



Tales from the Middle Kingdom

CHINESE HISTORY AND CULTURE IN STAMPS

MYSTICAL DRAGONS THAT SERVE AS SYMBOLS OF IMPERIAL POWER, national treasures from dynasties past, heroes of classical literature, paintings from old masters, UNESCO heritage sites and many other icons of the Middle Kingdom are portrayed on postage stamps issued by China. These little pieces of paper play big roles and tell immense tales. They are everyday archives that chart more than 5,000 years of history, showcasing one of the world's oldest and most complex civilisations, and even act as propaganda tools for the Communist Party of China and the revolution that transformed an ancient kingdom into a modern republic.



museings



MARK OF THE DRAGON: CHINA'S FIRST POSTAGE STAMPS

Stamps first appeared in China after the Opium War in 1840. These stamps were introduced by foreign powers for use at post offices in treaty ports they occupied after the war. The stamps were however non-Chinese stamps, and hence not recognised as stamps of China.

The first official postage stamp of China is a Large Dragon stamp issued in 1878 after the Qing Dynasty (1644 -1911) introduced a Customs Postal Service. The Large Dragon stamps were printed from cop-

perplate and bore the image of a huge dragon against a background of clouds and waves. This set of stamps was issued thrice: in 1878, 1882 and 1883. The stamps were inscribed with the words "CHINA" in both Roman and Chinese characters, and the face value denominated in candareens (a small unit of currency used in the Qing Dynasty).

The use of the Dragon motif aptly represents China as a nation. Traditionally, the Chinese people identify themselves ethnically with the dragon. They believe that they are descendants of the Dragon, a heavenly being that occupies a significant position in Chinese





mythology. The Dragon is depicted in various aspects of Chinese life and art, from folklore, literature and poetry to architecture, songs and dances. Historically, the Dragon also symbolises the imperial power of the Chinese Emperors across the various dynasties, who ruled from a seat known as the Dragon Throne. Dragon motifs featured strongly in the carvings on the steps of imperial palaces and tombs, including the Forbidden City in Beijing. In past times, it was a capital offence for commoners to wear clothes bearing the symbol of the dragon. And during the late Qing Dynasty, the Dragon even featured on the national flag of the kingdom.

COMMEMORATING THE EMPRESS DOWAGER

The Empress Dowager Cixi was the *de facto* ruler of Qing China from 1861 to her death in 1908. She exercised control over the nation first through her son the Emperor Tongzhi, and after his death, via her nephew Guangxu whom she named as Emperor. Before she died, Cixi passed the throne to her two-year-old grandnephew Puyi, who ruled as China's Last Emperor until 1912.

During Cixi's rule, the Qing Dynasty issued China's first commemorative stamp set in 1894. The stamps were issued to celebrate the 60th birthday of Cixi and were known as the Longevity stamps. Consisting of nine different face value stamps, each stamp had a different colour scheme and depicted an auspicious object such as a dragon, a carp, a sailing boat, a peony flower, an evergreen tree, a large peach, or the Chinese ideogram for longevity.

THE END OF AN EMPIRE AND THE BIRTH OF A REPUBLIC

The Chinese Revolution of 1911 was an important turning point in Chinese history. It marked the fall of the Qing Dynasty and most of all, the replacing of thousands of years of Imperial Rule with a new Republic.

In 1912, revolutionary leader Dr Sun Yat-sen, founder of the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party) was named the provisional president of the newly founded Re-

public of China. He showed great concern for stamp design. The Republic had planned to issue a new stamp that featured Dr Sun but before these could be produced Yuan Shikai, a former Qing Army general who had supported the Revolution took over the post of president. After discussions in parliament, a compromise was reached to feature both men. The stamps were finally issued on 14 December 1912 to commemorate the Revolution.

THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA & THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

On 1 October 1949, the Chinese Communist Party led by Chairman Mao Zedong proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC). On 8 October the PRC issued its first set of stamps to celebrate the convening of the first Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. A new chapter in China's postal history unfolded with the establishment of the Ministry of Postal Services on 1 January 1950.

Postage stamps were fully exploited as propaganda tools. The power of imagery was put to effective use during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when stamps were used to depict China as a communist utopia, reinforce communist ideology and to promote the ideals of the revolution.

The artistic style employed was heavily influenced by Soviet realism from the then-Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). This is a teleologically-oriented style of realistic art aimed at furthering the goals of socialism and communism. It is not surprising that the colour red was prominently used.

Mao Zedong was worshipped extensively by the masses, with his portrait, sayings, poems, writings, calligraphy, and most of all, his Little Red Book dominating several stamp issues. Traditional Chinese dancers, which display soft, elegant movements, were replaced by new socialistic dancers in dramatic and patriotic poses.

In December 1968, Mao began the "Down to the Countryside Movement" to harness new productive forces to transform China's agriculture and industry.





Stamp designs began to feature peasants, industrial workers and soldiers, as educated youth were sent from the cities to the countryside to learn from and work with the peasants.

VICTIMS OF THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

The cultural heritage of China was the biggest victims of Mao's Cultural Revolution that lasted from 1966-1976. Led by the fanatical Red Guards, this effort to purge the country of bourgeoisie elements resulted in the Destruction of Four Olds campaign (Old Custom, Old Culture, Old Habits, and Old Ideas) and the persecution of religion. Many religious buildings were closed down, looted or destroyed. Countless ancient structures, artefacts, antiques, sites of historical interest, books and paintings were destroyed. The Red Guards ransacked museums and burnt old books and works of art throughout China. Many traditional customs and practices were forbidden.

It is impossible to estimate exactly how much material was destroyed but many are certain that a great portion of China's history spanning thousands of years was sacrificed during the short ten years of the Cultural Revolution.

FROM REVOLUTION TO REFORM

After the Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao, the Chinese leadership moved toward more pragmatic reform plans. The goals of the nationwide reforms covered Four Modernisations - agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defence. The government made efforts to revive arts and culture, encouraging artists, writers and journalists to adopt more critical approaches, although open attacks on the Communist Party's authority were not permitted. Literature and the arts blossomed anew, and Chinese intellectuals re-established extensive links with scholars in other countries.

In 1985, China joined the International Convention Concerning the Protection of World Cultural and National Heritage. Since then, thirty-five natural and cultural sites have been recognised as UNESCO heritage sites. Of these, twenty-five are cultural heritage

sites, six are natural heritage sites, and four are mixed cultural and natural sites. China has embarked on large-scale renovations to restore six world cultural heritage sites in Beijing: the Ming Dynasty Tombs, the Great Wall of China, the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, the Summer Palace, and the "Peking Man" site at Zhoukoudian.

The restoration work began in 2004 and is scheduled for completion by 2008.

In addition, China has one of the world's richest non-material or intangible cultural heritage. The ancient stage art of Kunqu Opera and the art of playing the guqin, a seven-stringed zither, are some of the Chinese entries in UNESCO's list of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity. The ancient Naxi Dongba literature manuscripts have also been inscribed on the World Heritage List. In 2001, the Chinese-Tibetan epic poem King Gesar, the longest literary work in the world, was listed by UNESCO in its world millennium memorials.

All these changes can be vividly seen in the design of postage stamps issued after 1978. Stamps became more colourful and showed more artistic designs, steering away from the realist Soviet style. Themes that were shunned in the earlier decade made strong comebacks. The range of topics and themes explored in Chinese stamps was so wide that they were effectively mini-encyclopaedias of the country, covering every subject from classical painting, Beijing Opera, flora and fauna, classical literature and folklore, historical artefacts, religious objects, philosophers, and much more.

Stamps from China provide not only a glimpse into the country's politics and economy, scientific and sporting achievements, but also showcase 5,000 years of history and cultural artefacts, a rich tradition of arts and culture, and nearly three dozen UNESCO world heritage sites that one can visit today to marvel and appreciate.

Dragons, Treasures and Masterpieces, an exhibition of Chinese stamps, will be held at the Singapore Philatelic Museum from 23 July 2008 till January 2009 as part of the NHB China Festival 2008