

[Additional information is available under “Exhibits” on the Society’s web site ([www.ChinaStampSociety.org](http://www.ChinaStampSociety.org)). The Society will put on a seminar titled “Exhibiting For Beginners” at StampShow 2009 and during its National Convention at BALPEX 2009.]

## EXHIBITING CHINESE PHILATELY IV

### The “Synopsis”

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The dictionary defines synopsis as “a brief summary or general survey of something.” The concept was first used philatelically when Clyde Jennings, a famous, longtime exhibitor and judge, introduced it as a way to improve exhibiting. It has now achieved almost universal acceptance. Typically when you enter an exhibit the show requires you to submit a photocopy of the title page and a synopsis page (try to limit it to one page). In some cases you are allowed to send them in at a later date (six or eight weeks prior to the show) as long as they are received in time for distribution to the jury members for their preparation and research for evaluating the exhibit.

Included with this article are two examples of a synopsis. Take a moment now and look them over.

There are no rules, only conventions, as to synopsis format. They typically follow a subject matter outline of the judging criteria as set forth in the latest edition of the Judges Manual and the APS World Series of Philately Uniform Exhibit Evaluation Form.

An example of the Uniform Exhibit Evaluation Form is also included with this article. Take a moment and look it over.

As you scan through the list of evaluation criteria and the percentages of weight given to each you readily see what the judges are looking for in a good exhibit. What you will want to do in your synopsis is give the jury a nudge in your favor in evaluating each of these criteria. I have touched upon several of these concepts in prior articles and will cover others in future articles. For purposes of preparing a good synopsis you need only remember what the criteria are and to the extent appropriate discuss each in your synopsis. In discussing them it is not necessary for you to state the obvious, only to convey meaningful information. In other words, if your exhibit is of first day covers it probably is not necessary to discuss “condition.” But if it is of Mongolian pre-adhesive postal history and most covers are found with splotches of yak dung, you had better say: “the covers shown are typical of the period and are as good as one should expect.”

Unlike the title page, which will be seen by all those viewing your exhibit, only the judges will see the synopsis. While the title page is to attract the viewer’s attention and stimulate interest in your exhibit, the synopsis is to educate jurors on your subject and the important aspects of your exhibit. You should answer those all-important questions of who, what, when, where, why and how on your title page, and should only repeat any of this information in your synopsis if it is necessary to drive home an important point. Each judge will have both the title page and the synopsis and will typically read the title page first, so repetition in the synopsis will be tedious unless it is necessary to reinforce a particular point. It is better to use the synopsis as a means of informing the jury of specific things about the exhibit.

## **PURPOSE**

Both the title page and the synopsis normally begin with an explanation of the purpose of the exhibit. Try phrasing the statement of purpose differently in each. That way you get to drive home important points so that the jury has a clear understanding of what they should expect to see and what they should not expect to see.

In your synopsis you should also state what division you feel your exhibit falls in: traditional, postal history, display, thematic, postal stationary, aero- or astro-philately, special studies (for example revenues), illustrated mail, first day covers, Cinderellas, single frame or youth. The jurors are not bound by your choice and are at liberty to evaluate your exhibit as if it is in another division if they feel it will benefit you in determining your award level.

Also explain what you are trying to accomplish. What is your story? Why have you chosen to put these particular things (stamps, covers, etc.) in an exhibit? Remember you are not just showing off a collection, you have to tell a story. And the story has to be philatelically meaningful. The things you chose to tell that story have to get the job done. If something is noticeably missing you have to find one.

You can limit the scope of your exhibit in several respects. Typical limitations are: stamps of a particular issue, a set of stamps, those prepared for a special purpose, uses during a limited time period, stamps by a certain engraver or printer, those from a specified geographic area – the list goes on and on. Just remember that when you set the parameters for your exhibit they must comport with your title. Do not title your exhibit “Early Aviation of France” when you are only showing the 1920s and 1930s. Better to title it “French Aviation in the 1920s and 1930s.” Most importantly, remember that if you limit your scope to exclude the tough stuff (the better, scarcer or more expensive items) you do so at your own peril. The judges will figure out what you have done and will probably think less of you for doing so. Having said that, it is important to point out that once you have set the boundaries of your exhibit, stick to them, defend them and be consistent with respect to them. Do not include that really great cover you want to show off if it does not fit within the scope of your exhibit. State your boundaries in your synopsis, explain them and follow them when you prepare your exhibit.

## **WHAT IS PRESENTED?**

Here you can explain why you chose the boundaries of your exhibit. If appropriate, explain what is not presented and why it is not presented. If something a judge would expect to see is not there you need an explanation. It may be that your exhibit is short on pre-production items: original drawings, essays, proofs, etc. If so, you may need to explain that in your subject matter area there are few such items on the market because they are all in postal museums. Be honest on this – a misstatement here can come back to haunt you. A judge that knows other collectors knowledgeable in your area may consult with them.

## **TREATMENT**

The object is to describe the story, tell how it unfolds, and explain why this particular treatment was chosen. It may be possible to do this in narrative text, but often a summary approach works better. Here an exhibit plan or outline may be helpful. The choice depends upon the complexity of the story. Typically the development of the story is constrained by the chronology. Not that there is anything wrong with a chronological presentation, but if your exhibit is complex you may find yourself having to restart the chronology again as you begin each sub-part of your exhibit. In cases like this, or where

the subject is otherwise complex, an outline or exhibit plan can be very helpful. It can be presented in a bullet format: simply listing each of the parts – much like chapters in a book. If it is more complex you can indent sub-parts within the list of bullets. Or you can present it in the typical outline format: Roman numerals, sub-parts as capital letters, sub sub-parts as Arabic numerals, and then small letters.

You need also explain your method of highlighting important philatelic items. It is advisable to have a method of making them stand out. Some people use colored dots next to the item, some use different colored paper matting, some use colored outline borders (easy to do on your computer), and some use darker or thicker outline borders. I use a black hairline to frame most things in my exhibits. When I want to draw attention to an item, I make the frame line much thicker.

### **RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE**

The second category on the Exhibit Evaluation Form, representing 35% of your total evaluation, is “Knowledge, Study and Research.” Selection of appropriate items to tell your philatelic story and correct, insightful descriptions of those items are the two best ways to demonstrate that you are philatelically knowledgeable. You should thoroughly research the subject and, hopefully, come up with some new conclusions that add to the sum total of philatelic knowledge. In short, read everything you can find, write something if you have anything new and different to say, and show off your knowledge when you assemble your exhibit by writing good descriptive text.

Here I like to talk about the double and triple “whammy.” What I mean by this is selecting an item that enables you to talk about more than one aspect or area of philately. Don’t just put in a cover franked with the stamp that went from point A to point B. Find one that has a variety of the stamp, paid an unusual rate such as printed matter, went from an obscure place or to an unusual place, was underpaid and required postage due, needed to be forwarded, etc. Nothing is as boring as ordinary covers. Find ones that give you something else to talk about in your description to show off the philatelic knowledge you used in finding an item and correctly describing it.

In your synopsis you can elaborate on research you did, explain the sources of data, tell how it was used in putting together your exhibit, and explain where you used unconventional research sources to find something that is not contained in the traditional body of philatelic knowledge. This original research not only makes for a more interesting exhibit, but scores points with the judges and will probably earn you a higher medal level.

### **CHALLENGE FACTORS**

Your choice of an exhibit subject and the story you set out to tell should involve some challenge factors. You also need to explain them in the synopsis. The most common such factor is “difficulty of acquisition.” Judges are usually impressed with those exhibits that contain a significant number of items that are simply hard to find, such as covers. These items need not necessarily be expensive, although they typically are. After all, they are expensive because so many collectors want them and that drives the price up. People want them because they are interesting, the very reason that make them so desirable for an exhibit.

Scarcity not only manifests itself in the price of an item, but in the frequency in which it comes on the market. Probably the most common statement made in this section of a synopsis is something to the effect that “it took me ‘X’ years to accumulate the items in this exhibit,” the so called “lifetime achievement” exhibit. But there is good reason for the

frequency of this sort of comment – that is because it is true. One of the few positive aspects of increased age is that you have been around long enough to have acquired the things it takes to make a good exhibit. There are always those with a thick wallet that can quickly overcome this advantage, and that is just one of the facts of life. You can usually better this sort of exhibitor with hard work and the knowledge that makes for a better exhibit.

Other challenge factors can include the difficulty in researching a subject. The synopsis gives you an opportunity to explain how you overcame this challenge.

### **MATERIAL HIGHLIGHTS**

It is sometimes handy to think of the synopsis as an opportunity to say to the jury those things that you would want to say if you could personally walk them through your exhibit. Think in terms of pointing out what you want to emphasize, key items that are the focal points of your exhibit, anticipating things they might find confusing and explaining them, anticipating and answering unasked questions, and explaining why some things are not present that they might expect to see in your exhibit.

I had a personal experience at an exhibitor's critique that drove home this last point. In the bibliography of my synopsis I had listed a specialized catalogue of China, thinking it would be a concise way to acquaint the jury with my subject. Unfortunately that catalogue had an incorrect listing of a double overprint on one of the stamps and a judge criticized me for not having it in my exhibit. After that critique I added a sentence to my synopsis explaining that the catalogue was in error and the double overprint it listed does not exist.

This is also the place where you can list the highlights of your exhibit and use words like: only, one of six, earliest recorded date, etc. Under "treatment" you explained how you drew attention to these items with special borders, etc., and here you get an opportunity to brag about them. Yes, I did not say "mention them," I said, "brag about them." It is perfectly permissible to blow your own horn in the synopsis. After all, it is your chance to tell the judges why your exhibit is important. Here you let the judges know what they can expect to see and tell the judges what they need to know about what they are going to see. If you do not tell them these things no one else will.

### **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

It is tempting to list all those books and other references you used in researching your exhibit thinking that this will show how thorough you were. But, unlike most bibliographies, this one is intended for a different purpose and should be concise. It is only intended to assist the jury in preparing to judge your exhibit. You should only list the most important sources – ones that will quickly familiarize them with the subject matter. You are not trying to make them experts. If appropriate, specify the pages so they can find things quickly, and confine your listing to publications readily available in a language common to the jury. It may be impressive to cite a book in Mongolian, but chances are the judges do not know anyone who can read it.

Most importantly, if you have been planning ahead you have already written an article on the subject of your exhibit for a philatelic magazine and should reference it. Nothing is better than demonstrating that you are one of the experts in the field.

I want to urge you to obtain a copy of Ada M. Prill's 2006 update to Randy Neil's book. Page 143 from The Philatelic Exhibitors Handbook (available from Subway Stamp Shop, Inc. \$31.99) is reproduced below.