

Early Ryukyu Islands Issues

by Richard Pederson

The Ryukyu Islands are a chain of islands running southwest between Japan and Taiwan. Prior to the end of World War II (WW II), the Ryukyus were part of Japan. The Ryukyus were occupied by the United States (US) in 1945 and, following WW II, were administered by the US until they were returned to Japan on May 15, 1972.

During the period of US administration, over 250 distinctly different stamps, including air mail and special delivery stamps, were issued. There are also many collectible varieties, including errors, to challenge collectors. In addition, there are numerous postal stationery items, revenues, and provisional stamps issued by postmasters in the island districts of the Ryukyus. Since many of the provisional issues are scarce and quite expensive, especially in used condition, they should be expertized by a competent certifying organization prior to purchase.

For those finding a complete collection of the Ryukyus to be too intimidating or expensive, an option is to limit your collection to the regular, air mail, and special delivery stamps issued by the US administration prior to the establishment of the semi-autonomous Government of the Ryukyu Islands (GRI) on April 1, 1952. This leaves a collection of less than 50 major issues (including back-of-the-book issues such as air mail and postal cards) with a number of varieties and errors that can be added to increase the challenge, as your budget permits. Of these earlier issues, the only significant challenge to completion is Scott number 17, the 100 yen surcharge on Scott 10, the 2 yen rose violet stamp picturing Shuri Castle. Less than ten thousand of these stamps were issued and a nice copy usually costs well in excess of \$1,000.00, depending upon condition.

The first set of Ryukyu stamps (Scott 1-7) was issued by the US administration on July 1, 1948, with a second printing (Scott 1a-7a) issued on July 18, 1949. The two printings are identical in design, but are readily distinguishable because of differences in paper, perforations, and sharpness of impression. The first printing has duller colors, rough perforations, and grayish paper. The second printing has vivid colors, cleanly cut perforations, and is on white paper. The second printing is pictured below in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Second printing of first Ryukyu Islands issue.

The second set of stamps (Scott 8-13), which was issued on January 21, 1950, is pictured in Figure 2. There were multiple printings of this set, but they are not distinguishable from one another, except in the case of the 50 sen value picturing a tile rooftop. The third printing of the 50 sen is on white paper rather than off-white paper. On the first two printings of the 50 sen, there was also a defect in position 76 of the printing plate causing a white sky above the tile roof. The defect was corrected for the third printing.



Figure 2. Second Ryukyu Islands issue.

Three yen stamps picturing Ryukyu University and a pine tree were issued on February 12, 1951 and February 19, 1951, respectively. Those stamps are pictured below in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Stamps picturing Ryukyu University and a pine tree.

In 1952, the 50 sen stamp pictured in Figure 2 was issued with a 10 yen surcharge. There are three major types of this surcharge, each having one or more sub-types and/or errors. Figure 4 shows the three major types (those types - Scott 16, 16A, and 16B are pictured from left to right). The three major types can easily be distinguished by the spacing of the lines used to strike out the 10 sen value, the size of the characters at the top, and the spacing of the numeral 10. On Type 1, the lines used to strike out the value are closer together than on Types 2 and 3. On Type 2, the lines striking out the denomination are closer together than on Type 1 and the “1” and “0” of the overprinted “10” are close together, as on Type 1. On Type 3 stamps, both the lines striking out the denomination and the digits of the number “10” are spread apart and both the characters at the top are in 9-point font as opposed to the 8-point characters used on Types 1 and 2. Close up images showing differences in the major types are pictured in Figures 5 and 6.



Figure 4. Three major types of 10 yen on 50 sen surcharge.



Types 1 & 2
- Size 9



Type 3 -
Size 8

Figure 5. Font differences on major types of surcharge.

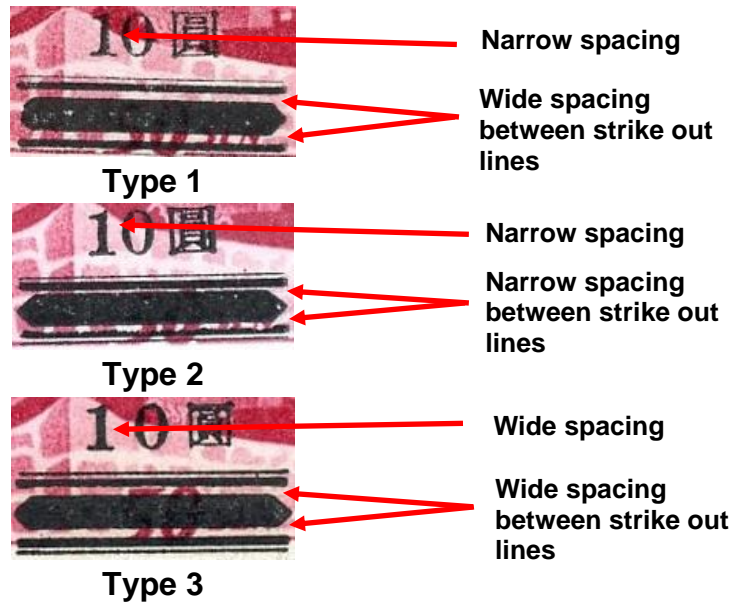


Figure 6. Spacing differences on major types of surcharge.

There are also numerous sub-types of the three major types of surcharges. The various sub-types include those resulting from the use of different font sizes from the normal ones for the type, use of an incorrect font, a missing asterisk, missing strike out bars or characters, spacing variations, and inverted strike out bars. Figure 7 shows three examples of sub-types of the first two major types (Scott 16 and 16A). In the left example (Scott 16c), a size 8 font is used instead of size 9 for the characters at the top of the Type 1 stamp. In the middle example (Scott 16d), size 8 font is used on the left character and size 9 on the right character of the Type 1 stamp. The final example shows a Type 2 stamp on the right with size 8 font instead of size 9 (Scott 16Aa).

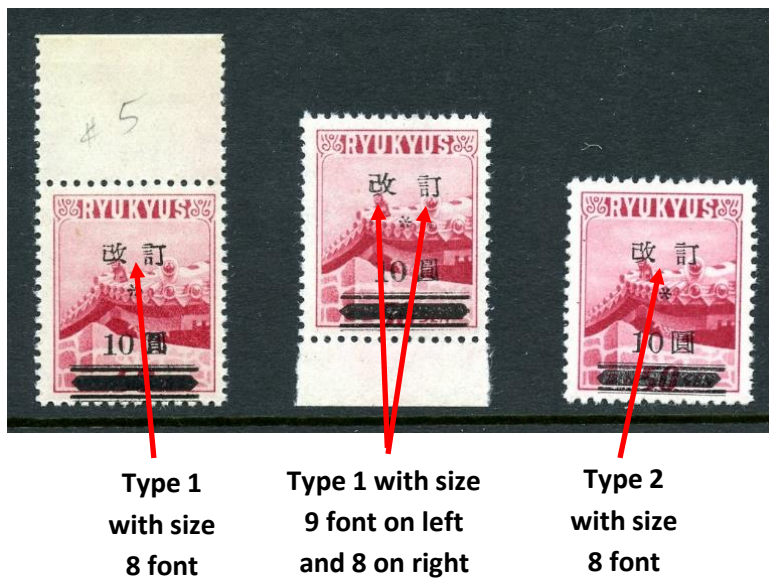


Figure 7. Sub-types of Types 1 and 2.

As discussed above, Scott number 17, the 100 yen surcharge on 2 yen issued in 1952, is an expensive stamp and should be expertized. Figure 8 shows an example of a nicely centered copy of the 100 yen surcharge that was listed on ebay® for \$1,800.00 and included a certificate of authenticity issued by the International Society for Japanese Philately.



Figure 8. 100 yen on 2 yen surcharge.

The final regular issue prior to the establishment of the GRI, is the 3 yen stamp picturing a dove, bean sprout, and map, which is pictured below in Figure 9.



Figure 9. 3 yen stamp picturing dove, bean sprout and map.

In addition to the regular issues, there are six air mails, one special delivery stamp, and a number of postal cards and letter sheets issued prior to the GRI. The air mail and special delivery stamps are pictured in Figures 10 and 11.



Figure 10. First six air mail stamps.



Figure 11. Special delivery stamp.

If the initial issues of the Ryukyu Islands capture your interest, there is certainly much more to collect. The later issues include perforation and paper varieties, missing and inverted overprints, a color omission, and imperforate between pairs. For those desiring to delve even deeper into Ryukyu Islands emissions, there are First Day Covers (FDCs), postal history, and back of the book (BOB) issues including postal cards, letter sheets, revenues, provisionals issued for specific Ryukyu areas and districts, specimens, proofs, and Christmas seals.

References:

Wikipedia; "Ryukyu Islands"; last modified on 5 September 2017.

Scott 2015 Specialized Catalogue of United States Stamps & Covers; edited by Charles Snee; published by Scott Publishing Co.; pages 1049-1073; October 2014.

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