

# A Short History of Tibetan Postage Stamps Commemorating their 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

by Briti Deb

## Introduction

Historically, "Tibet" refers to a plateau region in central Asia located at the "roof of the world" and at the foot of the snow-clad mountains, bordering China in the East, India through West to South, Nepal, Bhutan and Myanmar in South and Turkestan in north-west. Today, Tibet officially refers to the Tibetan Autonomous Region within China. Tibet is the home for Tibetan Buddhism, distinctive form of Mahayana and Vajrayana, introduced into Tibet in the beginning of 7<sup>th</sup> century CE from the Sanskrit Buddhist tradition of northern India [1]. Tibet is famous for its splendid cultural heritage such as the arts in the form of colorful thangka paintings, sand-mandalas, and rare cultural relics with unique ethnic style, Tibet is also well-known to the world through the office of H.H. The Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader and the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

Tibet's postal history probably dates back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when wax seals were used. Tibet first issued its own postage stamps in 1912, and used them until the 1950s when Communist China started taking over control of Tibetan affairs through its "Peaceful Liberation of Tibet" (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Scott 132-135 Peaceful Liberation of Tibet (Scott is a catalogue of postage stamps, published by Scott Publishing Co, which lists all the postal purpose stamps of the world), clockwise (a) The Potala Lhasa of 400 Fen, (b) Tibetan ploughing with Yaks, 800 Fen, (c) The Potala Lhasa of 800 Fen, (d) Tibetan ploughing with Yaks 1000 Fen.

The rarity and value of Tibetan stamps, postal history and postal artifacts, makes Tibet one of the most prized collections among philatelists.

It is often difficult to identify the value of Tibet postage stamps due to existence of many printings, variety of shades, and colours for each value. Arnold Waterfall in the *Postal History of Tibet* [2] listed various Tibet cancels and divided them into several different types, such as "Hel. T46", referring to Wolfgang Hellrigl's *Postal Markings of Tibet* [3]. In his book Mr. Hellrigl divided the Tibet cancels into several different types such as Chinese = C, British-Indian = B, and Tibetan = T.

Sending mail to Tibet a century ago was not easy. After the amount of postage was paid in cash by the sender, the post office affixed a wax seal (or stamp) to the letter as a marking that the charges have been paid, and would then forward the mailed item to its destination. Mail was sent C/O an agent in Pharijong or Gyantse, received by the British-Indian P.O., and delivered to the agent, who would affix a Tibetan stamp and re-mail at a Tibetan postoffice. Failing to find an agent in Gyantse or Pharijong, the sender would affix the Tibetan stamp at the time of original

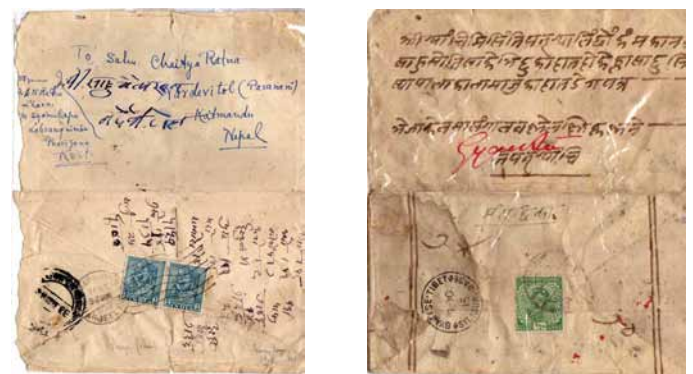
sending and privately send it to a Tibetan P.O. The Tibetan postal network handled international mail to and from several countries including the USA (Figure 2-a and 2-b), Australia (Figure 2-c), India (Figure 2-d), Nepal (Figure 2-e, 2-f), and Wolfgang Hellrigl even reported a registered commercial cover from Leh (Jammu-Kashmir) to Lhasa, dated 1925 [4].



(a) (b)



(c) (d)



(e) (f)

Figure 2: (a) 1953 cover from USA to Lhasa via Gyantse Type B-3, Hel. B48 receiving mark dated 3 Oct 1953, (b) 1953 postcard from the United Nations in New York to Lhasa via Gyantse Type B-3 arrival dated 24 Jun 1953, (c) 1947 registered cover from Yatum Tibet to Sydney Australia with Indian Victory stamps tied by Yatum-Tibet / via Siliguri India (Hel. B-47) cancel dated 3 Sep 1947 with scarce Yatum Tibet registration (Hel. B-90) also bearing a Sydney Australia receiving mark dated 16 Sep 1947, (d) 1921 cover from Calcutta to Gyantse via Kalimpong with Geo. V 1/2 green tied by Bara Bazar Calcutta cancel of 15 Jul 1921 having Gyantse Type B-3 Hel. B48 received (probably) 21 Jul 1921, (e) 1952 cover from Pharijong Tibet to Kathmandu Nepal using India 1 Anna Boddhisattva stamp tied by Pharijong Darjeeling (Hel. B18) cancel dated 26 Jul 1952 and the time 5:30 PM, (f) 1915 cover from Nepal to Gyantse Tibet using India Geo. V 1/2 Anna green tied by indistinct Nepal cancel with clear Gyantse Tibet / Siliguri base receiving mark dated 17 Oct. 1919.

In 1923, a telegraph and telephone line from India to Lhasa was completed [5] Discovery of the high denomination stamp of 1 Sang (equivalent to 6 2/3 Trangka) has led to the belief that it might had been used for telegraphic purpose with fee of 1 Sang per Word (Figure 3). There now follows a brief history of the Tibetan postal service, in chronological order.



Figure 3: Tibetan wireless telegraph stamp of ½ Sang yellow mint with wide margins.

### Pre-1902 Postal System

Existence of early (i.e. pre-stamp period) postal system is evident from the bronze seals and covers with wax seals. The franks employed in the primitive Tibetan postal system were strikingly unconventional [6]. Franks are markings (pre or post printed), codings, labels, in postal correspondence facilitating postal service. Tibet issued its own stamps in 1912, 1914 and 1933.

### 1903 - 1909 Postal System

After the arrival of the Tibetan Frontier Commission led by Sir Francis Younghusband in Khamba Jong 1903 to settle disputes over the Sikkim-Tibet border [2], typewritten overprints on Indian adhesive postage stamps started to be used in the Field Post Offices (FPOs) at Chumbi [7]. After entering Lhasa in 1904, postal correspondence was inscribed with the name of the Lahssa, later corrected as Lhasa [6]. As a result of British-India and Tibet Convention of 1904, Indian Postal Agencies were established at Gartok, Gyantse, Pharijong, Yatung, and Chumbi along the Indian trade route to Lhasa [2]. Indian postage stamps employed were the 3 pies grey, 3 pies carmine, and 1 rupee carmine and green, with the portrait of Queen Victoria, and the ½, 1, 2, 4 and 8 Annas values of the King Edward VII series [6]. Poor road conditions and bad weather limited postal movements from Lhasa to base office at Chumbi, and the lack of security warranted armed escort [6]. Such mails operated through the FPOs are prized collections today.

### 1909 - 1912 Postal System

Chinese forces of the Qing Dynasty occupied Tibet from 1909 to 1911, when the Dalai Lama and His Government fled into India. Thereafter, Chinese stamps and special Chinese date stamps were used at Chabdo, Gyantse, Lhasa, Pharijong, Shigatse and Yatung. Initially, the Chinese foreign post offices used regular stamps of Imperial China (Figure 4), but in 1911 a set of eleven stamps (surcharged in three languages) was introduced for Tibet (Scott #1-11).



Figure 4: 2 Cents green used stamp of Imperial China tied by Yatung-Tibet Type C-3 (Hel. C15) cancel.

### Stamps Issued During 1912 - 1914

After the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912, The Dalai Lama returned to Tibet from India and regained the authority of independent Tibet [8]. Tibet issued its first postage stamps in 1912 (Figure 5). A Snow Lion which is also the national emblem of Tibet is usually seen in these stamps, along with the marking in Tibetan characters meaning "Tibet Government" and "Tibet" in English. The hand carved printing plate in a wooden block consisted of twelve stamps, making each stamp even from the same denomination slightly different from the other. Each stamp printing was made on request from the PO. when supplies were needed, making every print a different shade. Locally xylographed and rice paper commonly used as material, such a primitive method of production resulted in wide variations and shades for each stamp. Using dull ink or shiny enamel paint to print, many of the stamps were re-printed a number of times over many years. Some of the currency values used were Skar (pronounced Gar), Zho (pronounced Sho) = 10 Skar = 2/3 Trangka, Trangka (pronounced Trangka) = 1 ½ Zho = 15 Skar, and Srang (pronounced Sang) = 10 Zho = 6 2/3 Trangka.

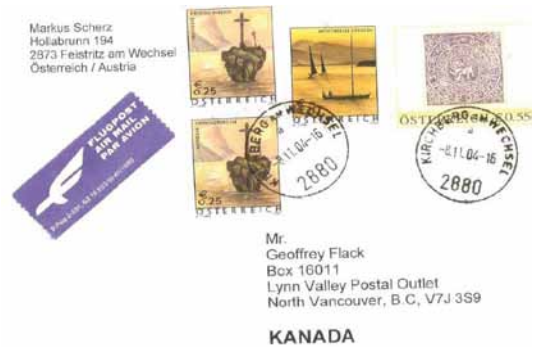


Figure 5: A 0.55 Euro Austrian stamp illustrating a Tibet 4 Trangka blue stamp on it, produced as a "custom order" by the Austrian P.O. Only 200 copies of this stamp were produced.

British-India and Tibet reached an agreement on their common frontier with the Simla Treaty of 1914 [9]. Tibet issued two stamps in 1914 printed in a sheet of 6 stamps with hand carved wooden printing blocks, re-printed on demand till 1950s (Figure 6).

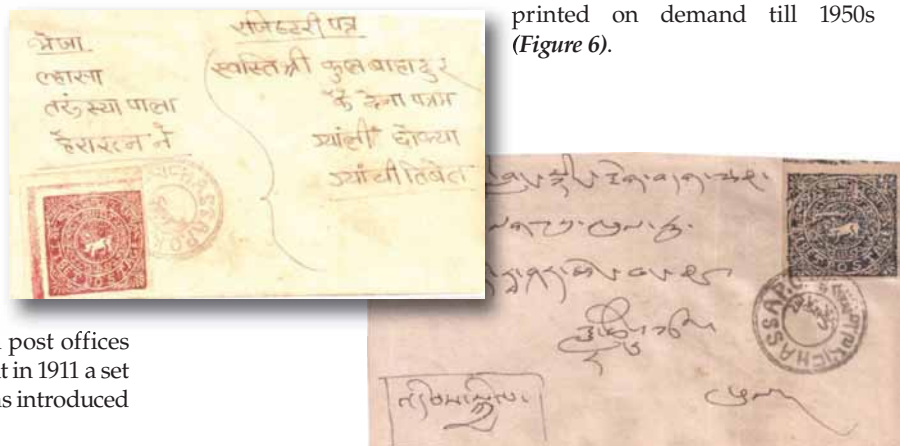


Figure 6: An 8 Trangka vermilion (left) and a 4 Trangka deep-blue (right), all of shade 5, tied by unknown cancellation, with Tibetan inscription as Tibetan Government Postal Service, English Inscription as TIBET POSTAGE, Imperforate, and in Sheets of 6 (3 x 2). The vermilion is of value 8 trangka, variants are Carmine and pink. The deep-blue is of 4 trangka value also found in dull gray-blue and indigo variants. The boxed marking in the right cover could be an indication that the cover was insured.



## Stamps Issued in 1933

The printing block used for stamps issued in 1933 (Figure 7) had 12 separate clichés, bound together to make one printing plate. After printing a certain number of stamps, the printing plate used to be separated, the clichés cleaned, again bound together, and clichés filled with old ink to reprint. Since the separate clichés have been carved by hand, they were slightly different from each other and several different settings could be identified, numbered with Arabic numbers from 1 to 4. Stamps were perforated from this issue, but it is believed that only the very first printing was perforated officially.



Figure 7: Set of stamps issued in 1933, perforated and imperforated, in sheets 12 (4 x 3), color (from left) chestnut brown of value 1 Trangka, orange of value ½ Trangka, dark-blue (Waterfall #130) of value 2/3 Trangka, carmine of value 1 Trangka, emerald-green of value 4 Trangka.

## Stamps Issued by China in 1952

After the overthrow of the Republic of China by the Communists in 1949, and the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the People's Liberation Army entered Eastern Tibet in early 1950s, and extended Chinese control over all of Tibet in the next few years. After the creation of the "Tibetan Autonomous Region" by the People's Republic of China in 1965, Chinese post offices were opened throughout Tibet, and Tibet's own stamps became replaced by Chinese stamps, and Tibetan stamps ceased to be used anywhere after the dissolution of the Tibetan government in 1959. The annexation of Tibet by China ceased any issue of new Tibetan postage stamps. A set of commemorative stamps on the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet were issued by the Chinese People's Postal Service in 1955 (Figure 1).

## Postal System Beyond 1952

Even after the Chinese invasion in Tibet, evidence of Indian stamps being used in Tibet could be found (Figure 8).



Figure 8:  
An early 1950 cover from Pharijong Tibet to Kathmandu Nepal with India 2 Anna Nataraja stamp tied by Pharijong/Darjeeling (Hel. B18) cancel.

The failed Tibetan uprising of 1959 led the Dalai Lama to flee Tibet for India following the setting up of the Government of Tibet in Exile in Dharamshala, India, often referred to as "Little Lhasa". In an effort to preserve Tibetan culture, language, religion, history, and the Tibetan way of life, the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies was set up in 1967 with support from Government of India. A set of four unused blocks of commemorative stamps was believed to be issued in 1984 on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Tibetan National Uprising (Figure 9). The four values were described on a small card which was sold with the stamp set.



Figure 9: (a) Yumbu Lhagang before and after Chinese destruction. It is a National Monument built during the reign of Tibet's first king Nyatri Tsenpo in 128 BC. (b) Gaden Monastery before and after Chinese destruction which was one of the three major centers of learning in Central Tibet, (c) Logo and monogram of Tibet - 1984, (d) The Potala Palace with the Tibetan National Flag.

## Conclusions

Since the "Peaceful Liberation of Tibet" by Communist China started during 1949 (Figure 1), several public debates have brought in serious issues on the existence of ancient Tibetan art, culture, music, language, religion, festivals, and environment, suggesting the need for more research and discussion on Tibet. This article is believed to help in that direction.

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