

THE EARLIEST KNOWN (1863) INCOMING COVER TO HAINAN ISLAND AND THE ONLY KNOWN EARLY INCOMING MAIL FROM ITALY TO CHINA/HONG KONG VIA MALTA

by Robert Schneider

There are a number of early letters from the late 1840s and 1850s written by Catholic missionaries from then remote interior parts of China, including Yunnan and Hunan. These letters from some of the first Europeans to live in these places, sent out through Hong Kong, represent the earliest international mail from these locales and an important, if somewhat underappreciated in my opinion, part of China's postal history. Interestingly, there is very little incoming mail to complement these early outgoing ecclesiastical letters, which is not so surprising given the living conditions of the Catholic missionaries, the climate and the very nature of the missionaries' tenure in China.



Thus, the 1863 entire letter from Rome to Kiungchow on Hainan Island illustrated above is rather remarkable. Besides its place as very rare incoming early mail to what I would like to call the "interior" of China (i.e., other than Hong Kong and the Pearl River Delta, the more-developed coastal Treaty Ports north of Hong Kong, and Peking), it is likewise very early Hainan Island mail, as well as rare early surviving mail from Italy to China. In fact, it is the earliest recorded incoming cover to Hainan Island, predating by over 25 years the heretofore earliest recorded cover ⁽¹⁾

Kiungchow, along with its port of Hoihow, was opened to foreign trade by the 1858 Treaty of Tientsin (that was ratified by China in the 1860 Convention of Peking concluding the Second Opium War) and designated a Treaty Port, but, as no one showed an interest in it, the actual opening was deferred until 1872, when China made it a Customs Port. Apparently, Westerners did not really take up residence until 1876. A British postal agency was also established there in that year ⁽²⁾. Even by 1882, there were only 10-12 Western residents scattered throughout the city, attesting to its relative remoteness and very minor stature in the Treaty Port system ⁽³⁾.

This cover is an entire letter addressed to Luderico Fauvie, “Vico. Apo.” (missionary priest), at “Kong-Tchou in Cina” (Kiungchow in China) and was dispatched from Rome in September 1863. Like other contemporary correspondence to places where a consular postal agency had not been established, it is further addressed care of an agent in Hong Kong, in this case one Sig. D. Luigi Ambroli ⁽⁴⁾. Its contents are actually a duplicate copy of a letter written in Latin dated 7 July 1862.

The cover was privately carried from Rome to Malta ⁽⁵⁾. Malta’s external post was then operated by the British Post Office ⁽⁶⁾, and thus an agent in Malta affixed a Great Britain 4d vermilion stamp, paying the ½ ounce rate from Malta to Hong Kong ⁽⁷⁾, which was cancelled by the “Malta/A25” duplex (17.9.63). A blue-black “Hong Kong/C” cds (17.11.63; Proud type D11) on the reverse documents its arrival in Hong Kong. Interestingly, this is within the period ascribed by Patrick Pearson in which the cds was struck in bright blue (28.9.63-9.5.65), and is the only usage in this color variant during this period I am aware of.

The letter was carried by P&O packets from Malta to Hong Kong. Euxine took the letter from Malta (1.10) to Alexandria (4.10). It was then carried overland to Suez, where Nubia (10.10) took it to Galle (24.10). Columbian in turn took it from Galle (25.10), but encountered boiler problems and laid in at Singapore (3.11) for repairs, so its mail was delivered by Emeu, which sailed the Singapore (9.11) to Hong Kong (17.11) leg. My letter is now only one of two recorded covers showing this delayed P&O itinerary from Galle to Hong Kong, the Columbian’s mail arriving in Hong Kong approximately a week late.

The exact route of the letter’s journey from Hong Kong to its ultimate destination on Hainan Island is by nature much less certain. However, it is believed that the most likely route would have been to Saigon by the Messageries Imperiales Cambodge, which departed Hong Kong 26.11 and arrived in Saigon 30.11. From there it would probably have gone by a coastal vessel to Haiphong and then on to Kiungchow.

Besides illustrating the inherent difficulties in getting mail to remote parts of China, the cover also illustrates, from the Italian-origin side, arrangements I had seen for Italian mail from Hong Kong/China of the period prior to 1863. Mail from Hong Kong to Italy was conveyed by the P&O to Marseille or occasionally Malta for shipment onward to Italy. From the few covers I have seen, for the mail sent via Malta, an agent or intermediary paid the on-going postage to the final Italian destination ⁽⁸⁾. In 1863, arrangements were instituted for Italian mails from Hong Kong to be carried directly from Alexandria to the Italian port of Ancona by Italian packets ⁽⁹⁾. The Papal States – of which Rome was a part – did not join the Kingdom of Italy until 1870, so they may not have been party to the arrangements for direct mail between Alexandria and Italy as part of the Hong Kong service. This outbound letter therefore followed an earlier and rare mode of posting through an agent overseas and is the only cover sent thus from Italy to China or Hong Kong via Malta recorded by members of the Study Circle I am aware of.

In summary, this 1863 entire letter from Rome to Kiungchow represents:

1. The earliest known incoming cover to Hainan Island, predating by over 25 years the heretofore earliest known incoming usage, as well as rare incoming early mail to interior China.
2. The only known early incoming mail from Italy to China/Hong Kong via Malta.
3. The only known usage of the Hong Kong cds in blue-black during the period it is recorded in bright blue by Patrick Pearson.

Footnotes

- (1) The earliest recorded inward card/cover in Lee Scamp's 2005 article on mail to/from the Hoihow BPO was dated 1890. Hong Kong Study Circle Journal 335, p. 12
- (2) Edward B. Proud, British Post Offices in the Far East, Proud-Bailey Co. Ltd. (1991), p. 332
- (3) Edward J. M. Rhoads, China's Republican Revolution: The Case of Kwangtung, 1895-1913, Volume 81, Harvard Univ. Press (1975), p. 16
- (4) This likewise may have also been part of the system set up by the Catholic Church to support missionaries "in-country" in China
- (5) The entire does not have any Italian markings, attesting to its private carriage from Rome to Malta
- (6) Great Britain operated Malta's external post until 1885, with Great Britain stamps being used to pay the postage from September 1857 through December 1884
- (7) 1862 Malta Postal Guide
- (8) Cf., 1857 (15 Dec.) envelope from Hong Kong to Turin (Kingdom of Sardinia) with endorsement that 1 lira 85c. (1s 6d) was paid by the Sardinian Consulate in Malta (including 8d double-rate postage Hong Kong to Malta), ex David Davies, Lee Scamp; Zurich Asia, 2.11.06, lot 1045; 1859 (14 June) entire from Shanghai to Naples with Great Britain 1d and 2d applied over original "1/8" rating and cancelled in Malta (representing 3d postage Malta to Kingdom of Two Sicilies), Interasia Auctions, 31.1.10, lot 1749. I likewise have an 1859 entire from Calcutta, which was sent privately to Malta, where a forwarding agent applied a Great Britain 6d stamp for payment of the double-rate postage to Naples. Letters from Hong Kong/China sent to the Kingdom of Sardinia (which included Piedmont) via Marseille, on the other hand, apparently do not show this treatment of the on-going postage being paid at the port preceding entry into Italy no doubt because of a postal convention/treaty between France and Sardinia
- (9) Proud in his Postal History of Hong Kong 1841-1997, Proud-Bailey Co. Ltd. (2004), page 62, notes that Hong Kong was notified of this on 26 February 1863

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