



“The comity of nations”: the Chinese Post Office, the Universal Postal Union, and the abolition of “alien post offices”, 1843–1923

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The Republic of China joined the Universal Postal Union in 1914, believing that its status in the Union as an equal sovereign state would help recover China’s “postal autonomy” by forcing the abolition of the “alien” post offices established by the various foreign powers on Chinese soil. In the aftermath of the Opium War (1839–1842), the imperialist powers had violated the sovereignty of the Qing empire by opening foreign post offices in the treaty ports. Although the establishment of foreign post offices initially attracted little notice, the growing complexity of the unequal treaty regime and China’s lowly status as a “semi-civilized” country in international society began to greatly concern Qing officials. As the Qing empire struggled to understand the European-dominated international order in the late 19th century, the government began taking a variety of steps to raise China’s status and recover its lost rights

Among the little-known steps in China’s struggle to recover its sovereignty was the establishment of a domestic postal administration. In the late 1870s, Sir Robert Hart, as Inspector General of the Imperial Maritime Customs Service, began developing a Customs Post to handle mail within the country. Although this was largely an experiment, the Universal Postal Union invited Hart to join the Union in 1878. Feeling unprepared to fulfill the necessary international obligations, Hart demurred, but continued with his experiments until the Guangxu Emperor ordered him to establish an Imperial Post Office in 1896. The Imperial Post Office was itself a semi-colonial institution, administered by a small cosmopolitan group of international bureaucrats and staffed by thousands of Chinese workers. Concerned by the ramifications of granting a semi-colonial institution a monopoly over the mails, the Guangxu Emperor decided to force Hart to contend with the six other postal services operating within China. Over the next 25 years, Hart and his successors devised a host of strategies to challenge and eliminate their postal competitors and transform the Imperial Post Office into an internally-sovereign and internationally-recognized postal service.

This presentation will discuss the strategies devised by the foreign and domestic employees of the Imperial Post Office, known as the Chinese Post Office after the 1911 Revolution, to force the abolition of the foreign post offices in China. Between 1896 and 1911, the Imperial Post Office secured exclusive transportation contracts with steamship and railroad companies and rapidly expanded its own domestic network, especially in border areas, to undermine the profitability and forestall the opening of new foreign post offices. After the 1911 Revolution, the new republican government decided to formally join the Universal Postal Union. They assumed that membership of the Union would automatically force the withdrawal of the foreign post offices. Waiting until after the war to address the question, the Chinese delegates to the Versailles Peace Conference and the 1920 Madrid Congress discovered that the UPU, as an international administrative union, could not decide such “political” questions. Instead, high-level Chinese diplomats and postal administrators aggressively and effectively negotiated the withdrawal of the foreign post offices at the Washington Conference in 1922.