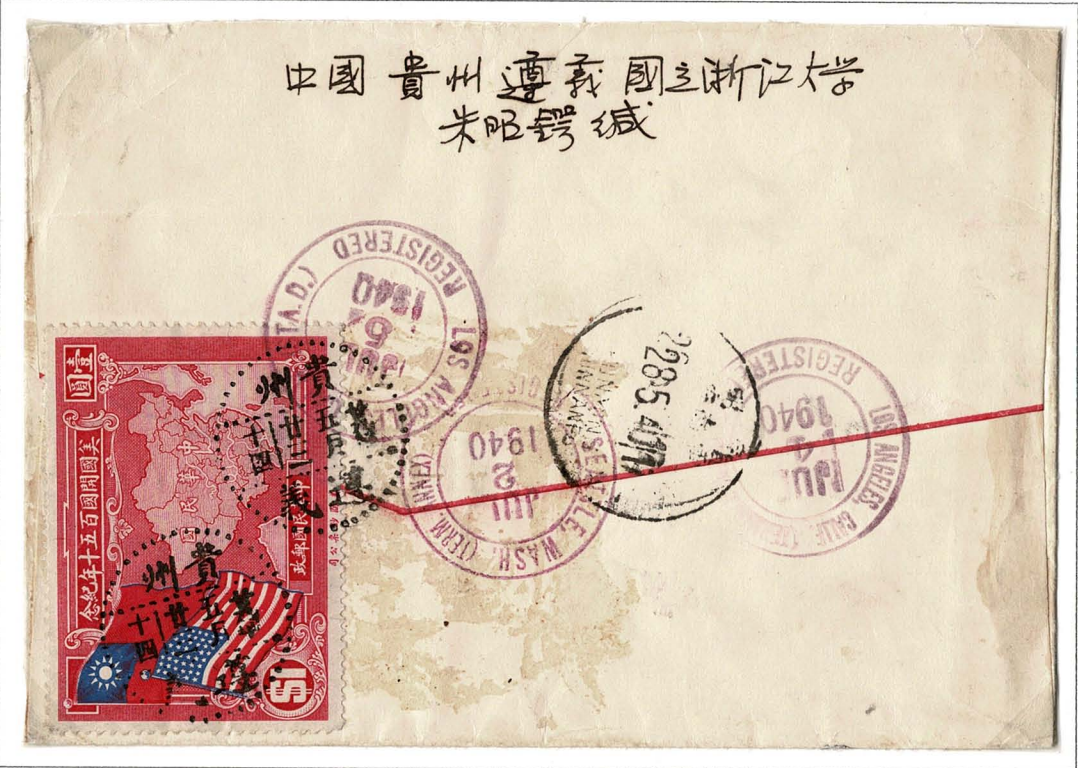
After the last seaport fell in 1938 the decision was made to repair and upgrade the Burma Road for a connection with the West. The first convoy was in 1939 and regular service was established by 1940.



April 11, 1940, Yuanling, Hunan Province, 50¢ surface to USA, via Kunming, Yunnan Province, April 21, via the Burma Road, received July 25, 1940.



Completed in 1938, the Burma Road connected Chungking, through Kweiyang, to Kunming, China, to Lashio, Burma, and by road or rail to Rangoon, Burma. From there mail went by sea to India and onward.



May 23, 1940 (stamps were demonetized May 1), Tsunyi, north central Kweichow Province, \$1 registered surface to USA, via Kunming, Yunnan Province, May 28, via the Burma Road, received July 5. Not all China mail received censor marks.