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Perspective article

# A foreign dentist practicing in Shanghai, China in the late Qing Dynasty: The case of Dr. Sanger's letter notifying the relocation of his dental office in 1895

Feng-Chou Cheng <sup>a,b,c</sup>, Ling-Hsia Wang <sup>d\*\*</sup>,  
Chun-Pin Chiang <sup>e,f,g,h\*</sup>



<sup>a</sup> Chia-Te Dental Clinic, New Taipei City, Taiwan

<sup>b</sup> School of Life Science, College of Science, National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan

<sup>c</sup> Science Education Center, National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan

<sup>d</sup> Center for the Literature and Art, Hsin Sheng Junior College of Medical Care and Management, Taoyuan, Taiwan

<sup>e</sup> Department of Dentistry, National Taiwan University Hospital, College of Medicine, National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan

<sup>f</sup> Graduate Institute of Oral Biology, School of Dentistry, National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan

<sup>g</sup> Department of Dentistry, Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital, Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation, Hualien, Taiwan

<sup>h</sup> Institute of Oral Medicine and Materials, College of Medicine, Tzu Chi University, Hualien, Taiwan

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\* Corresponding author. Department of Dentistry, Hualien Tzu Chi Hospital, Buddhist Tzu Chi Medical Foundation, and Institute of Oral Medicine and Materials, College of Medicine, Tzu Chi University, No. 707, Section 3, Chung-Yang Road, Hualien 970, Taiwan.

\*\* Corresponding author. Center for the Literature and Art, Hsin Sheng Junior College of Medical Care and Management, No. 418, Gaoping Section, Zhongfong Road, Longtan Township, Taoyuan 32544, Taiwan.

E-mail addresses: [milkegg5452001@gmail.com](mailto:milkegg5452001@gmail.com) (L.-H. Wang), [cpchiang@ntu.edu.tw](mailto:cpchiang@ntu.edu.tw) (C.-P. Chiang).

In the early stage of modern China, there was a lack of formally educated dentists. The so-called experts on the street corners were still a common sight in cities and towns in the late Qing Dynasty and early Republic of China. These mobile dental practitioners would travel around with signs advertising toothache treatment and tooth extraction, and would attract customers by beating drums and performing stunts.<sup>1,2</sup> The earliest modern dental treatment in China appeared in the mid-19th century. Some church hospitals established the dental services. Through the activities of these hospitals' dental services, advanced modern dental knowledge and technology from Europe and America were gradually introduced into China, prompting the gradual development of the modern dental medicine in China. In the late 19th century, dental offices opened by foreign dentists began to appear in Shanghai's Bund (now Huangpu District). In the early 20th century, Chinese dentists who had studied dentistry abroad began to open their dental offices, which appeared sporadically in major Chinese cities. At that time, most dental offices were run by individuals with simple equipment and easy technical capabilities. The establishment of China's earliest national dental office began in the dental room of the Imperial Hospital in the late Qing Dynasty. In 1898 or later, the Qing Imperial Family established a court-style dental office, in which Western dental equipment and materials were used to treat oral disorders and repair broken and missing teeth.<sup>1</sup> However, historical data on the practice of modern dentistry in early China is very scarce. This study reported a foreign dentist, Dr. J. Sanger, practicing in Shanghai, China in the late Qing Dynasty through the interpretation of his letter card notifying the relocation of his dental office in 1895.

In the past, the written records that people created and preserved for the exchange of information and expression of emotion (such as letters or notices) have become the important first-hand historical materials for studying human social activities. This study interpreted a letter card mailed in 1895 by a foreign dentist, Dr. J. Sanger, for informing his friends and patients about the relocation of his dental office. This letter card was a piece of letter paper that could be folded in half. It was a silver one-cent postage cover with the emblem of the Shanghai Municipal Council (SMC) issued in 1893 (Fig. 1A). It was mailed at the end of 1895 and stamped with the SMC postmark. The interpretation of the handwritten English words on the cover was "a. R. Barewan Englks" on the first line and "Nanking Rd" on the second line. It was to be sent to Barewan Englks who lived in a certain building on Nanjing Road. The content was mainly a notice of the relocation of Dr. Sanger's dental office and mentioned that the charges for dental services were moderate and appropriate (Fig. 1B). The complete content was described as follows:

Professional notice

Dr. J. Sanger, dental surgeon, begs to inform his friends and patrons in Shanghai and the outports that from the 1st, January 1896, his consulting rooms will be removed from No. 1 the Bund to No. 6 the Bund, (Russell's Old Building), first floor, Rooms 4 and 5.

All work guaranteed to be strictly first-class; charges moderate.

J. Sanger, D.D.S.

Shanghai, 24th December, 1895.

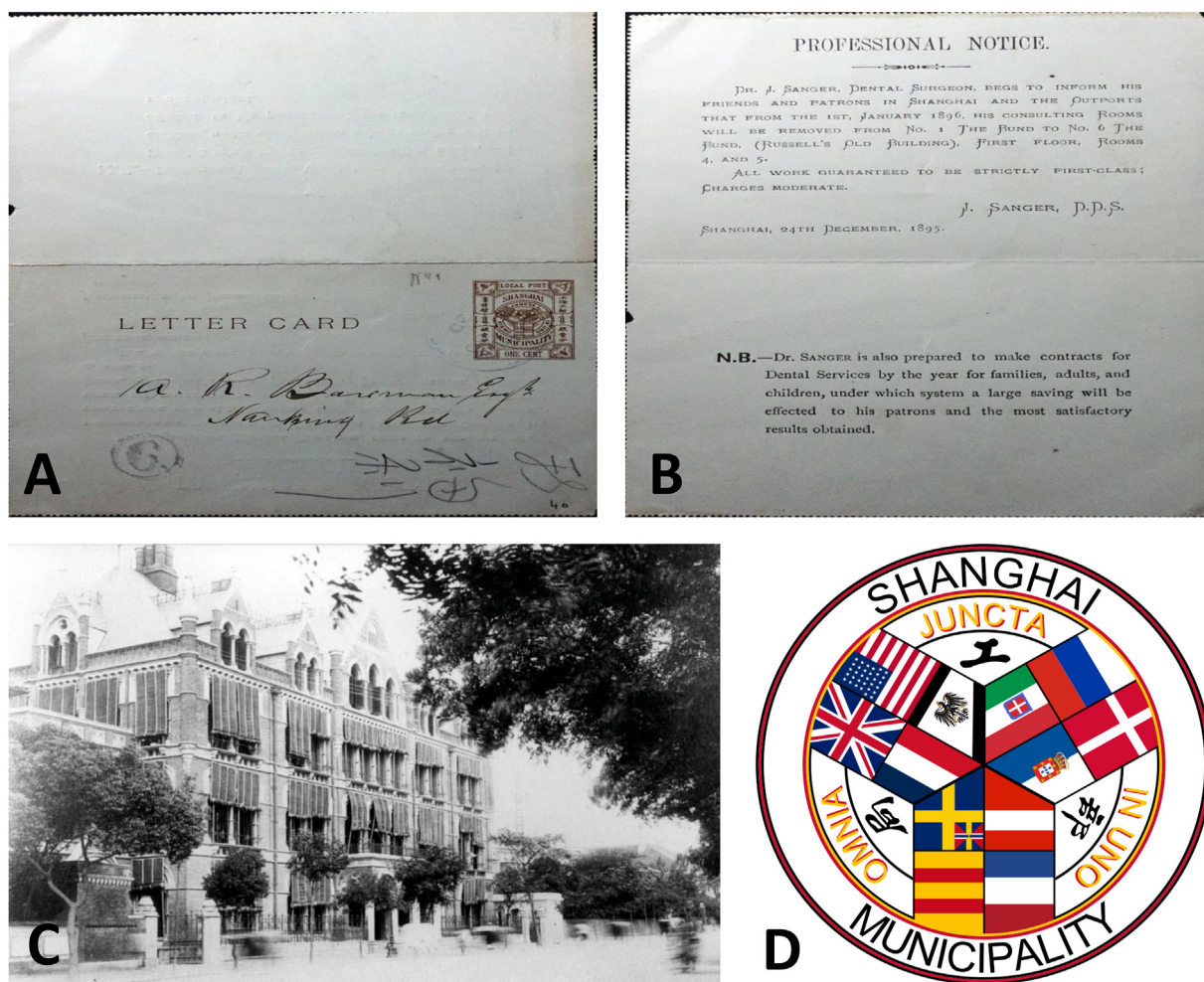
N.B.- Dr. Sanger is also prepared to make contracts for Dental Services by the year for families, adults, and children, under which system a large saving will be effected to his patrons and the most satisfactory results obtained.

The Bund in Shanghai was designated as the British Concession in 1844 and became the starting point for the modern urban development of Shanghai. After Shanghai was opened as a commercial port in 1846, the Bund began to become the financial and trade center of Shanghai and even China, and was also known as the "Wall Street of the East".<sup>3</sup> The Russell's Old Building at No. 6 the Bund mentioned in the letter was erected by Russell & Co. and taken over by the Imperial Bank of China (later to become Bank of Communications). The date of construction of the building is unknown, but it appears on an 1886 photograph (Fig. 1C).<sup>4</sup> This shows that Dr. Sanger's dental office was located in the most prosperous area of Shanghai. In addition, foreign immigrants in the Shanghai Concession were mainly businessmen engaged in bulk import and export trade, including many prominent families who already had industrial roots overseas. Among them, British merchants held a dominant position. In 1865, there were 1372 British expatriates living in the Shanghai International Settlement, accounting for 60 % of the total number of expatriates from all countries.<sup>5</sup> Dr. Sanger, perhaps a British immigrant dentist, might have come to Shanghai to develop his dental career because he saw the development potential of Shanghai.

As the number of foreign expatriates in Shanghai increased, in 1854, a committee of Western businessmen met and held the first annual meeting of the SMC, becoming the autonomous administrative agency of the Shanghai International Settlement. The SMC began to form its own government-like system of police, courts, prisons, etc., and carried out administrative activities such as municipal construction, public security management, taxation, and postal services. The SMC essentially served as the municipal government of the Shanghai International Settlement. It was abrogated in 1943.<sup>5</sup> In this study, the stamp design on the upper right of the letter card is the emblem of the SMC, which bears witness to the history of the SMC as the highest administrative agency in the Shanghai International Settlement. The center of the circle of the emblem is inlaid with the flags of various countries: the upper left is the United Kingdom, the United States, France, and Germany (Prussian flag); the upper right is Russia, Denmark, Italy, and Portugal; and the lower part is the national or civil flag of Sweden, Austria, Spain, and the Netherlands (Fig. 1D).<sup>5</sup>

The dental offices are the main model for providing oral disease treatment and oral health care services to the general public. In the late 19th century, the dental offices in China, mainly run by foreigners, began to appear slowly. Through the development of these dental offices, the modern dental theories and techniques from Europe and America were gradually introduced to China, promoting the development of modern dentistry in China. Dr. Sanger in this study may be a pioneer of modern dentistry in Shanghai. By 1930, there were 123 registered dentists in Shanghai's Huangpu District (72 Chinese and 51 foreigners), accounting for 46.5 % of the total number of dentists in Shanghai.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Sanger's professional notice revealed several important messages. Firstly, after the Industrial Revolution and Medical Modernization in Britain, the concept of



**Figure 1** A foreign dentist, Dr. J. Sanger, practicing in Shanghai, China in the late Qing Dynasty. (A) A silver one-cent postage cover (letter card) with the emblem of the Shanghai Municipal Council (SMC) was mailed at the end of 1895 by Dr. Sanger for notifying the relocation of his dental office. (B) The content was mainly a notice of the relocation of Dr. Sanger's dental office and mentioned that the charges for the dental services were moderate and appropriate. (C) The Russell's Old Building at No. 6 the Bund mentioned in the letter was erected by Russell & Co. and taken over by the Imperial Bank of China (later to become Bank of Communications).<sup>4</sup> (D) The center of the circle of the emblem of the SMC is inlaid with the flags of various countries.<sup>5</sup> This letter card is the personal collection of Feng-Chou Cheng, the first author of this article.

modern medicine (including oral health and dental care) had become part of people's daily lives.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, Dr. Sanger's dental office moved to the first floor of Russell's Old Building and occupied two rooms, indicating the expansion of his dental business. This means that there was a demand for the dental services among the local immigrant population. However, the dental office in a prime location might also imply that dental treatment was a high-cost medical project. Third, Dr. Sanger's dental office was a one-person dentist practice model. He had various dental professional skills and the ability to deal with patients of all ages. Finally, Dr. Sanger's dental office had modern business management concepts, such as the customer management and the planning of customized dental service contracts, and the focuses on customer satisfaction. This also means that in addition to clinical skills, business management skills are also important for dentists.

This study provided a new perspective through the excavation and analysis of a dentist's letter in the late 19th century, revealing that the history of dentistry is a multi-disciplinary subject that combines medicine and history, exploring the development context and theory of dentistry from the perspectives of society, politics, economy, philosophy, science, and culture.<sup>1</sup>

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest relevant to this article.

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