

Reminiscences

By Michael Rogers



Discoveries sometimes come in especially unusual ways...

I'm a huge fan of taking our inventory to stamp shows. Call it "wave the flag" or a "meet and greet." Whatever, it's a fine way to make friends and introduce ourselves. Sure enough, specializing in China and Asia means we carry a unique product line. At a show, maybe one dealer had a few sets of China, maybe another dealer had a little Asia here or there, but hardly anyone could hold a candle to us. Not that I was snooty about it.

Our first Los Angeles SESCAL show was at the Ambassador Hotel, now torn down. All we knew when we signed up was we had a corner table. Upon set-up, I realized our corner pierced the aisle in front of us too closely. As I alerted the show manager about the size of the crowds that came to my booth at other shows, he cackled that I was blowing my own horn. I resigned myself to the inevitable. Forty five minutes into the show, the fire marshal threatened to close SESCAL down if my situation wasn't remedied. Quick thinking on the part of the show management—to the consternation of the other booth holders—my booth was carried to the front of the hall, creating a "super booth" size and placement that I retained for over twenty years!

SESCAL was the place to be. Los Angeles and environs was home to wonderful collectors. Terry Chang, Carl Kilgas, Danny Ko, and Henry Nyi were but a few of many fine collectors there. As I made my plans to man a booth at SESCAL, I received a treasured invitation to join Henry Nyi and family in Chinatown for a traditional meal. Afterward, Henry's daughter complimented me for enjoying insects, eel and monkey. Ah, I knew better than to inquire as to what I was eating.

From 1995 to 2004, we held public auctions at SESCAL. Lots would be shown for viewing on Friday and Saturday with

the auction held on Sunday. Often folks would bring material to us, asking our opinion.

In October 2002, an elderly gentleman walked up to our booth and gingerly pulled out of his folder an immensely rare stamp which I had read about but never seen, accompanied by a 1980 Stanley Gibbons certificate. He had a used example of the 1901 British Offices in China B.R.A. 5 cent on 1/2 cent inverted surcharge. Choosing to speak to my Chinese employee, he showed the stamp and certificate, asking for an evaluation.

Then I was blown away by my employee. He knew enough to open the *Chan Catalogue*. Then he looked to the wrong line, telling the collector the catalogue value for the normal stamp (\$480) instead of the invert (\$4,500). The collector looked crushed, saying that in 1980 he had spent \$1,000 for it. Then he turned around and left. Three customers chased him. I thought I would never see him again.

Quietly I said to my employee: "that B.R.A. invert is terribly rare. Perhaps only one pane of 25 exists. How could it catalogue only \$480?" To which my guy starts yelling that the stamp "was on eBay all the time." Knowing that nothing would be accomplished talking to a closed mind, I walked away.

I assume my guy glanced at the B.R.A. stamp, concluding it to be the normal. Had he listened to the collector or viewed the certificate, he would have been as excited as me.

Instead, he entertained only the first thought that occurred to him. Working a show booth can be mentally draining, but he had several clues along the way that he was in error.

Sunday: My job at a show auction is tending to the back rows. The retail booth

is open so I pay attention to both. As luck would have it, the same elderly gent was sitting alone in one of the back rows, watching the Sunday auction, so I sat next to him. I said that my thinking was he probably sold his B.R.A. invert given those guys were running after him when he left my auction booth. No, he said, he was so disappointed, he put the stamp back in his folder. Still had it.

I introduced myself saying, in all my years experience, I had never seen it, meaning it was pretty rare. Put it in my auction and I'll give you a \$2,500 reserve. He was unwilling, saying he would rather take my employee's opinion for fact. I said do it my way and there's no risk. He got testy and said some impolite things. I said, "OK, plan B, what do you want for it?" So he offers me the stamp for a thousand dollars and I'm thinking to myself "this is crazy, why not go with the \$2,500 guarantee, and then if it doesn't sell at auction...but the guy's mind was made up, like a rock.

So I excused myself, reaching for a bill of sale, and paid him.

When I arrived home, I reached for the phone, and told the story of the acquisition of the B.R.A. invert to someone I had been selling China to for many years. He is the kind of guy that enjoys a good story.

I had spent some time researching the stamp, trying to figure out an appropriate price. Auction sets a price but I knew this collector would enjoy the stamp without fighting for it.

My company finally sold this example of the B.R.A. invert at auction where it achieved \$7,250. When I was but a teenager, my grandmother gave me some advice. She said that people get along swell so long as they are reasonable and keep their minds open. ☒