

Chinese Stamp Exhibition Traces Communist Advance in Post-WWII China

Exhibition at UC San Diego's IR/PS Library on display from April 4 through June 12, 2009

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After the surrender of Japan in August 1945, closing the final curtain on WWII, a military struggle for power continued in China. What ensued was a well-orchestrated and steady rise of the Chinese Communist Party, leading finally, in 1949, to Chiang Kai-shek's ouster and retreat to Taiwan.

"Philatelic Footprints on the Road to the Liberation of Shanghai," an exhibition at UC San Diego's School of International Relations & Pacific Studies (IR/PS) Library from April 4 to June 12, shows Chinese postage stamps and related materials that trace the Communist advance from the Battle of Huahai in northern Jiangsu Province in November and December of 1948, through the taking of Shanghai on May 27, 1949. As Communist forces moved southward towards Shanghai, they overprinted existing stocks of Nationalist postage stamps with the messages they wished to convey, such as "People's Post," "People's Currency," and similar text, for use in newly occupied cities and towns. The stamps printed for these purposes included appropriate pictures such as Sun Yat-sen, the father of the Chinese Republic, or neutral subjects such as modes of transportation, but, not surprisingly, no pictures were shown of the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek.

While "revenue protection" was an ostensible reason for issuing the stamps-the Communists sought to replace the Nationalist gold yuan or silver yuan currencies as quickly as possible-the Communists also understood that the establishment and maintenance of a postal system had long been considered important indicators of governmental legitimacy in China.

The stamps on display in the exhibition belong to Hugh Lawrence, who, for the past 35 years, has amassed an impressive collection of stamps from China's post WWII, pre-Communist era.

"My collecting has been fueled by my longstanding interest in Chinese history," said Lawrence. "What fascinated me about these postage stamps is how they became a political communications tool that the Communists used to proclaim 'the changing of the guard' to the local populations. More than just postage stamps, these stamps were really being used for propaganda, following the troops from city to city and heralding their occupation of new territory."

Lawrence's collection also includes stamps that reflect the Nationalist hyperinflation during the same time period, which may be the subject of a future exhibition.

The exhibition is sponsored by the UC San Diego Libraries, Friends of the UCSD Libraries, the School of International Relations & Pacific Studies, and the Chinese Studies Program.

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