

[Additional information is available on the Society's web site in the section titled "Exhibits." [www.ChinaStampSociety.org](http://www.ChinaStampSociety.org) During 2009 the Society is putting on seminars on Exhibiting Chinese Philately at WESTPEX, StampShow and BALPEX.]

## EXHIBITING CHINESE PHILATELY II

H. James Maxwell

Beginning exhibitors have the most trouble in choosing a subject matter. This dilemma breaks down into several distinct concepts.

### The Story

An exhibit must tell a story and that story must be philatelically significant, not merely historically significant. Since China has been the victim of so much turbulence, it is very tempting to grab hold of something that is historically important and then try to make the stamps tell that history. You can use history to help define the scope of the story you are about to tell or as an explanation of why your exhibit makes a significant contribution to philately, but the historical implications should take a back seat to the philately. The exhibit should showcase philatelic material, show some originality in the presentation and treatment of the stamp subject matter, and only incidentally explain the historical context within which the stamps were issued or the covers carried.

Also, you can't just show some of your favorite stuff. It must tell a story and the philatelic material must be germane to that story. This may all sound rather abstract and hard to grasp. What does philatelically significant mean? It does not necessarily mean expensive or scarce. It is easier to understand if we look at examples at the opposite extremes. At one extreme would be an exhibit where the collector shows all his favorite stamps or covers or all his most expensive or scarcest stamps or covers. This is not "exhibiting," it is merely showing off items from a collection. While a collector is perfectly entitled to do this, he should not expect a high medal level or any special awards. At the other extreme are exhibits that chronicle the evolution or development of something such as a particular mode of mail delivery, a new airmail route, the mail service in a given town or community, a railroad route that better facilitated the movement of mail, etc. Each of these is clearly an example of a good exhibit subject. Most exhibits fall somewhere between these two extremes. The exhibitor is drawn to a particular subject matter, has collected it for some period of time and wishes to show off what he has managed to assemble.

The key concepts are evolution and development. The exhibit should start at some point in a continuum of change. That way it has a "beginning" – typically a point in time where something happened or changed and what followed was new or different from what had come before. Judges will tell you an exhibit should have a good beginning, a good middle and a good ending. What they are really saying is that the beginning should be a point of departure that signals something new, then traces that something through its evolution or development and then culminates in a big finish. What they are asking for is theatrics. Something that grabs their attention, keeps them interested and concludes with something that gives them a satisfied feeling and makes them feel they got their money's worth. This is really what philatelic significance and story telling is all about. It does not require expensive stamps or covers but does require powerful and dramatic philatelic items. They can be important covers franked with stamps that catalogue 20¢, as long as they are philatelically significant. A subject should be chosen that gives you an opportunity to show off such items and your exhibit must contain some of them. Of course it never hurts to have scarce or expensive stamps and covers as they very much add to the theater.

### Subject Choice

In this day in age it is possible for a collector to choose a subject and start accumulating philatelic items relating to that subject. Club meetings and stamp shows are plentiful, there are a large number of firms holding auctions that emphasize Asia and eBay is at your fingertips. This has not always been the case. The strength of the market for Chinese stamps has increased the number of stamps and covers on the market, drawing out items that might otherwise have sat idle in collections or accumulations. Higher prices always have this effect. All of this benefits the exhibitor.

However, I always recommend that when casting about for a subject for an exhibit you should start by selecting an area or category where you already have a great deal of material. This may sound strange but as you get into the preparation of an exhibit you will find that it takes a great deal of material, more than you would have initially imagined. Think about it in the simplest of contexts. If you are going to do a single frame postal history exhibit with 16 pages and an average of two covers on each page other than the title page, you will need about 30 covers. Extrapolate this to a ten-frame exhibit and you will need about 318 covers. The same holds true for all types of exhibits. It is always easier if you start with a subject where you have a great deal of material on hand as you will be launching your project with a good head start. You can then fill in gaps and supplement your holdings with additional purchases. The Online Stamp Sales area of the CSS website is yet another excellent source of additional material.

There is no such thing as starting with too much material. Inevitably there will be numerous items in your collection or accumulation that cannot appear in your exhibit. You may have several covers franked with a given stamp and want to use all of them to show the proper use of that stamp. Unless, however, there is some philatelic difference or reason to justify including more than one, the addition of others could well be what is called "padding." This is bulking up the exhibit without adding anything that is substantive. Another example would be putting several different covers from one rate period in a rate study exhibit. You could include an ordinary letter, a registered letter, a registered express letter, an ordinary express letter, etc., but to include two registered letters without the additional one adding something philatelically different would constitute padding. The same sort of thinking applies to padding with stamps. Hence, you may start out with a great deal of material on your chosen subject only to find that much of it may not be usable. You cannot put it in just because you like it; each item must add something to the exhibit.

### **Tools**

Before starting work on a new exhibit I recommend putting together certain items to have with you when accumulating material. Even if you are not doing a postal history exhibit, construct your own rate table so that you are aware of the duration of various rate periods and will spot a cover that is from a short rate period to use as your example for the use of a given stamp. It is always nice to have two or more things to talk about when describing a cover. Look for such covers. A double or triple whammy is much more interesting than a normal cover. The "perfect" cover might have a fantail perfin being used to pay a two-day printed matter rate to the Canary Islands! You get the idea. Prepare a table of dates of issuance, earliest known uses, dates of withdrawal from use (if applicable), uses restricted to certain localities, known special uses (regular issues used as revenues or for postage due), etc. Also be aware of known varieties, errors, freaks and oddities (EFOs) so that you will notice any previously unrecorded varieties. A word of caution with respect to EFOs – limit the inclusion of misperforated or paper-fold varieties as they may lessen the impact of the more significant varieties you need to include.

### **Personal Experiences**

By way of example, I have always been fond of the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the US Constitution Commemoratives of 1939 (Scott 364-7, Ma 425-8) and, over the years, I have acquired a large number of covers and interesting stamp items. In 2001 I was casting about for a subject for my first exhibit. That set seemed to be a logical choice. My goal was then to fill in my gaps. I started out preparing a traditional exhibit, a type of exhibit that should include several distinct categories of material: (a) pre-production items (if any) such as drawings, essays, proofs and specimens, (b) the stamps themselves, (c) varieties and EFOs, and (d) items establishing and explaining the use of the stamps (typically done with covers and used examples with significant cancels). For a more detailed explanation of these requirements read the pertinent chapters in Randy L. Neil's book, The New Philatelic Exhibitors' Handbook. I did not have any pre-production items of the US Constitution set and had to acquire some.

I first showed the exhibit in ROMPEX 2001 and received a Silver Medal. Because single frame exhibits were initially conceived to be a point of beginning for new exhibitors (no longer true) they have always received a written comment sheet prepared by the judges explaining the award level and critiquing the exhibit. This is one of the reasons I suggest a beginning exhibitor start with only a single-frame

exhibit. I was fortunate because the judges, either out of pity or because they felt the new exhibit had promise, gave me a rather detailed comment sheet. I made many changes in response to their comments and received a Vermeil Medal at SESCAL 2001. Many items had come out of the exhibit and other things went in. This is why it takes a great deal of material for an exhibit. If you start out with only enough material to cover the 16 pages you will quickly be in trouble when the judges suggest that certain items be removed and that you should have more of some other types of items. Again I received a comment sheet from the judges at SESCAL and this time I was able to attend the exhibitors' critique. At such critiques you will learn not only from the judges' comments on your exhibit but also from what they say about the other exhibits. Again, in response to comments, many items came out of my exhibit and other things went in. My next foray was at MIDAPHIL 2001 where the exhibit received a Gold Medal. But, most importantly, by this point in time the exhibit had evolved from what I originally conceived to be a traditional exhibit of the stamps into a postal history exhibit consisting primarily of covers, and the title had changed twice.

Several lessons are immediately apparent: (a) your first concept for the exhibit may not end up being your final concept, the story line or concept may dramatically change or at the very least evolve, (b) you can never have too much material relating to the exhibiting subject, (c) your first attempt will not necessarily yield you the reward you think you deserve, (d) feedback from the judges is important and making changes in response to that feedback will be rewarded, and (e) most importantly, you will have learned how to be a better exhibitor and will have had fun preparing and changing your first exhibit. For these reasons I do not think it is important to have the perfect story the first time you show your exhibit - what is important is to start making pages.

Start putting together that first exhibit. You will probably find that after you have done five or six pages you will wake up in the middle of the night with a great idea and decide to change the entire approach of your exhibit. I go through this process each time. Several years ago I created a single-frame exhibit of the last three commemoratives issued by the Nationalists while still in control of the mainland, the Silver Yuan issue of 1949 for the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the UPU (Scott 988, Ma 1396) and the Peking Scenery issue (Scott 98-90, Ma 1394-5), popularly known as the Peking Views. For years I have struggled with this exhibit, never receiving a medal level higher than Vermeil. About two months ago, however, I awoke in the middle of the night realizing what had always been wrong with the exhibit and I now can't wait to find the time to make the revisions that I think will finally yield a Gold. By the way, the revisions include a new title. Again, I have always found these stamps both attractive and interesting and I started with a substantial holding of stamps, varieties and covers. They also present a profusion of varieties and interesting usages, some of which are quite dramatic with transposed characters, imperforate examples, stamps without overprints, plate varieties, etc. This is the stuff of which an interesting exhibit is made.

### **China – good or bad**

Because of China's turbulent history, Chinese philatelic material lends itself to exciting stories. But exhibiting Chinese material also poses some problems. You know a great deal about the subject of your exhibit – but the judges don't. They are prepared to judge an exhibit of US Prexies, having probably seen several such exhibits and been brought up in a tradition of understanding such subjects. But Chinese material presents an entirely different problem which can be best understood by realizing that the average American judge knows just about as much about the Chinese Revolution as the average Chinese judge would know about the US Civil War. This presents you with both advantages and disadvantages.

While it is an advantage that the material is exotic, at the same time it is a disadvantage because you will have more explaining to do. In choosing your subject it is probably best to break some new ground. Do not choose a subject that you recently saw exhibited at a major show. This way, while the judges are probably unfamiliar with your material, it is equally likely they have never seen a better exhibit on your subject. No one else's exhibit has set a high standard for your subject and you will be the first one and get to set the bar.

It is very important with Chinese items to be careful to explain any chops and marks in Chinese that the judges would not understand. This applies to not only to those having philatelic significance but also to those not having any significance such as agency chops, carrier chops, return address chops, etc. If you do not tell them what it is, they may think you are trying to hide something – either that you do not know what it is or, worse yet, that it is philatelicly significant and you failed to explain it. Likewise, for those years after the founding of the Republic you must explain that it is necessary to sometimes add 11 years to the year shown in the cancel to get to the Gregorian calendar equivalent. For terminology you should scrupulously follow the definitions contained in the APS handbook, Fundamentals of Philately. You simply must be absolutely correct in your use of philatelic terms. Terms unique to China, such as “double registered” or “special issues” should never be used.

### **Presentation**

Since an exhibit is intended to tell a story, more descriptive and explanatory text is needed than you would use when preparing an album page. You will be told over and over to keep it brief – judges do not like to read wordy text. What they really mean to say is keep it concise and succinct. You still need to explain the who, what, when, where, why, and how, but avoid verbose or flowery language. You are often cautioned to write as if you are composing a telegram where you will be charged so much for each word. Do not overuse unnecessary articles when composing your sentences. Keep them concise and to the point. Rather than “This cover was mailed from Toishan, in Kwangtung Province, to the United States of America on November 26, 1948, and was franked with a \$3 million stamp paying the then current printed matter rate.” try, “\$3,000,000 Printed Matter Rate – Nov. 26, 1948, Toishan, Kwangtung Province, to USA.”

Make sure every word is absolutely necessary. I like to use a journalistic style. It is concise and to the point but at the same time dramatic. When you need to explain several points consider the use of a list of bullets, short concise phrases that communicate – they need not be complete sentences. Keep the blocks of descriptive text small in relation to the size of the philatelic items so as not to detract from the impact of the item. Proofread, proofread, proofread! Oh, did I mention proofread. Do not describe things that are obvious to the viewer but, by the same token, describe those things that may be obvious to you but may not be apparent to someone viewing the material. Hopefully you will be blessed with a non-philatelist who will read your text. If they do not understand what you are saying, it is for you to revise your text. Again I recommend Randy Neil’s book.

### **What goes where?**

Generally speaking the order of presentation is dictated by a chronology of the dates on which the stamps were issued, when certain events took place or when postal rates changed. With some subjects this presents a problem in coming up with a strong beginning, middle and end. In life, things do not always happen that way – so too with philately. To create your strong beginning you can sometimes make up for the absence of strong philatelic items at the at the beginning of your story with a really dramatic title page (the subject of the next article in this series) which includes a very important or striking philatelic item such as an essay, proof or spectacular cover, that would not come at that point in the chronology. This way you have a strong start when the stamps or covers that come at that point in your exhibit are not that special.

At the other end of the exhibit you may have a similar problem coming up with a strong finish. To compound this problem the finish will appear in the last page or two of a single-frame exhibit or in the bottom row of pages in the last frame of a multi-frame exhibit. Some of us older folks do not squat down as easily as we once did and judges are no exception. Hopefully your subject will have enough exciting material so that it can fill the top row of a single-frame for a strong start and the bottom row for a strong finish or the first frame of a multi-frame for a strong start and the last frame for a strong finish. This beginning/ending issue should be kept in mind when selecting a potential subject.

Having a strong middle is also important. The exhibit should flow and be interesting throughout. If it appears to contain pages and pages of seemingly redundant material, the judges may not pause long enough to see what really great material you presented and your other viewers will quickly get bored.

Your subject should contain enough variation that the judges and the viewers will want to look to see what you have next. This can be helped by advantageously positioning certain important or striking items within the frame or frames. The most important row is the second row and the most important pages are the two middle pages in the second row. Try, if possible, to position important or striking items there. The second most important row is the top row, and I personally think the most important pages are the first two on the left. This is where I frequently finish up with something important from the previous frame or introduce the next sub-part of the exhibit. People seem to expect to see sub-parts of a multi-frame exhibit begin near the top left of a frame. This probably stems from the fact that exhibits begin with a title page in the top left position of a single-frame and the top left of the first frame in a multi-frame exhibit.

### **Bunching**

Another element of presentation is balance – balance in presenting and positioning material within the frame and balance in positioning and presenting material within the exhibit. A simple illustration would be a multi-frame traditional exhibit with covers to show uses of the stamps. If the exhibit has five frames it would not be appropriate to have 12 covers in the first frame, 11 in the second, 26 in the third, 12 in the fourth and 25 in the last. It would be weighted down in frames three and five and would appear out of balance. The same sort of problem can come up in a single frame exhibit with lots of covers in the top two rows and very few in the bottom two rows – it would be out of balance. Of course, this problem of presenting too much of one thing is not just limited to covers and could apply to any sort of philatelic item. You must be cognizant of the frequency in which items appear throughout the exhibit and the positioning of them within the frames. Early on in planning your exhibit, and as you accumulate items, be aware of balancing and do not be tempted to load up on items for one sub-part just because they are readily available or inexpensive. I am currently putting together a multi-frame exhibit of the Japanese Occupation issues of China. I find myself incorrectly accumulating covers with the Shanghai-Nanking issues of Central China (Scott 9N1-114, 9BC1-7 and 9NJ1-4; Ma SH 1-129, SH Air 1-7 and SH PD 1-4) because they are readily available. Since only the covers of North China and the District Overprints for Hopeh are also readily available, and everything else is hard to find, I am creating a bunching problem. Physician – heal thyself.

However, I do plan to test the Japanese Occupation subject by starting with a single-frame exhibit of the Central China issues. I have seen several really excellent Japanese Occupation exhibits in Japan and at other shows in Asia, but I do not recall seeing one here in the US. Accordingly, I think this may be a good subject for an exhibit, but I am going to test it before I commit to a major multi-frame exhibit.

### **Get Started!**

The next article in this series will be on how to prepare a title page. But don't wait – get started making pages! The last page you will want to make is your title page. Begin working with page two. Read up on Microsoft Publisher and pick a Saturday morning to sit down at the computer and try to make a page. Lay out some stamps, covers, etc. on some Vario (or other) pages in a way that seems pleasing to you and then use Publisher to create pages on which to mount the material the way you laid it out. As you make pages, ideas will start to pop into your head. My first page took about an hour and a half to create. I can now create a “first try” of a page in just a few minutes. Also, as you save each page that you create you are building a library of formats. You will find that other pages are similar and you can start with one of the pages you have saved and simply revise it to make the new page. Just be sure to do your revisions on a copy of the original page, not the original page itself, and save the new page with a new number or name. The text on the pages will no doubt change as you proceed to put together your exhibit and the title may also change, perhaps several times, before you are finished. So do not be in a hurry to mount the stamps on the pages. Make the pages, print them on regular paper and lay out the stamps in mounts that are not affixed to the page. This way you can see how it looks before you commit to printing on thick paper. When you have all 16 pages ready lay them out on a table to make sure you are happy with everything before you start mounting. Happy exhibiting!