Standard Messages: Institutional Identity and Symbolism in Chinese Postal Flags, 1896–1949

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The creation and selection of national flags is usually a complex symbolic interaction and elaboration undergone during a process of state-making and/or nation-building by various state or social groups acting to establish a visual representation of and identity for their modern nation-state. Generally speaking, in geographical areas where ethnic nation-building preceded state-making, flags were initially a sign of symbolic protest against the established order—the "stars and stripes" or the French revolutionary tricolor—representing an attempt to break with the past political order.[1] When state-making preceded nation-building, as in many colonial or semi-colonial societies, a new or proposed national flag often represented an elitist conception of the political or ethnic makeup of the new nation-state designed to foster political nation-building by developing shared and unifying abstract political symbols.[2] These symbols seek to represent the "nation" as homogeneous and anonymous—to symbolize the nation as a collective people whose shared national interests outweigh any particular sub-identity. For example, the five-barred flag (Figure 1)

Figure 1. Flag of the Republic of China, 1912–1928[50]

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adopted by the Chinese Provisional Government in 1912 as representing the five largest ethnic groups in China—Han (red), Manchu (yellow), Mongol (blue), Hui (white), and Tibetan (black)—purportedly epitomized a shift within revolutionary Chinese ideology from ardent anti-Manchuism during the struggle to overthrow the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1911) to a new inclusive racialist conception of the ethnic makeup of the Chinese "nation" led by the Han majority. In fact, the Republican government adopted the five-barred flag because it was the least attached to any specific political platform—it was not a party banner—among the contending revolutionary groups.[3]

The emotional connections between a "nation" of people and their national flag is not, of course, a given, but represents a process of mutual negotiation and renegotiation as both sides attempt to fix the symbolic meaning and significance of the flag. The nature of symbolism, as Alfred North Whitehead puts it, "is very fallible, in the sense that it may induce actions, feelings, emotions, and beliefs about things which are mere notions without that exemplification in the world which the symbolism leads us to suppose."[4] That is, the ephemeral symbolism of an object like a national flag must constantly undergo a process of discursive and real struggle between different actors who seek to fix the exemplification of the flag in their own interests.[5]

The study of national flags in Republican China (1912–1949) has already received considerable attention in the historical literature, but what scholars have overlooked is a subfield of vexillology—the study of institutional flags.[6] Discussions of institutional flags—flags that represent specific government, public, or private institutions—are largely absent from the historical literature. Institutional flags have probably been ignored because they represent either specific political, institutional, or interest-group politics and therefore cannot be said to constitute symbols facilitating either state-making or nation-building in a broad sense. In practice, however, this study of early twentieth-century Chinese postal flags demonstrates that institutional flags could and did serve several important symbolic functions contributing to state-making, but only because of the particularly unstable political situation in China at that time.

During the entire Republican era, there was no central unified state—many governments claimed such status, but not a single one ever completely governed the entire territorial entity known today as China.[7] While relatively more significant "states" existed in Beijing (1912–1928), Nanjing (1927–1937, 1945–1949), and Chongqing (1938–1945) within "China", their status as "the state" was dependent on international recognition making them more juridical than empirical states.[8] Additionally, several mini- or quasi-states continued to operate with more or less autonomy around the country throughout the entire period acting as a centrifugal force in Chinese state-making. All of the quasi-state actors, however, continued to assume the ideal of a Chinese unitary state even as they fought aggressively for more autonomy or local control vis-à-vis other state contenders. This assumption of a soon-to-be-unified China opened enough political and bureaucratic space where large-scale administrative institutions of the Beijing, Nanjing, or Chongqing governments could operate on a "national" scale within the quasi-states. The institutions of the central government operating on a national scale were relatively few in number and were often semi-colonial, foreign-administered, and Chinese-staffed such as the British-controlled Maritime Customs Service and Sino-Foreign Salt Inspectorate, and the French-controlled Directorate General of Posts.[9] Quite possibly, although more research needs to be done, the ability of these institutions to act nationally was contingent upon their status as being foreign-administered and thus the quasi-state actors were forced to weigh the advantages of taking them over versus the possibilities of foreign intervention. Whatever the case, each of these institutions shared certain common features making them important administrative structures fostering the creation of a truly centralized Chinese nation-state, not the least of which is the use of institutional flags representing central government authority within the quasi-states.

The postal flags were designed to foster an institutional identity for the Post Office as an efficient government institution and a symbol of postal authority that transferred those same functions and values onto the larger entity of the central government as it sought to expand its state prerogatives moving from the ideal of a unitary state to an actual one. This transference was achieved in three ways. First, on a practical level, the flags

symbolized postal authority when flown on postal boats or contracted mail steamers and boats thus speeding the mails and exempting the ships from the many tax and inspection barriers established around the country by both the central government and quasi-states. Second, as a symbol of a national institution, the postal flags also represented its presence in areas not directly controlled by the central government, maintaining the ideal of China as a unified nation-state. Third, and more ephemerally, the postal flags helped create both an internal institutional identity—as a symbol of the esprit de corps of postal workers—and an external institutional identity as an efficient, progressive government organ with a unique capacity for fostering communications helping to create the idea of a unified nation of diverse peoples.

From the first proposal for a unique Chinese postal flag in 1914 to the end of the Republican era in 1949, there were five main designs—each signifying a process of negotiation and renegotiation over the symbology of the flag between the central government, the Post Office, and other state contenders. The initial form is known as the flying goose postal flag and it represented an effort by the Post Office to create an institutional identity using referents to the "central" Beijing government—the five-colored national flag was the jack in the upper canton—and traditional Chinese symbology—the flying goose was a classical reference to the transmission of messages. During the Northern Expedition (1926–1928) when the southern-based National Revolutionary Armies tried to unify the country militarily, the postal flag, representing the warlord-dominated Beijing government, became politicized and the five-colored jack in the upper canton was dropped in June 1927.[10] Between June 1927 and January 1929, the postal flag simply consisted of the flying goose on a white field. In January 1929, after the establishment of the "National" Government in Nanjing, the Directorate created a third postal flag consisting of the same design as the first but using the Nationalist Party flag as its jack in the upper canton, thus demonstrating the ascendancy of the Nationalist Party over the government and country. In late 1931, for unknown reasons, a new postal flag and pennant were designed consisting of five wavy lines representing the marks made by an automatic canceller machine on stamps with an art deco-style seal character for "Posts" within the dater circle. This flag, by dropping

its referent to the Nationalist Party, created a more institutionally-based, technologically-advanced identity—the automatic canceller representing the most current technology for cancelling stamps—but one less understood by the general public. The final manifestation came in 1947 when the Directorate ordered all Post Offices to retire the postal canceller flag, although the pennant still flew on ships, and a more basic flag was created simply using the words "Post Office" (郵局) in green on a probable field color of white or yellow. This final postal flag represented the post-war realities of a unified state under the Nationalists and stable postal identity making it unnecessary to use the postal flag for state-making purposes. In sum, Chinese postal flags were not symbols designed in inspire patriotic fervor—no one felt chills looking at the postal flag or sacrificed his life defending it—but tactile representations of institutional identity designed to subtly suggest government efficiency, administrative authority, and central government presence within the quasi-states, thus becoming a vehicle for state-making. Although this article only deals with the creation and use of postal flags, many of the conclusions could be profitably applied to the Maritime Customs and Salt Inspectorate flags (Customs flags, Figures 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7; Salt Inspectorate flags, Figures 8, 9).

Figure 2. Flag of the Imperial Maritime Customs Administration, 1861–1862, 1867–1873, 1912–1928, 1931–1949 (on the bow)[51]

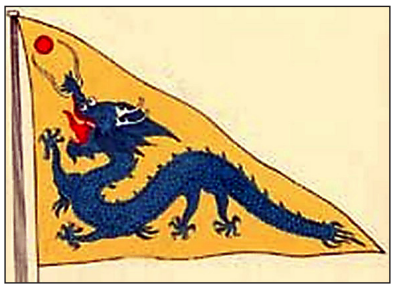

Figure 3. Flag of the Imperial Maritime Customs Administration, 1873–1889[52]

Figure 4. Qing State Flag and Flag of the Imperial Maritime Customs Administration, 1890–1912[53]

Figure 5. Flag of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service, 1912–1928[54]

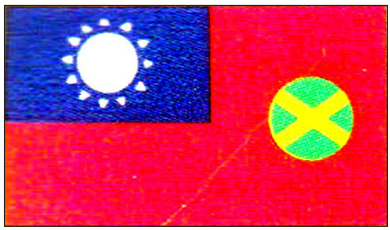

Figure 6. Flag of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service, 1928–1931[55]

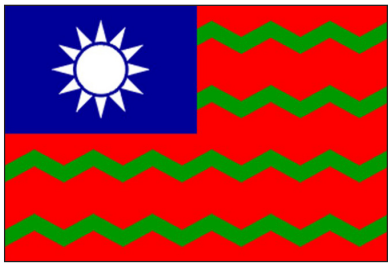

Figure 7. Flag of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service, 1931–1949[56]

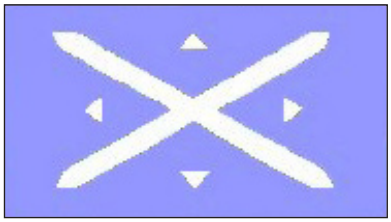

Figure 8. Flag of the Chinese Salt Inspectorate, ?–1931[57]

The Qing Dragon Flag and the 1911 Revolution

From the founding of the Imperial Post Office in 1896 until the 1911 Republican Revolution, Head (guanliju 管理局), Branch (zhiju 支局), First-Class (yideng 一等), and Inland (neidi fenju 內地分局) Post Offices flew the "second" imperial dragon flag (Figure 4) from their masts as a Qing government institution.[11] During the Republican Revolution in 1911 revolutionaries in radical hotbeds like Changsha and Wuhan objected to the hoisting of the Qing dragon flag. They demanded the foreign Postmasters immediately lower the flag and remove the words "Great Qing" (Da Qing 大清) from the signs and lintels of the Post Offices. The Postmasters in rebel territory agreed, even going so far as to chip out the characters from stone signs.[12] The foreign Postmasters were quite willing to remove offen-

Figure 9. Flag of the Chinese Salt Inspectorate, 1931–1949[58]

sive markers of Qing identity from the exteriors of Post Offices and were generally accommodating to the revolutionaries, but they would not raise the five-colored flag nor surrender either the Post Offices or any symbol of postal authority such as the Postmaster's chop until the Qing emperor abdicated.[13] In fact, the Post Offices in revolutionary areas, quite ironically given their status as part of an official Qing institution, declared themselves "provisionally neutral" (linshi zhongli 臨時中立) during the period of struggle between the revolutionaries and Qing state, effectively demonstrating that in periods in which a central unitary state did not exist, the Post Office would maintain the fiction of one.[14] The official Post Office statement was that it was "recognized as a national institution" rather than a state institution during the 1911 Revolution and was "everywhere treated as neutral."[15] Six weeks after the official establishment of the Republic of China on 1 January 1912 the Directorate circularized all Post Offices to lower the Qing dragon flag and hoist the new five-colored national flag.[16]

The Flying Goose Postal Flag, 1914-1927

In 1912 the British-controlled Chinese Maritime Customs Administration adopted a new institutional flag incorporating the traditional Customs flag as the jack in the upper canton and the five-colored flag as its background (Figure 5). The Directorate General of Posts also raised the issue of a distinctive institutional postal flag (youqi 郵旗) with the newly-established Ministry of Communications (Jiaotong bu 交通部), successor to the Ministry of Posts and Communications (Youchuan bu 郵傳部) at this time, but, for various unspecified reasons, the issue was tabled. In 1914 when China joined the Universal Postal Union (wanguo youlian 萬國郵聯) the general international practice was that each national postal service had its own service flag to help identify ships carrying mail matter.[17] To coincide with China entering the Universal Postal Union, the Directorate General petitioned the Ministry of Communications to propose a possible postal flag.[18] The Ministry responded by designing a flag with a light orchid field color, five-colored national flag in the upper canton, and a white goose as the central emblem. The Directorate General thought that light orchid, because it would fade easily, would make the goose indecipherable

Figure 10. Flag of the Directorate General of Posts, 1919–1927[59]

and therefore wanted to change the field color to green and the goose to a "goose-yellow" color, which would also accord with the traditional green and yellow colors of the Chinese Post Office. For various reasons, however, the proposed flag was not adopted.

After several failed attempts to create a distinctive institutional postal flag, in December 1918 the Directorate General of Posts again petitioned the Ministry proposing the adoption of the 1914 model flag. Minister of Communications Cao Rulin (曹汝霖) agreed and submitted the proposal to President Xu Shichang (徐世昌) who, on 7 February 1919, mandated the official adoption of the flying goose postal flag.[18] The following day, the Shanghai-based newspaper *Shen bao* carried a description of the flag.[19] It consisted of a white field with a five-colored national flag as jack in the upper canton, a large flying wild goose (fei hong 飛鴻) in deep gray with a red beak and feet as the central emblem, and the Chinese character for "posts" (郵) and French "postes" in black in the lower hoist canton (Figure 10). The flag measured eight feet along the fly and five down the hoist with the canton being two feet wide and three feet long.

As stated in the Directorate's circular announcing the introduction of the service flag, its initial purpose in wanting a "distinctive emblem" for the Post Office was to smooth the transmission of mails on steamers and native craft with the postal flag "affording them additional protection." The significance of the flag, besides its distinctive symbology, was to "connote the authority of the [Postal] Administration" in order that private firms carrying mail matter under contract with the Post Office would be exempt from stoppage or interference by riverine, lijin (厘金), or other tax authorities wanting to search the mails for taxable goods. The postal flag would thus help speed the mails by using the symbols of an idealized unitary state—a national flag in the canton—giving steamers and contracted native craft passage into the centrifugal quasi-states around the country.

While the warlords of the centrifugal quasi-states might refuse to remit land tax receipts to the "central" Beijing government, they would not refuse entrance to the Beijing-based Directorate General of Posts and their mail transports.[20]

Figure 11 (top). Jumping Carp Postage Stamp, issued 1897
Figure 12. Flying Goose Postage Stamp, issued 1897

The Ministry of Communications' choice of a flying goose for the proposed 1914 flag stemmed from the Post Office's use of the symbol dating back to 1897. The symbolism of the flying goose was attempt to harken back to traditional ideas in representing the Post Office—to use a symbol recognizably attached to the transmission of letters. According to the Directorate, flying geese "in ancient times…are said to have been used for the conveyance of interprovincial correspondence, the letters being attached to their feet."[21] The goose was first used as a symbol of the modern Post Office in 1897 with the initial issue of postage stamps ordered by Imperial Maritime Customs Service Inspector General Sir Robert Hart, designed by Customs clerk R. A. de Villard (C. 費拉爾), and approved by the Qing government's foreign affairs office, the Zongli Yamen (總理衙門). The first three stamp issues represented respectively a dragon, symbol of the emperor, a jumping carp (liyu 鯉魚) (Figure 11), and a wild flying swan (ye tian'e 野天 ☒) (Figure 12)—the last two signifying traditional carriers of messages.[22] Hart himself approved of the flying swan as representing "speed" to the "Chinese eye" and the Guangxu Emperor apparently "lauded" the flying goose stamp design.[23]

The story that geese carried messages originated with the famous historian Ban Gu (32–92 C.E.), who recounted the tale of Su Wu (蘇武) of the 2nd century B.C.E. During a lull in a protracted war between the Han and Xiongnu (匈奴) peoples in 100 B.C.E., Emperor Han Wudi dispatched Su Wu as an envoy to negotiate with them. The Xiongnu took Su Wu captive and set him to tending sheep in an isolated border region,

probably near present-day Lake Baikal. After peace was restored between the Xiongnu and Han in 81 B.C.E., Emperor Zhao (r. 87-74) asked for Su Wu's release, but the Xiongnu reported him long dead. Su Wu, fearful of remaining among the Xiongnu, sent an underling to see the Han ambassador. The Han ambassador was to have the Emperor claim to have found a note from Su Wu attached to a goose's leg. This evidence would force the Xiongnu to release Su Wu, which is what apparently happened.[24] Other more fantastic versions claim that Su Wu actually did tie a letter to a goose's leg and set it aflight. Some time later, the Emperor was hunting on the imperial grounds and shot a goose only to discover the letter from Su Wu tied to its leg.[25]

The image of the wild goose, as a symbol, was designed for double signification: speed and the characteristics—loyalty, fidelity, steadfastness—of Su Wu in his attempts to serve his emperor faithfully. Since most people knew something of the Su Wu story, it being a part of both "high" and "popular" culture in the Republican era, the Post Office was attempting to create a correlation between itself and ancient Chinese stories and history.[26] The goose thus represented Su Wu's laudable characteristics as well as the divine intervention that brought the goose to the imperial hunting grounds. The symbolic meaning of the goose as loyalty in the Su Wu story overlapped with its function in Chinese marriage lore—geese maintained a single life-long partner making them a traditional emblem of marriage.[27] It was said that if a goose's partner died, the living partner would die soon thereafter as a sign of loyalty. These overlapping significations—loyalty, fidelity, and steadfastness—exemplified by the flying goose postal flag, said Postal Commissioner Liu Yaoting (劉曜庭) at the Postal Conference in 1934, "honored national history."[28] Many people, Liu continued, cited the allusion of Su Wu and the goose thus having a "deep understanding" of the postal flag and its meaning.

The real importance of the postal flag was that it gave postal workers access "to all places up rivers, into the mountains, on the plains, and into the wilds allowing them to pass through any obstructions they encountered."[29] This kind of exaggerated rhetoric expressed the idea that despite the centrifugal quasi-states, unexplored border regions, or forbidding mountain passes, postal couriers could penetrate them all by carrying the postal

flag as a representation of central government authority. During both the Beijing (1912–1928) and Nanjing periods (1927–1937) the Chinese Post Office did operate as a national network in areas controlled by local warlords or other forces as they continued to envision a unitary Chinese state, but the postal flag did not always protect the Post Office from attempts at intervention.

When warlord quasi-states sought to take over provincial or local Post Offices, Postal Commissioners used ready-made excuses to explain that the result of such actions would be the effective isolation of the area because the Directorate would stop all intercourse with the area. If postal funds were locally demanded, the Commissioners were to demonstrate that postal surpluses were contingent upon the smooth working of a national postal service and explain that profits were not made by local or provincial Post Offices, but by the network as a whole thus effectively dissuading interference in postal operations.[30] By contrast, such excuses were not as effective when made by the district offices of the Sino-Foreign Salt Inspectorate. Their typical response was to make some financial arrangement with the warlords in the form of a one-time payoff to ensure the continued operation of the Inspectorate as a national administration.[31] When demands were made on the Guangzhou Customs Houses for a pro-rated share of local revenues by Sun Zhongshan (Yat-sen) in 1923, the excuses for not handing over the funds were rather weak, but the foreign powers responded by threatening armed intervention if Sun acted on his claims.[32] The excuses made by each of these foreign-dominated Chinese government institutions were made to maintain the integrity of their Services while also effectively continuing the fiction of a unitary Chinese state when none existed—the fiction of this unitary state was represented not only by their offices, but manifested in their institutional flags.

The flying goose postal flag flew relatively uncontroversially until the Nationalist Armies starting taking control of southern provinces during the Northern Expedition (beifa 北伐) to unify the country in 1926–1927. All Postal Commissioners had standing orders to remove any postal symbols that might "arouse local ill-feeling" if requested in order to forestall any attempt to pull the Post Office into a conflict between local warlord quasi-states, revolutionary groups, and the "central" government.[34] The

five-barred national flag in the upper hoist of the postal flag did arouse the ire of the Northern Expeditionary Armies. The first objections to the five-barred flag came in late 1926 and early 1927 in the southern postal districts where the local Nationalist authorities refused to recognize it as the national flag.[35] The Directorate once again ordered Postal Commissioners to remove the postal flag where objection was shown by the local political authorities. If necessary in southern postal districts, Post Offices were allowed to fly the same flag as that hoisted on local government buildings.[36] With the southern Nationalist authorities continuing to complain, the Directorate allowed District Postal Commissioners to have a piece of white cloth sewn over the five-colored jack so the postal flag could still be flown to show its institutional identity and protect postal property.[37] From June 1927 to January 1929, then, the Post Office tried to avoid the struggle between the Northern and Southern "central" governments by reducing the postal flag to the flying goose and the character for Posts (郵).

As in 1911, the Post Office in 1926–1927 acted not in the interests of the central Beijing Government, but in the interests of maintaining its own integrity as a national service. The Directorate General was willing to negotiate the content of the postal flag with the republican revolutionaries in 1911 and the Nationalists in 1926–1927 to ensure the viability of the Post Office as an institution of a soon-to-be unitary Chinese state. Frederick Maze, Inspector General of Customs after the Northern Expedition, also claimed that the institutional flag of the Maritime Customs Administration helped protect Customs property during the Northern Expedition when the southern National Revolutionary Armies objected to the five-barred national flag as part of the institutional Customs flag. The Customs Administration thus made the same decision to protect the integrity of their Service by removing the five-barred flag when demanded by the Nationalists.[38]

Nationalist Postal Flags, 1927–1949

After the Nationalist Ministry of Communications had fully taken over administration of the Directorate General of Posts on 28 June 1928,[39] a new

postal flag was introduced in January 1929 consisting of the same model as the 1919 postal flag with the Nationalist Party flag replacing the five-colored flag as the jack in the upper canton, symbolizing the dominance of the Nationalist Party over China (Figure 13).[40] This new postal flag was deemed "inappropriate" shortly thereafter, probably because the jack represented the Nationalist Party rather than the nation, and the Directorate requested design suggestions from the staff for a completely new postal flag.[41]

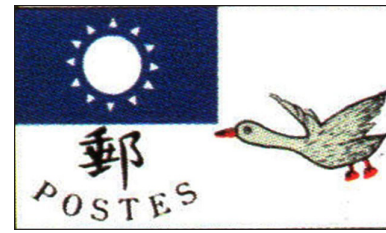

Figure 13. Flag of the Directorate General of Posts, 1929–1931[60]

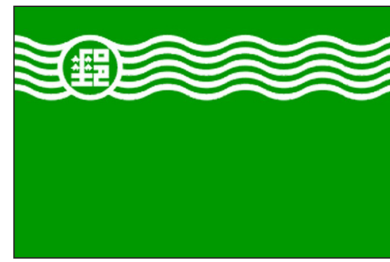

Figure 14. Flag of the Directorate General of Posts, 1931–1949[61]

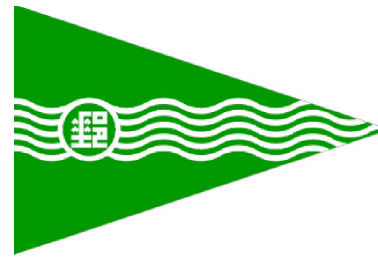

Figure 15. Postal Pennant of the Directorate General of Posts, 1931–1949[62]

The final design for the new postal flag was approved and issued by the Ministry of Communications on 9 November 1931.[42] Ministry Order No. 217 describes the postal flag as consisting of green cloth and comprising a white impression of the automatic cancelling machine lines for cancelling stamps running along the top of the flag with the dater impression in the left-hand corner with an ancient seal character for "Posts" (郵) in the middle of the dater circle (Figure 14). A three-cornered postal pennant (youchuan weiqi 郵船⊠旗) was also issued for use on postal and contract ships, but with the automatic dater lines running through the middle of the flag (Figure 15).

The automatic canceller flag symbolized both the depoliticization of the postal flag by dropping the Nationalist Party flag from the upper hoist and the technological modernity of the Post Office by demonstrating its adoption of the newest machines for cancelling stamps—up to the 1920s and

even into the 1930s letters in China were still hand-cancelled. The use of the seal character with an art deco-inspired font was a reference harkening back to an ancient writing style with a Machine Age twist. A large number of periodicals, newspapers, books, and other print forms also used art deco fonts for Chinese characters in the interwar period. Unfortunately, this combination of art deco style and a seal character made the character for "Posts" almost illegible. Instead, as its use to the present in Taiwan testifies, this character simply became a visual synecdoche for the Post Office.

Even after the adoption of the postal canceller flag, the flying goose remained a part of postal identity and continued to hold its power to represent the Post Office, especially among workers. Beginning in 1921, postmen were required to wear a postal badge on the breast of their uniforms. The badge consisted of the same symbology as the postal flag—the flying goose and five-barred national flag. When the Nationalist military authorities objected, during the Northern Expedition, the postal badges were also altered. On 25 August 1928 the Directorate ordered the goose and flag on postal badges dropped in favor of the seal character for "Posts", which is the origin of the seal character on the automatic canceller flag.[43] Even after the Post Office stopped officially using the flying goose, however, postal workers continued to support the image in a private capacity. On 1 December 1933, the National Postal Workers' Union (Quanguo youwu zonggonghui 全國郵務總工會) adopted a union pin consisting of a white flying goose, a 12-point Nationalist Party star, and a green background.[44] The same basic design was also adopted in April 1936 for the Chinese Postal Workers' Correspondence School (Zhonghua yougong hanshou xuexiao 中華郵工函授學校), which was created to recruit and train candidates for the postal examinations (Figure 16).[45]

Figure 16. Symbol of the National Postal Workers Correspondence School, created 1936

The automatic canceller-design postal flag was less than successful in representing postal identity. Contem-

porary critics claimed it "lacks profound meaning" because of the absence of symbols associated with the Post Office. The seal character for Posts, consisting of an ancient form of a Chinese character in a modern font, was indecipherable for most people as the word "Posts". In general, the entire flag was "difficult to identify" with the Post Office and lacked the "elegance" of the flying goose flag.[46] Those postal workers who wanted to use the flag as a sign of collective identity emphasized instead the importance of the color green, which was the traditional postal color. In 1947 when trying to organize a women's branch inside the National Postal Workers' Union, the leaders called for all female postal workers to be "united under the green postal flag"[47] thus demonstrating the increasing importance of color branding over emblems over the course of the Republican era.

Starting in late 1947, for unspecified reasons, the Directorate began restricting the use of the postal flag on Post Offices. Postal boats and contract carriers were allowed to continue hoisting the automatic canceller pennant in order to avoid outside interference, but Post Offices were told to store away their other flags.[48] Around the same time, the Directorate General issued regulations for the establishment of "Model Post Offices" (shifan youju 示範郵局), which were to be new Post Offices constructed across the country all using the same architectural plans, paint scheme, and general appearance. Topping these new style Post Offices would be a "white flag pole" with a flag having the words "Post Office" (郵局) in green in the middle of the flag.[49] Presumably, although the plans do not specify, the field color of the flag would have been either white or yellow in order to make the characters more easily distinguishable. The creation of this simple postal flag denoting just the name of the Post Office indicates a decline in identity politicking in the postwar years as the Nationalist state had become more secure and widely recognized among the Chinese people thus lessening the need for state-making symbols like postal flags.

Conclusion

The several manifestations of Chinese postal flags in the 1919–1949 period cannot be understood as narrowly representing the Post Office only.

At the same time, no great struggles occurred over the design of the flags, no state or institutional rituals emerged around them, and there were no efforts to sacralize them. Indeed, the importance of the postal flags in the context of state-making was related to the particular historical constellation of contending central and regional quasi-states during the Republican era that gave such normally insignificant elements an inordinate symbolic importance. In the context of a country rent into contending central and quasi-states, each following programs of state-making, the postal flags served as a symbol of the identity and development of the Post Office as a sovereign institution of the central government respected around the country for its unique capacity to knit the country together through communications.

Over the course of the Republican period, the importance of the postal flag as a symbol of the state declined in inverse proportion to the growth of the "central" state's power. In the 1920s, when quasi-states were most numerous, postal flags were a combination of traditional Chinese symbols like the flying goose "honoring national history" and a national flag in the upper hoist representing both a national and institutional identity; during the mid-1930s as the number of quasi-states declined, the postal flag came to represent an exclusive institutional identity based on a symbol of technological modernity through the automatic canceller flag. In the late 1940s, with the number of contending states reduced to the Nationalists and Communists engaged in a civil war (1945–1949), all postal flags disappeared, except ones simply stating "Post Office." The postal flags were finally stored away having served their function faithfully in sending the "standard message" that China was to be a unitary modern nation-state.

Acknowledgments

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Endnotes

1. Nation-building is defined herein as the creation of a national community sharing, or at least convinced it shares, common ethnicity, race, history, language, culture, or other identifying features that seeks to encourage the population to identify with the nation, individually participate in its development, and increasingly commit and give loyalty to the national entity. After such a national community is created, or while it is being created, it usually seeks to govern itself through the creation of a state. Such a bottom-up, socially-based process, usually called ethnic nation-building, is contrasted with top-down state-sponsored political nation-building in which an existing state attempts to create its own conception of a national community by either broadly or narrowly defining those who belong to the state through political citizenship. State-making, by contrast, is defined as the process whereby state institutions are created in order to govern a compulsory national community of a given territorial entity and that gradually seeks to gain both sovereignty and loyalty from the nation through the legitimate use of force. During this process the state often seeks to bureaucratize its relationship to local society, penetrate local society for the extraction of resources, and consolidate control over the local population for social order. On the process of nation-building, see: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition (New York: Verso, 1991), Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983), and Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001); on the process of state-making, see: Charles Tilly, ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, translated and edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), and J. K. Bluntschli, *Theory of the State*, Authorized English translation from the sixth German edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885).

2. For this process in India, see: Arundhati Virmani, "National Symbols under Colonial Domination: The Nationalization of the Indian Flag, March-August, 1923," *Past and Present* 164 (August 1999): 169-197.

3. On the choice and history of the five-barred flag, see: Henrietta Harrison, *The Making of the Republican Citizen: Political Ceremonies and Symbols in China, 1911–1929* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 98-105.

4. Alfred North Whitehead, *Symbolism: Its Meaning and Effect* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1927), 6.

5. For example, in response to the "improper" construction and use of the national flag, the National Government issued special flag etiquette regulations in 1934 to police the production, handling, and use of the national and party flags. "Dangqi guoqi zhizao shiyong tiaoli" (Regulations on the construction and use of the

party and national flags), *Guomin zhengfu gongbao* (Gazette of the national government) 1554 (October-November 1934).

6. e.g. Li Xuezhi, "Minyuan guoqi zhi zheng" (The struggle over the national flag in 1912), *Shixue yankan* (Historical Studies) 1 (1998): 46-50; Zhao Youci, "Zhonghua minguo guoqi kao" (An examination of national flags of the Republic of China), Wenshi chunqiu (Literature and History annals) 3 (2000): 55-58; Guoshiguan, ed., *Zhonghua minguo guoqi yu guoge shiliao* "Collections of Historical Materials on the National Flag and Anthem" (Xindian: Guoshiguan, 2002).

7. For a broad overview of the political situation in Republican China, see: James E. Sheridan, *China in Disintegration: The Republican Era in Chinese History, 1912–1949* (New York: The Free Press, 1975).

8. On the theory of quasi-states, see: Robert H. Jackson, *Quasi-States: Sovereignty, International Relations, and the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

9. On the history of the Maritime Customs Administration, see: Stanley F. Wright, *Hart and the Chinese Customs* (Belfast: WM. Mullan & Son, 1950); Thomas P. Lyons, *China Maritime Customs and China's Trade Statistics, 1859–1948* (Trumansburg, New York: Willow Creek of Trumansburg, 2003); Donna Brunero, *Britain's Imperial Cornerstone in China: The Chinese Maritime Customs Service, 1854–1949* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2006); on the history of the Salt Inspectorate, see: Julia A. Strauss, *Strong Institutions in Weak Polities: State Building in Republican China, 1927–1940* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 80-105; S. A. M. Adshead, *The Modernization of the Chinese Salt Administration, 1900–1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970).

10. On the Northern Expedition, see: Donald A. Jordan, *The Northern Expedition: China's National Revolution of 1926–1928* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1976).

11. For images of postal buildings and staff with the dragon flag, see: *Zhongguo Qingdai youzheng tuji* (Collected pictures of the Qing dynasty postal service) (Beijing: Renmin youdian chubanshe, 1996), 27, 35.

12. S/O No. 21, Changsha Sub-District Postmaster Arlington (C. 阿林敦) to Postmaster General Theopile Piry (C. 帛黎), 7 January 1912 in Second Historical Archives, 137.2188-10; "S/O No. 33, Sub-District Postmaster Beytagh (C. 畢德爾) to Postmaster General Piry, 21 October 1911 in Second Historical Archives, 137.1806-2".

13. S/O No. 10, Changsha Sub-District Postmaster L. C. Arlington to Postmaster General Piry, 27 October 1911 in Second Historical Archives, 137.1807-3.

14. Despatch No. 1583/2678, Hankou District Postmaster Hyland (C. 海蘭) to Postmaster General Piry, 27 September 1912 in Second Historical Archive, 137.2986; Confidential letter from Nanjing District Postmaster Rousse (C. 魯士) to Postmaster General T. Piry, 7 February 1912 in Second Historical Archives, 137.2182-2.

15. Ministry of Posts and Communications, Directorate General of Posts, *Report on the Working of the Chinese Post Office, For the 3rd Year of Hsuan T'ung, of the Former Ch'ing Dynasty (1911)* (Shanghai: Supply Department of the Directorate General of Posts, 1912), 12.

16. Circular No. 280, Postmaster General Piry, 16 February 1912 in Second Historical Archives, 137.2023-3.

17. On China's entrance to the Universal Postal Union, see: Mi Shilong, ed., "Qingmo Minchu Zhongguo canjia wanguo youlian dang'an shiliao xuan" "Material Concerning China's Joining the International Postal Union at the End of the Qing Dynasty and the Early Republican Period," *Minguo dang'an* "Republican Archives" 3 (1999): 16-26.

18. Zhang Jialu, "Woguo zaoqi de youqi" (Our country's early postal flags), *Lingnan youkan* (Lingnan philately) 1 (2004), 26.

19. The official Directorate circular announcing the flag is as follows: Circular No. 471. Co-Director General H. Picard-Destelan (C. 鐵士蘭), 5 April 1919 in Ministry of Communications, Directorate General of Posts, ed. *Postal Circulars and Instructions, 1919-1922*, Vol. 5 (Shanghai: Supply Department of the Directorate General of Posts, 1923) in Second Historical Archives, 137.2023-5.

    Some vexillologists claim the flag was probably created in 1920. Robert M. Spaulding, "The Postal Flags of East Asia," *The Flag Bulletin* 189 (September-October 1999), 192.

20. *Shen bao*, 8 February 1919.

21. In fact, most of the common soldiers of these warlord regimes depended heavily on the Post Office to remit monies back to their families in other parts of the country often swamping a Post Office with demands for money orders. For example, S/O No. 10, Yichang Postmaster to Postmaster General Theopile Piry, 8 February 1915 in Second Historical Archives, 137.2187.

22. See footnote 20.

23. "野天鵝" and "飛鴻" are used inner-changeably when talking about the postal goose. The actual bird being discussed is probably the currently endangered species *Anser cygnoides* (Swan Goose) whose breeding range covers Mongolia, North China, and Southeastern Russia.

24. Inspector General to Postal Secretary No. 12 Staff/Postal No. 5511, 16 September 1896 in R. A. de Villard, "Proposed Stamps, & Postcards, etc, for the Imperial Chinese Post, Memos submitted to the Inspector General of I.M. Customs in Stat. Sec. Despatch No. 1009, 22 August 1896" in *Feila'er shou gao: Qingdai youzheng, youpiao, minxinpian beiwang lu* (Proposed stamps and postcards for the Imperial Chinese Post by R. A. de Villard) (1896, reprint: Beijing: Renmin youdian chubanshe, 1991), 70.

25. The original story is recounted in Ban Gu, *Han Shu* (History of the former Han dynasty) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), Vol. 8, 2466.

26. Charles Alfred Speed Williams, *Outlines of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs* (1932, reprint: Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 1988), 221.

27. The Su Wu story can be encountered in any number of forms in the late Qing and Republican eras including cartoons, street ditties, children's books, and so on. For example, under the title "Su Wu Tends his Sheep" (*Su Wu muyang* 蘇武牧羊) we find a movie by the famous director Bu Wancang (卜萬蒼) released in 1940, a Chinese opera by the noted librettist Yang Yinong (楊亦農) in 1948, a fictionalized version by Du Zhenyu (杜箴宇) in a 1937 *Shen bao* series on popular stories; under the title "Su Wu" we find a play by the well-known dramatist Gu Yiqiao (顧一樵) in 1941 and a historical study in a series on loyalty by Peng Ziyi (彭子儀) in 1940.

28. Edward A. Armstrong, "The Symbolism of the Swan and the Goose" *Folklore* 55: 2 (June 1944): 54-58. It is said that in ancient China the bridegroom gave his betrothed a wild goose as a gift. Since the goose migrates south in the winter it was considered a sun bird (陽鳥) thus representing the male characteristics of yang to the female yin. The goose then symbolized the male expectation that their wives would follow them as the goose follows the sun.

29. Proposal No. 132, Acting Jiangxi Postal Commissioner Liu Yaoting, in Jiaotong bu, Youzheng si, ed., *Youzheng huiyi huibian* (Collection on the Post Office Conference). (Nanjing: Jiaotong bu youzheng si, 1934), 196.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Confidential Circular S/O, Co-Director General Destelan, 28 November 1922 in Second Historical Archives, 137.2188-3.

32. Strauss, *Strong Institutions in Weak Polities*, 82-83.

33. Brunero, *Britain's Imperial Cornerstone*, 54-65.

34. Confidential Circular S/O, Co-Director General Destelan, 28 November 1922.

35. The Nationalists had stopped using the five-barred national flag in their bases in southern China in late 1924 and early 1925, thus refusing to recognize the sovereignty of the Beijing governments. John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China: Politics, Culture, and Class in the Nationalist Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 180-181.

36. Co.-D.G. Circular Memo No. 1904, Co-Director General Destelan, 11 January 1927 in Second Historical Archives, 137.2023-23.

37. Co.-D.G. Circular Memo No. 1966, Co-Director General Destelan, 9 June 1927 in Second Historical Archives, 137.2023-23.

38. http://www.bristol.ac.uk/history/customs/resources/flag1931.html

39. Circular No. 579, Director General Liu Shufan (劉書蕃) and Co-Director General Destelan, 28 June 1928 in Ministry of Communications, Directorate General of Posts, *Postal Circulars and Instructions, 1923–1929*, Vol. 6 (Shanghai: Supply Department of the Directorate General of Posts, 1929) in Second Historical Archives, 137.2023-6.

40. Circular Memo No. 128, Director General Liu Shufan, Officiating Co-Director General C. H. Shields (C. 希樂思), 25 January 1929 in Second Historical Archives, 137.288-3. For an image of this flag flying on a Post Office, see: *Zhonghua youzheng tuji* (1912–1949) "A Picture Album of the Chinese Postal Service, 1912-1949" (Beijing: Renmin youdian chubanshe, 1996), 6.

41. Circular Memo No. 193, Officiating Director General Lin Shi (林實), Co-Director General Tollefsen (C. 多福森), 2 May 1929 in Second Historical Archives, 137.6272-2.

42. Robert M. Spaulding argues that the automatic canceller postal flag dates from 1935, but he does not provide his source for this claim. Spaulding, "Postal Flags of East Asia," 190. Quite possibly he mistakes the revision of Rule No. 2140 in the *Postal Compendium* (*Youzheng gangyao* 郵政綱要) based on Ministry of Communications, Directorate General of Posts Circular No. 702 issued on 28 February 1935 as the origin of the flag. In fact, Ministry of Communications Order No. 217 of 9 November 1931 created the automatic canceller flag. The content of Order No. 217 can be found in: Jiaotong bu, Youzheng zongju, ed., *Youzheng dashiji: Zhonghua youzheng qishi zhounian jinian* (Chronicle of the postal service: Commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Chinese postal service) (Taibei: Jiaotong bu, Youzheng zongju, 1966), 213. Circular No. 702, simply consisting of a number of revisions to the *Postal Compendium*, can be found in Second Historical Archives, 137.2251-5.

43. No. 84/1063, First Secretary Huang Naishu (黃乃樞) to Postal Supply Department, Shanghai, 25 August 1928 in Second Historical Archives, 137.7896.

44. "Tianjin youwu gonghui cheng zhizi di shi hao" (Petition No. 10 by the Tianjin Postal Workers Union), *Tianjin yougong* (Tianjin postal workers) 7: 3-4 (1934), 21.

45. *Zhonghua yougong* "China Labourer's Post" 2: 4 (1936), 6. On the establishment of the Postal Workers Correspondence School, see: Jing Shi, "Zhonghua yougong hanshou xuexiao chuangshe zhi lilun yu shishi zhi wo jian" (My views on the theory and practice of establishing a postal workers correspondence school), *Zhonghua yougong* 1: 8 (1935): 11-19.

46. Jiaotong bu, Youzheng si, ed., *Youzheng huiyi huibian*, 196.

47. "Nü yougong zhi ye" (Female postal workers' page), *Zhonghua yougong* "China Labourers' Post" New Series 1: 1 (May 1947), 30.

48. Jiaotong bu, Youzheng zongju xunling ju hui tongzi di 1642 hao, dai juzhang Gu Chunfan, 12 December 1947 交通部郵政總局訓令局會通字第1642號,

代局長谷春藩 (Ministry of Communications, Directorate General of Posts circular No. 1642, office series, Acting Director General of Posts Gu Chunfan) in Second Historical Archives, 137.5505.

49. Jiaotong bu, Youzheng zongju xunling ju ye tongzi di'1437 hao, juzhang Huo Xixiang, 6 September 1947 交通部郵政總局訓令局業通字第1642號,局長霍錫祥 (Ministry of Communications, Directorate General of Posts Circular No. 1437, business series, Director General Huo Xixiang) in Second Historical Archives, 137.6364. Unfortunately, I have been unable to uncover an image of this postal flag used between December 1947 and late 1949 and have relied on its description in this Circular.
50. http://flagspot.net/flags/cn-nqta.html
51. http://flagspot.net/flags/cn-custm.html#customs
52. *Ibid.*
53. http://flagspot.net/flags/cn-dragn.html
54. http://flagspot.net/flags/cn-custm.html#customs
55. Inside back cover of C. A. S. Williams, *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs, Fourth Revised Edition* (1932, reprint: Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 1988).
56. http://www.fotw.net/flags/cn-custm.html
57. Inside back cover of Williams, *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs*.
58. http://flagspot.net/flags/cn-salt.html
59. http://flagspot.net/flags/cn-pst.html
60. Inside back cover in Williams, *Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs*.
61. http://flagspot.net/flags/tw-post.html This flag was removed from Post Offices in late 1947, but continued to fly on post boats and contract carriers.
62. *Ibid.*

Note: *In this article every effort has been made to represent accurately all Chinese characters. In those few cases where a character was not available in the typesetting software, it has been replaced with the ☒ symbol.*