

SHANGHAI AND THE EXPERIENCE OF WAR. THE FATE OF REFUGEES

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Abstract. In 1937, bitter and brutal fighting raged for three months in and around the city, with intense bombardment from ships and planes. Within weeks, hundred of thousands of residents were thrown on to the streets and made homeless. This paper is concerned with the massive and sudden transformation of Shanghai residents into refugees and the consequences on the resources and management of the city. In the first part, I argue that 1937 created an entirely new situation no authority was prepared to meet because of the scope of the population exodus and to the actual blockade of the city. The second part is devoted to the refugee population, in both quantitative and qualitative terms. It examines who the refugees were—those who found refuge in camps—and why they did not reflect the normal structure of the local population. The last part is concerned with the challenges refugee camps had to face in maintaining a huge destitute population with limited resources in war-torn overcrowded urban space. War caused tremendous suffering among the civilian population, especially children, despite the fairly successful organisation of support by the authorities and private organisations.

Introduction

Shanghai was probably the first large metropolis to experience large-scale modern warfare in its very midst. In 1937, bitter and brutal fighting raged for three months in and around the city, with intense bombardment from ships and planes. Within weeks, hundred of thousands of residents were thrown on to the streets and turned into refugees. As war spread to the countryside, more people poured into the city. This episode of Shanghai's history is hardly present in the collective memory beyond the conventional clichés of official history. While there is a massive body of testimonies by Chinese and foreign witnesses, with thousands of images and photographs, the tragedy of residents-turned-refugees in their own city awaits a full account. There was no 'post-war' in China and the elaboration of a communist official historiography excluding the individual pre-empted the expression of a 'memory of war'. The Sino-Japanese conflict was downgraded to a

war between evil and good, between a heroic and anonymous 'people' under the far-sighted guidance of the Chinese Communist Party and cruel, often beast-like, Japanese soldiery.

This paper is concerned with the massive and sudden transformation of Shanghai residents into refugees and its impact on the city and its resources. In the first part, I address the issue of war in Shanghai and its past experience with refugee issues. I argue that 1937 created an entirely new situation no authority was prepared to meet, even when compared with the 1931 Yangzi flood or the 1931–1932 first Japanese attack on the city. The second part is devoted to a study of the refugee population, in both quantitative and qualitative terms. In fact, those who found refuge in camps—a small proportion of the refugees—do not reflect the normal structure of the local population. The last part is concerned with the challenges refugee camps had to face in maintaining a huge destitute population with limited resources in war-torn overcrowded urban space.

I. *Shanghai and the Experience of War*

The experience of war was not totally new to Shanghai, nor was the sudden and massive arrival of a destitute population a novelty. In the nineteenth century, the city had received various waves of refugees linked to natural disasters or, more often, to human conflicts. The first demographic expansion of foreign settlements had taken place on the heels of the Taiping Rebellion when thousands of well-off and not-so-well-off Chinese sought refuge and safety in the foreign enclaves. This was also the time of a local rebellion by secret societies—the Small Sword rebellion—in the walled city, though the extent of the damage was due more to fire than to fighting. Thereafter, Shanghai lived under a sort of *pax occidentalia* thanks to the presence of the well-protected (and sometimes heavily guarded) foreign settlements. Even the numerous warlord wars of the first two decades of the twentieth century circled around the city but never touched it. Yet, when the Nationalist army reached the city in spring 1927, the local warlord army put up a fight that turned Zhabei into a battlefield.

Because of its rapid development and wealth, Shanghai acted as a magnet for the impoverished population from the countryside. As a result, there was a constant stream of poor people making their way to Shanghai in the hope of getting rich or simply finding a decent job. These populations settled down in hand-made straw and mud huts. They were known as the *penghu* (squatter) population, and the foreign authorities regularly expelled them from their territories. As

a result, they congregated in the Chinese municipality in the areas bordering the foreign settlements.¹ In other words, Shanghai lived with a certain floating population, ignored by almost everybody unless they became a nuisance. Yet the city was sometimes overburdened by large waves of refugees in times of flood or shortage. To meet such emergencies, a whole array of benevolent societies provided help, food and shelter. While these organisations were originally and primarily geared towards helping the local poor, they possessed a capacity for management and the financial resources to face such specific situations. This proved to be a valuable asset during wartime.

The real test came in the winter of 1931–1932, when the Japanese navy launched its first attack on the city and Shanghai experienced both the brunt of modern warfare and the combination of *intra-muros* fighting and refugees. The hostilities did not last very long. The Chinese army was not prepared and organised beyond the locally based Cantonese 19th Army. The Chinese state was eager to bring the conflict to an early stop and to avoid any possible extension. These conditions notwithstanding, there was tremendous physical damage in the northern districts of Hongkou and Zhabei.² The population was taken by surprise and was unable to migrate *en masse*, as would happen five years later. They had to be rescued, at great risk to those who volunteered. There were numerous victims, though no proper account was ever established. Nevertheless, the conflict remained limited in scope, use of arms and space. The population of the foreign settlements or in Nanshi was not affected directly. This conflict gave the local associations their first opportunity of running a system of support to refugees on a large scale under the supervision of the Chinese municipal authorities.

In 1937, when war descended again on Shanghai, tragedy and misery hit almost every corner of the city. Shanghai was ranked by then as the fifth largest city in the world (3.5 million). A fully fledged military battle was fought in, over and around the city, taking millions of civilians as actual targets, creating complete chaos and disorder. The foreign settlements had in the past been protected, since their extraterritorial status made them an island of relative protection in

¹ See Lu, Hanchao, 'Creating urban outcasts: shantytowns in Shanghai, 1920–1950', *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 21, No. 5 (July 1995), pp. 563–596; 'Becoming urban: mendicancy and vagrants in modern Shanghai', *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (1999), pp. 7–36.

² On the 1931–1932 conflict in Shanghai, see Jordan, Donald A., *China's Trial by Fire: The Shanghai War of 1932* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001) and Henriot, Christian, *Shanghai 1927–1937. Municipal Power, Locality, and Modernization* (Berkeley: The University Press of California, 1993), ch. 4.

times of upheaval. In 1937, however, the effects of modern war blurred these distinctions. To an area of less than six square miles, normally with a population of close to two million, war brought utterly destitute refugees by the hundred of thousands within just a few weeks. As one district after the other, within and on every side of the city—except the foreign settlements³—came under the scourge of war, there followed an almost complete evacuation into the settlements.

War brought dislocation and spoliation. Repeated and heavy bombing by Chinese and Japanese planes brought incredible damage. They flew all over the city in pursuit of their intended targets or chasing each other. Unfortunately, their degree of accuracy was far from ideal. Twice, Chinese planes—never officially recognised—accidentally dropped huge bombs in the most congested areas of the city, causing thousands of civilian casualties in seconds. Entire sectors of all forms of industry, communication, commerce, and ordered life came to a standstill. The Nationalist government had decided to make Shanghai an example in resisting the Japanese advance. Chiang Kai-shek hoped that this second front would slow down the Japanese and generate international publicity for the conflict.⁴ It was a pointless and strategically disastrous decision that brought only increased suffering to civilians and soldiers alike. The populous districts of Zhabei and Hongkou in the north were the primary targets, along with Yangshupu, the large industrial district of the city, as in 1932. Fighting and bombings raged for weeks. Then uncontrolled fires razed the area to the ground. Later, the Japanese army also disembarked troops in the south and attacked the southern districts—the former walled city and its suburbs known as Nanshi, south of the French Concession. Few villages within a 50-mile radius of Shanghai escaped attention and

³ In fact, the eastern district (Yangshupu) of the International Settlement was completely engulfed in the fighting and then occupied by the Japanese army. Yangshupu was the major industrial district of Shanghai.

⁴ The point is made by Hans van de Ven. While there is little doubt that Chiang made the decision to open a second front, it is less clear that international politics were involved. The author is quite cautious about this point. In fact, apart from accidental bombings in the foreign settlements, the Chinese army refrained from escalating the conflict into a full battle that would engulf the entire city. Resistance in Shanghai was more for domestic than international consumption, even if it did generate sympathy in Western media. Foreign governments, however, refrained from getting involved in the conflict. Chiang Kai-shek had overestimated the capacity of his armies. While Chinese soldiers fought fiercely for three months, the combination of inferior training and equipment, tactical mistakes and Japanese superior weaponry brought defeat and then complete chaos among Chinese lines. Van de Ven, Hans, *War and Nationalism in China, 1925–1945* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, pp. 197–199 and 212–217.

thousands of unfortunate non-combatants were bombed out of their homes. All these displaced persons sought refuge in the foreign settlements.

The most direct consequence of war was intense population movement. This massive migration took place in a context where all communications and transportation were suspended for months, be it by land or by sea. Only a limited movement was organised, with the consent of the belligerents, to ship some of the residents out to their native places. Yet this was a trickle in the human sea that overwhelmed the city from all sides. Fighting also led to a complete blockade of goods, especially food and medicine. While supplies resumed progressively after mid-November, for three months the situation was especially tense and food prices shot up. This made organising assistance to the hundreds of thousands of refugees a nightmare. Finally, timing was also an important factor. The armed conflict broke out in mid-August. When it finally moved away from Shanghai in mid-November, the city was saddled with almost a million refugees and cold weather was about to set in. Even with the fairly mild climate Shanghai enjoys in winter, people could not be left on the pavement, in tent-like shelters or without winter clothing.

In the 1931–1932 conflict, the population had been caught by surprise and stranded in the fighting areas. The foreign settlements had closed access to their territories as soon as the conflict had begun, to prevent the inflow of the Chinese population, and the Chinese municipal authorities had organised the evacuation of civilians from the areas affected by fighting to the war-free districts of the municipality.⁵ Because the conflict was limited to the northern districts of Shanghai, people could also easily and safely go back to their native places. In 1937, the general configuration was radically different. War had begun in earnest in July, after the Marco Polo Bridge incident, and the Japanese army was advancing decisively across the North China plain. In other words, the population was keenly aware that local tensions anywhere could easily escalate into a fully fledged conflict. Even a small local incident could trigger the instant departure of terrified residents.⁶ When Chinese soldiers shot two Japanese marines on 9 August in Shanghai, this provided the pretext for war that the

⁵ Henriot, Christian, *Shanghai 1927–1937. Municipal Power, Locality, and Modernization* (Berkeley: The University Press of California, 1993), pp. 87–91.

⁶ In late July, the disappearance of a Japanese marine—he had actually escaped to avoid sanctions after a night of drinking—caused thousands of Chinese to seek refuge in the International Settlement. It is estimated that more than 50,000 left Zhabei between 26 July and 5 August 1937. *North China Daily News*, 26 July 1937 and 29 July 1937; *North China Herald*, 11 August 1937.

Japanese navy had been seeking. On the Chinese side, the Nationalist government itself had made the decision to stall the Japanese assault by opening a second front in the city.⁷ All goodwill interventions and mediations from the foreign authorities notwithstanding, the residents of the previously targeted districts did not miss the first signs of the military build-up. The wealthier residents began to relocate goods and family in the foreign settlements. When the Chinese mayor decided to abandon the Civic Centre in Jiangwan, panic prevailed and the flow of refugees-to-be quickly swelled and clogged the streets leading to the International Settlement.⁸

This was the first stage of a massive movement of population affecting all the Chinese-administered districts. Even before Nanshi came under attack, the French Concession also faced its first wave of refugees. When fighting hit the southern district, the French authorities decided to block the influx of population into their territory. Helpless and mostly destitute people assembled before the heavily guarded iron gates of the concession.⁹ The authorities were caught between humanitarian considerations and the fear of welcoming more refugees into their already resource-strained territory. Eventually, the initiative of a Jesuit, Father Jacquinet, provided a solution for the refuge-seeking population of south Shanghai (see below for more on the Jacquinet Safety Zone). The last and third wave of refugees came when the Chinese army withdrew to the western outskirts of the city on 27 October 1937, causing a large influx of civilian refugees from these areas. It was decided on humanitarian grounds to relax the previous restrictions on their entry into the settlement.¹⁰ While there are no definite figures, it was estimated by all observers that nearly a million people fled their homes during the Shanghai cri-

⁷ Van de Ven, *War and Nationalism*, pp. 197–199.

⁸ Decimal files (RG59), Index to communications sent and received (1910–1944 [1930–1939] Shanghai, 793.94/9298, 12 August 1937, NARA, General Records of the Department of State.

⁹ The French Concession used to have iron gates to block off any entry into its territory in times of crisis. In 1937, as in the International Settlement, additional measures were taken: ‘With hundred of miles of barbed wire strung round its perimeter, supported by machine-gun emplacements and dozens of supplementary defences, the French Concession, true to tradition, stands ready to repulse any who dare attempt to cross the border while carrying arms ... From the corner of Zikawei Road and Avenue Haig, extending to the south, the barbed wire entanglement fronts Zikawei creek, the banks of which are so steep and the slime so thick, that it is doubtful even the most agile could obtain a handhold ... The Concession may become a walled city ... engineers are constructing a brick wall which faces Nantao ... at the rate of 50 yards a day’; *North China Herald*, 9 September 1937.

¹⁰ Shanghai intelligence summaries, 5361, October–December 1937, No. 30, 29 October 1937, p. 57, WO106, Public Record Office (hereafter PRO).

sis.¹¹ Never before, not even in 1931–1932, had such a movement of population taken place. This was a unique moment in Shanghai history and an experience hardly met anywhere else during WWII.¹²

In a matter of days, hundreds of thousands of Shanghai residents lost everything; most left in haste, leaving all their belongings behind. But material goods were just one aspect of an experience that must have been intense and traumatic:

Harassed by acute fear; staggered by heavy burdens and at great expense, indescribable scenes of misery and discomfort followed. Separation of families; lost children; pitifully helpless sick and aged; child-births by the way; women struggling with little children over blasted railway tracks and bridges; crowded boat-trains bombed in the canals; repeated scattering from buses and trains to the field, as overhead the dreaded zoom of airplanes threatened ...¹³

This quotation aptly encapsulates the experience of ordinary Shanghai residents at the beginning of a journey into the unknown. As war unfolded, Shanghai residents were appalled by the horrific scenes resulting from bombings in the city and in the vicinity:

Children in blood-drenched rags being carried through the streets in rickshaws, exhausted women enquiring directions to the nearest hospital, men, dazed and weak from loss of blood, with wounds untreated for several days. Such were the cases which wandered into Shanghai almost daily from the surrounding countryside.¹⁴

¹¹ Decimal files (RG59), 102.81, 25 August 1937, NARA; Nagler, Etha M. 'The problem of food and shelter for refugees in Shanghai', *China Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Winter 1937–1938), p. 67.

¹² Although their cases are different, four major European cities had to sustain a situation of siege and fighting for long periods of time: Leningrad, Stalingrad, Warsaw and Budapest. While Stalingrad was a combat zone for several months, most of the civilian population was evacuated prior to the struggle. Leningrad had to sustain its large population throughout the long siege imposed by the German army between September 1941 and January 1944, but no battles were fought on the streets. Budapest experienced both siege and heavy fighting for more than 100 days. Warsaw bore the brunt of fighting for two months. The major differences with Shanghai is that in each case the whole city was surrounded (no 'safe haven' like the foreign settlements), there was only one legitimate local authority and chain of command (no foreign-led administrations or multiple armed forces), and there was no 'internal' movement of population. The fierceness of the battle for Shanghai can be compared to Budapest, however, though the central parts of the city were not affected directly. Ungvary, Krisztian, *The Siege of Budapest: One Hundred Days in World War II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Geoffrey, Robert, *Victory at Stalingrad* (New York: Longman, 2002); Glantz, David M., *The Battle for Leningrad: 1941–1944* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

¹³ Boone, W.D., 'Shanghai's refugee problem', *China Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Winter 1937–1938), p. 61.

¹⁴ 'Shanghai handles nearly 20,000 casualties', special supplement of the *China Weekly Review*, 4 December 1937, p. 6.

II. *Refugees: A Diverse and Moving Landscape*

The Chinese represented by far the bulk of the refugee population.¹⁵ Within this population, however, there were various layers in terms of resources, time and space. To gather a comprehensive view of the refugee situation, especially in the first six months of the conflict, one needs to take into account other non-Chinese categories of refugees, an aspect this paper will not develop. Yet there were other categories of refugee who competed over time for scarce resources. Chronologically, the first were the Jewish refugees who had come from Germany and Central Europe to escape Nazi persecution. They had arrived shortly before the beginning of the hostilities between Japan and China, relying on their own resources and competence, and on local charities and philanthropists, to survive in their new environment. By the time the war began, a large number, in particular the elderly, had not yet found a way to manage on their own. Those with no resources—around 2,600–3,000 out of a total of 30,000—were assembled in a camp. After the Japanese takeover of the city in 1941, almost all outside support was cut off. Furthermore, those who had no passport were required to move into a segregated area—often referred to as the ‘Hongkou ghetto’—as a measure of control. Yet, despite all the practical difficulties, this never constituted a camp similar to those established in Europe by the Nazis.¹⁶ In early 1942, around 5,000 were being fed daily, but another 3,000 were still in dire need.¹⁷ Most managed to survive through the war.

The Japanese were also concerned with the issue of becoming refugees, even if they were able to rely on resources made available by their authorities. On the one hand, part of the area where they

¹⁵ The most thorough study on the subject of refugees and the role of local elites in organizing support is Feng, Yi, ‘*Élites locales et solidarités régionales. L’aide aux réfugiés à Shanghai (1937–1940)*’, *Études chinoises*, Vol. XV, Nos 1–2 (1996), pp. 71–106.

¹⁶ On the history of the Jewish immigrants from Germany and Central Europe, the best study is by Kreissler, Françoise, ‘*Exil ou asile à Shanghai? Histoire des réfugiés d’Europe centrale (1933–1945)*’ (thèse d’État, Université Paris VIII, 2000), 3 vols; see also Ristaino, Marcia, *Port of Last Resort: The Diaspora Communities of Shanghai* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2002) and Freyeisen, Astrid, *Shanghai und die Politik des Dritten Reiches* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2000). There is a large body of personal memoirs by former Jewish immigrants who went through this experience. See Krasno, Rena, *Strangers Always: A Jewish Family in Wartime* (Berkeley: Pacific View, 1992); Carey, Arch, *The War Years at Shanghai, 1941–1945–1948* (New York: Vantage Press, 1967).

¹⁷ *Shanghai Times*, 14 January 1942, 15 January 1942, 5 February 1942.

lived was included in the battlefield (Hongkou, Zhabei, Yangshupu).¹⁸ Numerous families had to leave their homes and move south into the Japanese quarter in the International Settlement.¹⁹ Yet their fate was nothing compared to that of the Chinese families. The Japanese associations (Mindan, Renkokai) provided help and organised their installation. Soon after, they were shipped back to Japan on vessels brought over by the navy. The Japanese population decreased very substantially for several months, but most returned after the armed conflict came to a complete stop. Another wave of Japanese refugees hit the city later when fighting moved westward and affected the cities of central China, and the Japanese consulates actually issued warnings and orders to leave. The Japanese residents of these cities naturally sought refuge in Shanghai, pending their transfer back to Japan. Despite the difficulties, these families benefited from the support and logistics provided by the local associations.²⁰ It must have been a difficult time for them, to various degrees, as they had to leave home, shops and jobs all at once. Their well-planned removal from Shanghai, however, saved them from the traumas of war.

Obviously, the term 'refugee' covered a vast array of very diverse situations.²¹ All had been forced to abandon their homes and to resettle elsewhere in the city. Although some were able to prepare for their move, the large majority had to leave with little time and means to resettle and many fled after having lost everything. For most of them the narrow margins of normal life and the sudden exodus from threatened homes left no materials or opportunity for employment, no winter clothing and inadequate bedding. Their savings were limited and would be used up very quickly. With about one million people moving into the foreign settlements under such circumstances, it is

¹⁸ Henriot, Christian, 'Little Japan in Shanghai: an insulated community, 1875–1945', in Robert Bickers and Christian Henriot (eds), *New Frontiers: Imperialism's New Communities in East Asia, 1842–1952* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 146–169.

¹⁹ *North China Herald*, 9 August 1937.

²⁰ *Shanghai nihonjin kakuro rengokai no enkaku to jisei* (Events and Evolution of Japanese Street Associations in Shanghai) (Shanghai, Shanhai Nihonjin Kakuro Rengokai, 1939), p. 81.

²¹ Another category of refugees deserves a particular mention, that of the well-off Chinese who came from central China. See Barnett, Robert W., *Economic Shanghai: Hostage to Politics, 1937–1941* (New York, Institute for Pacific Relations, 1941), p. 128; Wu Chengxi, 'Zhanhou shanghai jinrong biandong zhi yiban de qingxiang' (The general situation of financial change in post-conflict Shanghai), *Jinrong daobao* (Financial Guide), Vol. 1, No. 1 (March 1939), pp. 4–5; Henriot, Christian, 'Shanghai industries during the Japanese occupation: bombs, boom and bust (1937–1945)', in Christian Henriot and Yeh Wen-hsin (eds), *In the Shadow of the Rising Sun. Shanghai under Japanese Occupation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 17–45.

easy to appreciate the challenge that assisting such a large population represented. The massive exodus presented obvious risks for social order and health conditions. Early on, the settlements' authorities and above all the various native-place associations worked towards sending as many people as possible back to their villages. By December 1937, some 375,000 refugees had been evacuated, but more than 700,000 still remained in the city, of whom 140,000 were to be found in camps and 250,000 in the Jacquinet Safety Zone.²² Obviously, even with the mobilisation of all available resources, no organisation could take care of such a large population.

In fact, contemporary observers noted that large numbers of refugees found their own solutions. Thousands were able to take care of themselves and find suitable accommodation with friends and relatives, or in hotels or places that they were able to rent. Nevertheless, those who could afford this were a minority in the human sea of refugees. Foreign observers marvelled that the problem of refugee relief was greatly facilitated by the saving features of the Chinese family system whereby any relation, no matter how distant, is honoured and can expect to move in with more fortunate members of the family:²³ 'In this small Shanghai area alone, the maligned family system is responsible for maintaining the life of perhaps three quarters of a million people who would otherwise be starving.'²⁴ And it meant something to receive parents or friends into Shanghai's crowded quarters where, in the central Shanghai district, for instance, the population density was already 181,000 persons per square mile.²⁵ It meant distributing limited food among double or triple the number of mouths. It meant sharing beds, and clothes, mats and utensils, and eventually even income.²⁶

It was estimated that in December 1937, 663,000 refugees lived upon the resources of friends and family. Observers expected that rapidly dwindling resources would lead to a need for assistance in carrying these refugees through the winter months.²⁷ In fact, this

²² 'Shanghai tackles relief problem', Special Red Cross Supplement, 4 December 1937, p. 2.

²³ Decimal files (RG59), 102.81, 25 August 1937, NARA.

²⁴ 'Chinese family system aids refugees', special supplement of the *China Weekly Review*, 4 December 1937, p. 4.

²⁵ Zou Yiren, *Jiu shanghai renkou bianqian de yanjiu* (A Study of Population Change in Old Shanghai) (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1980), p. 93. On population density in Shanghai, see Henriot, Christian and Zheng, Zu'an, *Shanghai. Espace et représentations de 1849 à nos jours* (Paris: CNRS-Editions, 1999), pp. 94–101.

²⁶ *Chinese family system aids refugees*, p. 4.

²⁷ 'Shanghai launches Red Cross drive', special supplement of the *China Weekly Review*, 4 December 1937, p. 1.

did not happen. By December, the population in refugee camps had reached its maximum, and even if there was still a turnover the ranks of refugees began a slow but continuous decrease. A report by British intelligence stated that the situation was slowly returning to normal in February 1938.²⁸ Indeed, refugees soon stopped being perceived as a problem. After August 1938, official reports hardly mentioned refugees as a specific difficulty.²⁹ This favourable development can be explained by various factors, including the resumption of economic activity and the progressive reopening of the occupied districts by the Japanese army (especially Zhabei, Hongkou and Yangshupu). Nevertheless, these measures came at a late date (the end of 1938), and in between the survival of displaced persons relied mostly on the resources mobilised within the private circles of families. Even with debatable and contradictory figures, there is no doubt that around half a million Shanghainese survived through the first months of the war, up to more than a year, thanks to the support they received from their relatives or friends.

Not all refugees were as fortunate, especially during the initial phase of the conflict. Those who had no family support simply settled anywhere, either as a temporary emergency measure or out of sheer exhaustion:

They overran the streets and huddled like pigs in sties in empty buildings, vacant lots, on window sills, in gutters and alleys. They sprawled for naps, nursed their babies, ate (when they could find or beg food) and lived their private life in public.³⁰

No matter how many people were taken in and fed in refugee camps, thousands still remained without shelter or somewhere to fill their rice bowl. Decayed buildings that should have been razed housed hundreds where once one or a few families had lived. Every foot of space was occupied in some downtown office buildings that fronted rich window displays and rushing traffic. In a dark movie theatre, new audiences of the homeless and empty-handed made their beds between the narrow rows of seats.³¹ Scarcely better off were the incalculable throngs who crowded street upon street of the poorer houses beyond belief; here the congestion, cost and strain drove out the weak, who became recruits for fresh camps and taxed hospitals.³²

²⁸ Intelligence report, 8 February 1938, F1699, 22083 Sino-Japanese war situation in Shanghai, FO371, PRO.

²⁹ 'Dui nanmin chuzhi banfa' (Procedure for the management of refugees), 11-37 (5), U38-5-1146, Shanghai Municipal Archives (hereafter SMA).

³⁰ 'Traffic in tragedy', *The China Weekly*, 13 August 1938, p. 344.

³¹ Boone, *Shanghai's refugee problem*, p. 62.

³² Boone, *Shanghai's refugee problem*, p. 63.

The number of these truly homeless refugees was estimated at 75,000 in December 1937, but the figure must have been higher.³³ They represented the most pitiful group of all. One witness recalled:

Two blocks north of Nanking road there is a little settlement of refugees. The shells of two business buildings house them. On mud floors are a few mats for beds. Locker space is a simply solved problem for there are few clothes to put in lockers ... The children are bathed in the street ... Adults take sponge baths if any ... There are many such buildings together of the helpless who literally have no place to go and no work to do. The older ones stare off, dazed and weak. The younger, Chinese-fashion, make the best of what is at hand.³⁴

The unregulated occupation of all sorts of unsuitable places throughout the foreign settlements presented a genuine challenge to the authorities. While they could guarantee minimum levels of food and health protection in camps, the 'street population' was fully beyond their reach and represented a potential threat to the health and safety of the other residents. Homeless and parentless young Chinese boys and girls were roaming the streets, huddling in doorways at night. There was growing concern about these youngsters, who found no other means of securing food than to steal it, cutting rice bags and snatching food from counters.³⁵ From official records it does not appear that there was a systematic policy of removing these refugees to camps. A number of them must have found their way to refugee camps, but up to 1940 official records show the persistence of small pockets of homeless refugees.³⁶

The massive arrival of refugees required emergency arrangements to accommodate them in surroundings with the minimum facilities for survival. The establishment of camps was initially the result of a proliferation of initiatives by all kinds of institutions and associations. The press noted that most conspicuous in mobilising to help the shelterless refugees were the provincial guilds and the benevolent societies.³⁷ In a previous study, Feng Yi has shown that native-place associations were indeed the main organisers of assistance to refugees, including their evacuation from the city, and the main financial supporters of the committees that eventually coordinated refugee assis-

³³ *Shanghai launches Red Cross drive*, p. 1.

³⁴ 'Traffic in tragedy', *The China Weekly*, 13 August 1938, p. 344.

³⁵ 'Aid asked for Shanghai's children', *The China Weekly*, 1 October 1938, p. 150.

³⁶ 'Appendix B. List showing number of poor refugees living on open spaces and in the empty houses of the settlement', in 'List of refugee camps in the International Settlement', revised 2 February 1940, U1-16-1034, SMA.

³⁷ 'Shanghai tackles relief problem', *Special Red Cross Supplement*, 4 December 1937, p. 2.

tance. After spring 1938, when the Red Cross eventually gave up the responsibility of funding refugee assistance, the task was taken over by a committee organised by the local elites, with the professional guilds and the native-place associations in turn as the main agencies providing the required funding.³⁸ Nevertheless, the organisation of assistance to refugees was a task that mobilised all the official institutions and civic associations, as well as numerous individuals. Faced with the proliferation of initiatives, three major committees were established to coordinate these efforts: the Shanghai International Relief Committee, the Federation of Shanghai Charity Organisations (Shanghai cishan tuanti lianhe jiuzaizhui) and the Chinese municipality-sponsored Refugee Relief Committee (Shanghai cishan tuanti lianhe jiuzaizhui nanmin jiuji weiyuanhui³⁹). The Shanghai International Red Cross was also very active, but it served only in a coordinating capacity and as a channel for collecting funding and material supply through its network abroad.

The refugee camps in Shanghai were to be found on nearly every street, in several places in a single block and on nearly every bit of 'vacant' land. The work of the authorities focused on reducing the number of camps, eliminating the less well-equipped ones, and introducing and maintaining standards for food, health and housing. They also endeavoured to carry out preventive medical work by vaccination against the most prevalent diseases such as cholera and smallpox. There was no dearth of volunteers among both Chinese and foreign residents. Thousands of Shanghai's youth enlisted in the arduous and manifold tasks of these camps, living for the most part within these cheerless surroundings. Figures about refugees and camps vary across the sources, sometimes within the same document. The table provided by Feng Yi is so far the most reliable reconstruction. In Table I, I have simply added census data for additional periods collected from the SMC archives.

The highest number recorded for camps in the International Settlement was 161, some time in December 1937, although they housed only 97,000 refugees.⁴⁰ Yet another source gives 137,000 refugees in camps at the end of November 1937.⁴¹ One contemporary participant even claims 'approximately 256,000 refugees, in about 200 camps

³⁸ Feng, *Elites locales et solidarités régionales*, pp. 92–93.

³⁹ Its name notwithstanding, the committee was independent from the Federation with which it shared the same name. See Feng, *Elites locales et solidarités régionales*, pp. 90–91.

⁴⁰ Note, Public Health Department, December 1937, U15-1-1032, SMA.

⁴¹ Boone, *Shanghai's refugee problem*, p. 62.

Table 1: Number of refugee camps and refugees in the Shanghai foreign settlements (1937–1944)

<i>Date</i>	<i>International Settlement</i>		<i>French Concession</i>		<i>Total</i>
	<i>Camps</i>	<i>Refugees</i>	<i>Camps</i>	<i>Refugees</i>	
15 August 1937			13	13,200	
30 August 1937	105	52,106	47	27,230	79,336
09 September 1937	147	60,595			
23 September 1937	121	61,896			
28 October 1937	129	72,447	35	23,800	96,247
11 November 1937	132	73,191	46		
02 December 1937	153	93,269			
06 December 1937	158	95,336			
14 December 1937	154	91,597	40	25,900	117,497
01 February 1938			27	18,735	
01 April 1938			24	17,000	
01 June 1938	62	40,000			
23 October 1938	87	54,771	39	27,102	81,873
07 November 1938			6	10,146	
29 December 1938	75	53,922			
01 February 1939	64	52,153			
20 June 1939			14	18,313	
04 October 1939	36	39,073			
01 April 1940			2	400	
02 February 1940	20	19,774			19,774
01 June 1940		18,031			
01 October 1940		16,396			
18 December 1940	14	14,764			14,764
03 January 1941	14	15,185			15,185
15 August 1941	13	13,108			13,108
05 January 1942	12	11,955			11,955
01 October 1942	7	2,238			2,238
01 December 1943	7	2,169			2,169
01 February 1943	8	2,154			2,154
01 March 1943	8	1,887			1,887
01 December 1943	6	1,516			1,516
01 February 1944	7	1,668			1,668
01 September 1944	6	1,353			1,353

and with thousands of even more pitifully situated, who from choice or necessity are living in the streets, in alley or doorways'.⁴² This must have included the camps in the French Concession. The largest 'camp' was the Jacquinet Safety Zone which opened on 9 November 1937, after an agreement was reached between its initiators and the Chinese and Japanese military authorities. The purpose was to offer a place of safety for the civilian population. It covered a good

⁴² Nagler, *The problem of food and shelter for refugees in Shanghai*, p. 67.

third of the former walled city, next to the French Concession, and was managed by an international committee, the actual policing being entrusted to Chinese merchants. It received between 225,000 and 250,000 persons, with half of these being totally destitute.⁴³ As such, the Jacquinet initiative was an innovation that was repeated some time later in Nanking (although it did not prevent the massive massacre of civilians for which Nanking remains infamous in history).

While most refugees came in groups, especially as families, some individuals were alone, lost, etc. Special refuges were established for the aged who had been bereaved of kin or hopelessly separated in the mass migration.⁴⁴ There were homes for lost children, and orphanages and nurseries for wartime babies who had been deserted. In August 1938, 1,500 orphans were taken care of in nine camps specially engaged in accommodating refugee children.⁴⁵ There were also camps for defectives and those maimed by war. Some received only young women, the natural prey of every exploiter.⁴⁶ Obviously, the war was hardest on those who were alone, under-aged, physically weak or handicapped. While in normal times they could rely on relatives, friends or neighbours, these protections just crumbled in time of emergency.

The number of refugees in camps remained high until February 1938, with 100,000 in the International Settlement, 50,000 in the French Concession and 75,000 in the Nantao Safety Zone (Nanshi).⁴⁷ Thereafter, the ranks of refugees started to melt away, although the process was offset by the influx of refugees from outside Shanghai. As we shall see below, there was a genuine concern among the authorities as to whether one section of the refugee population would remain satisfied with a regime of public assistance. Active measures were taken to send refugees away and to close camps. In September 1939, some 36 camps remained, with 39,077 refugees (and six Jewish refugee camps with 2,612 refugees).⁴⁸ By early 1940, the number of refugees had reduced to a small proportion of the original population (around 10 per cent) but continued to be a drain on local resources. In fact, it seems that a level was reached—around 15,000—that was difficult to

⁴³ 'Shanghai handles nearly 20,000 casualties', Special Red Cross Supplement, 4 December 1937, p. 9

⁴⁴ Boone, *Shanghai's refugee problem*, p. 64.

⁴⁵ *China Press*, 27 August 1938.

⁴⁶ Boone, *Shanghai's refugee problem*, p. 64.

⁴⁷ These are estimates rather than hard data; Intelligence report, 8 February 1938, F1699, 22083 Sino-Japanese war situation in Shanghai, FO371, PRO.

⁴⁸ SMC and French Concession health report, September 1939, Consular trade report, 1939, NARA.

break through. Without individual data it is impossible to assess who these refugees were, but some of them may have turned into 'professional' refugees. The decline and quasi disappearance of refugee camps was precipitated by the Japanese invasion in December 1941. The blockade that resulted from the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the extreme difficulties with food supply during the winter of 1941–1942 and the explicit policy of the Japanese military to get rid of the camps led the organisations in charge of refugees to close down the camps. In fact, a small number (six) remained to accommodate those who were unfit to be left on the streets.

Refugees did not represent a stable population, and the management of camps was made difficult by the constant movement of refugees in and out. One report indicates that the overall rate of turnover was 1.4 per cent, though with large differences among the six camps concerned (from 0.5 to 2.8 per cent). The same applies to the rate of monthly turnover that could be marginal (10–14 per cent) or tremendous (130 per cent). The highest number of new arrivals took place in November, with the arrival of cold weather and the exhaustion of meagre reserves.⁴⁹ Over a period of six months, statistics of 38 camps show that, after the initial mass arrival, between 60 and 300 persons moved in and out every month.⁵⁰ On average, camps offered better conditions than squatting in alleyways or old buildings. Yet there were considerable differences between them, which the Red Cross and the International Relief Committee endeavoured to reduce by closing the least viable camps or by regrouping the inmates in better-equipped camps. Despite these efforts, the situation remained far from ideal:

at the other extreme is the Sinza road camp. Jam-packed into two rows of houses with an alleyway between, the refugees live—or exist—in a welter of dirt, refuse and smelly humanity. In hallways so dark you can't see your footing you stumble into a child mother nursing her baby.⁵¹

People did not choose to become refugees. War dawned on Shanghai residents right across the social classes, even if the more well-off, as mentioned above, moved earlier than the rest of the population. The population of refugees should therefore reflect the struc-

⁴⁹ *Shanghai guoji jiujihui liu ge yue baogao* [hereafter *SGJLGYB*], 1937.8–1938.2 (Six-month Report of the Shanghai International Relief Committee) (Shanghai: Shanghai Guoji Jiujihui, 1938), p. 57.

⁵⁰ *Shanghai cishan tuanti lianhehui jiuji zhanhou nanmin weiuyuanhui ban nian gongzuo baogao no. 2* [hereafter *SCTLJZNW 2*], 1938, 3–8 (Half-year Report of the Committee for War Refugees of the Federation of Charity Organizations, March–August) (Shanghai: Shanghai Guoji Jiujihui, 1938), pp. 24–27.

⁵¹ 'Traffic in tragedy', *The China Weekly*, 13 August 1938, p. 344.

ture of the population in the districts affected by war. In fact, it is extremely difficult to identify the refugees. The historian can only rely on variable official records that used different and often very broad categories. Our data therefore is uneven and fragmentary, but it offers a glimpse into the refugee population, at least that of the camps. Quite clearly, certain categories were far more represented in this population than their actual share of the Shanghai population.

The first issue is that of statistical categories. Even the most distinct ones were easily mixed, like men and women or handicapped and orphans. Orphans and handicapped have no age or sex in most statistical records. They count only as 'mouths'. Children are categorised as below and above six years, but sex is not noted. Again, what they ate was more important than who they were. This makes statistical reconstructions quite problematic. In one report, out of a total of 35,675 refugees, 21,787 were counted as adults (61 per cent), to which the category 'old persons' (1,060, or 3 per cent) should be added. One cannot fail to note the very small percentage of 'old persons', even if the age limit is not indicated. By usual Chinese statistical standards of the time, this would mean above 60. This segment of the population represented a higher percentage in normal conditions. Some may have been unable to move to safety, or may have been left behind—there is anecdotal evidence of such cases—but this may be related to the social background of those who ended up in camps. These were families made up of parents and their children. Children represented 11,726 individuals (33 per cent). We can safely assume that the 490 orphans (1 per cent) were also children.⁵² In most reports, children appear in large numbers, averaging a third of the refugee population. This is very striking. In some cases, they even represent the overwhelming majority. In Camp No. 1 of the Shanghai International Relief Committee (SIRC), statistics categorised children as 'little babies' (5 per cent), 'children' (21.6 per cent) and 'student age' (24.2 per cent). In this camp, adults were subcategorised as 'adults' (30.7 per cent) and 'aged' (18.5 per cent).⁵³ In Camp No. 3, those aged under 18 represented 57 per cent. Those aged 50 and above were a mere 9 per cent.⁵⁴ There were 40,000 children below age 14 in all refugee camps in August 1938.⁵⁵ A few months later, in the 105 camps under the

⁵² *SCTLJZQNW* 2, p. 31.

⁵³ *SGJLGYB*, p. 50.

⁵⁴ *Shanghai guoji jiujihui nianbao* (Annual Report of the Shanghai International Relief Committee) (Shanghai: Shanghai Guoji Jiujihui, August 1937–August 1938), p. 51.

⁵⁵ *China Press*, 27 August 1938.

supervision of the SIRC, there was a total of 24,700 children below 14 years of age.⁵⁶

In most records, the sex distribution among refugees fails to reflect that prevailing in the population at large in Shanghai, where men outnumbered women. In a 1938 report, men represented 58 per cent and women 42 per cent (or 139 men for 100 women).⁵⁷ Yet in another table in the same report, adult women (10,832) appeared to be as numerous as men (10,855). Since the difference came from the 'others' category, which in the second table points to the 'children' category, one may assume that the sex balance among children was skewed towards boys.⁵⁸ In another report for the first six months of the war, men were slightly under-represented (5,859) compared to women (6,597), but we have no breakdown by sex for children (6,613).⁵⁹ Over the course of a year (August 1937–August 1938), in the six camps of the Shanghai International Relief Committee adult women were slightly more numerous (33.7 per cent) than men (30.5 per cent), with children representing 35.8 per cent.⁶⁰ In Camp No. 3, we have a detailed table by sex and age. Of the 1,320 inmates, there was a clear majority of women (56 per cent), especially in the 20–39-year age bracket (70 per cent). Girls were also far more numerous than boys.⁶¹ It is difficult to generalise from partial data and uneven situations in the various camps, but one gets the sense that women were over-represented among the refugee population. Camps may have been viewed as a place where women and children could find some comfort while men looked for resources and work outside. This imbalance may also be explained by the presence of scores of young female contract workers who were made homeless and whose contractors found it advantageous, as in 1931–1932, to use camp facilities pending the end of fighting.⁶²

The statistics on the profession of refugees were registered in very broad categories. In a 1938 report, the population was simply divided into workers (24 per cent), peasants (23 per cent), merchants (6 per cent), students (9 per cent) and others (37 per cent). 'Students' must have been children, while the 'others' category may simply reflect

⁵⁶ *News Bulletin*, Shanghai International Red Cross, 1 October 1938, p. 3.

⁵⁷ *SCTLJZNW* 2, p. 20.

⁵⁸ *SCTLJZNW* 2, p. 31.

⁵⁹ *SGJLGYB*, p. 50.

⁶⁰ *Shanghai guoji jujihui nianbao*, p. 19.

⁶¹ *Shanghai guoji jujihui nianbao*, p. 51.

⁶² Honig, Emily, 'The contract labor system and women workers: pre-liberation cotton mills of Shanghai', *Modern China*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (1983), pp. 446–447.

failure in proper registration.⁶³ Another report broke down its refugee population into workers (47.9 per cent), farmers (13.8 per cent), petty vendors (8.0 per cent), students (7.9 per cent), merchants (7.6 per cent), and without occupation (14.8 per cent). Yet in the camp next door, the distribution was completely different, with a majority of farmers (52 per cent) and a large number of petty vendors (20 per cent).⁶⁴ In other words, depending on the way statistics were drawn up and on the location of the camp, or on the timing of the arrival of the refugees, the distribution by profession varied greatly. On the whole, however, most refugees came from the ranks of the *xiao shimin* (small urbanites or the peasantry around Shanghai). The number of students is especially high, but this may be due to the high concentration of students in Shanghai whose universities were turned into refugee camps or simply destroyed and evacuated. As many came from places outside Shanghai, they could not rely on family to help them. It is also interesting to note that those with professional qualifications were few in the camps. A census of the qualified workers available in the six SIRC camps revealed a total of 633 individuals with professions ranging from tailor to carpenter, weaver, mason, brass smith, threadmaker, printer, cobbler, cotton-mill hand and cigarette-roller.⁶⁵

There is no surprise in observing that the largest share of the refugees originated from the neighbouring provinces. Jiangsu came first with 47 per cent, followed by Zhejiang with 30 per cent. In fact, this largely reflected the composition of the Shanghai population. Guangdong, Anhui, Fujian and Hubei represented respectively 2.8 per cent, 2.6 per cent, 2.1 per cent and 2.0 per cent. The rest came from all over China.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, the geographical origin does not tell us much about the actual place where those concerned lived. In fact, a report about refugees during the first six months after the hostilities broke out gives us a better sense of where they actually came from. In Camp No. 1, for instance, the distribution was: Zhabei (25.5 per cent), Baoshan (21.5 per cent), Yangshupu (17.3 per cent), Nanshi (8.8 per cent), Pudong (7.4 per cent), Dachang (6.7 per cent), Hongkou (6.6 per cent), Jiangwan (3.5 per cent), Wusong (2.7 per cent).⁶⁷ In the annual report by the same institution, a survey of three camps shows varying proportions among groups from the same

⁶³ *SCTLJZQNW* 2, p. 20.

⁶⁴ *SGJLGYB*, p. 52.

⁶⁵ *SGJLGYB*, p. 54.

⁶⁶ *SCTLJZQNW* 2, p. 32.

⁶⁷ *SGJLGYB*, p. 51.

place, but the overall image is the same. When detailed statistics are provided, it usually appears very clear that refugees were mostly former residents of Shanghai.⁶⁸

As noted, there was a sharp increase in the number of refugees in the months that followed the outbreak of the hostilities, followed by a gradual decrease.⁶⁹ Refugees did not relish staying in camps. In fact, a large number left voluntarily once they had found a place to live or a way to leave the city. In the six camps of the Shanghai International Relief Committee, 38,946 persons (out of a total of 65,000 refugees) left on their own, while 4,798 were repatriated to their native places.⁷⁰ As early as February 1938, the Shanghai Red Cross was attempting partial liquidation of the refugee situation by collecting scattered craftsmen, and finding space and materials for work and markets for products.⁷¹ Yet this could not solve the problem of self-support. Only 200 refugees were enlisted, and 85 per cent of these were women.⁷² The Red Cross found it increasingly difficult to raise enough funds to support the large refugee population. In May 1938, it launched a new drive to raise one million dollars to support the remaining 170,000 refugees.⁷³ The director of the Shanghai International Red Cross came to the conclusion that the relief system was beginning to produce the same undesirable effects that the 'dole' system did in the US during the depth of America's depression. He recommended drastic reforms to prevent charity from becoming a serious demoralising factor. He suggested classifying camps into three categories: housing camps, half-ration camps and full-ration camps. Refugees had to be sorted out and sent to the camps of the appropriate classifications.⁷⁴ It does not seem that this plan was ever implemented. When the Red Cross ran out of money, the local Chinese associations took over. Yet it was a sign that popular perception of the refugees was changing.

Owners of real-estate properties eventually expressed their discontent to the authorities about the continued occupation of their premises by refugees. This also increased the pressure to close the

⁶⁸ *Shanghai guoji jiujihui nianbao*, p. 51.

⁶⁹ *Shanghai guoji jiujihui nianbao*, p. 17.

⁷⁰ *SGJLGYB*, p. 51; *Shanghai guoji jiujihui nianbao*, p. 29.

⁷¹ Decimal File (RG59), 893.48/1451, 9 February 1938, NARA.

⁷² 'Million dollars needed for Shanghai relief work', *The China Weekly*, 21 May 1938, p. 389.

⁷³ *Million dollars needed for Shanghai relief work*, p. 389.

⁷⁴ 'Shanghai's refugee problems and Kiangsi relief work', *The China Weekly*, 6 August 1938, p. 318.

camps and evacuate the refugees.⁷⁵ Between April and August 1938, the Shanghai Federation of Charity Organisations (Shanghai cishan tuanti lianhehui) closed down eleven camps.⁷⁶ After a while, the local authorities increasingly perceived the presence of an idle population in refugee camps as a burden. In January 1939, the French Concession was making preparations to close most of the camps on its territory and to concentrate the refugees in a few large camps. The process was due to be completed in April 1939.⁷⁷ The Jacquinet Zone was closed at the end of June 1939, and the 19,000 refugees who still occupied the area were given a month's supply of food and dismissed. The liquidation of the zone was due to the departure of Father Jacquinet to France, to difficulties in supplying food and to the protests of the owners of the houses where the refugees had been accommodated.⁷⁸

In April 1940, the brigadier-general of the Salvation Army announced that he planned to liquidate all refugee camps by the end of the month. He estimated that 75 per cent of the inhabitants of the camps, totalling 30,000 to 35,000 (of whom 20,000 were in Salvation Army camps) would probably find a place and work. Clearly, the time had come for these refugees to fend for themselves: 'It was only legitimate for the working population of Shanghai that this matter of refugee relief should be liquidated, for some of the poor had lived for two and a half years in those camps where they had been provided with food, lodging, clothing, education, and hospitalization.' The brigadier-general feared that public criticism was bound to increase if no action was taken.⁷⁹ In 1942, when the Japanese started to impose the implementation of a system of population control (*baojia*) and food rationing, the authorities of the International Settlement moved more decisively to close all the remaining camps. There remained around 11,151 refugees citywide in various camps, with half of these in the three northern sub-districts. The planned closing of a large refugee camp on North Chekiang Road meant throwing the 4,193 inmates on to the street. In fact, by mid-March 1942, 1,782 persons had been dismissed with just a little money in their pocket. The remaining 2,407 inmates were about to be dismissed, including even a group of 200 cripples and 500 orphans. The same situation prevailed in

⁷⁵ *News Bulletin*, Shanghai International Red Cross, 1 October 1938, p. 3.

⁷⁶ *SCTLJZQNW* 2, p. 34.

⁷⁷ Note, Special Branch, 16 January 1939, U15-1-1032, SMA

⁷⁸ *Bulletin mensuel* (Monthly report, Intelligence section), French Concession, June 1939, p. 45, Archives diplomatiques de Nantes.

⁷⁹ Memorandum, 8 April 1940, Consular trade report, 1940, box 1498. NARA.

the other camps—one with 660 inmates and one with 4,083 inmates. Altogether, 2,228 persons were totally helpless and unable to survive their dismissal from the camps.⁸⁰

III. *Managing the Refugee Camps*

The establishment and organisation of close to 200 camps in a matter of weeks, in a city that was overwhelmed by a massive wave of a million refugees, was a formidable challenge despite the know-how that past experiences provided, especially the capacity for immediate mobilisation by the Chinese native-place associations. These were initially the main actors, to which higher-level organs such as the Red Cross or the SIRC tried to bring better coordination, supplementary resources and sets of rules for running the camps.

In the initial phase of establishment of the camps, there was no system of survey and distribution of resources. The SIRC became aware of the uneven situation among refugee camps and organised a Visiting Committee for the sole purpose of alleviating camp problems and improving the conditions in which the refugees lived. The duties of the committee were to make inquiries and observations and to communicate with the camp's supporting society or guild to enforce required correction or improvement in camp management.⁸¹ The Visiting Committee drew up a tentative 'brochure', in both English and Chinese, governing the organisation of the camps, and started a movement to train the camp managers.⁸² It carried out an exhaustive investigation that revealed considerable overlapping and waste. Charts were prepared for managers of camps to fill in for the requisition of food, clothing, etc. Each refugee was given a number, and it became easier to check actual requirements when itemised requisitions were presented.⁸³ After a few weeks of improvisation, a better sense of order was achieved with the adoption of common rules and the installation of basic facilities in almost all camps.

Order and mutual helpfulness prevailed, despite bleak misery. Most of the camp labour and many and varied projects were willingly undertaken by the refugees themselves (construction, cooking, clean-

⁸⁰ Report, investigator, 9 March 1942; Report, investigator, undated, U15-1-1002, SMA.

⁸¹ Yapp, D.K.F., 'Social service among the refugees', *China Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Winter 1937-1938), p. 95.

⁸² Yapp, *Social service among the refugees*, p. 99.

⁸³ Doodha, N.B., 'Organization of refugee camps as worked out by the visiting committee', *China Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Winter 1937-1938), pp. 89-92.

ing, etc.). Yet this represented an activity for the few. Most refugees had to spend long idle hours in confined quarters. They were not strictly 'interned'. The privilege of taking a leave of absence prevailed in practically all the camps, but the police, worried about interference with traffic, forbade the refugees to walk in the streets in large numbers. They were allowed to go out between 6.00 and 7.00 a.m. for fresh air and walking exercise.⁸⁴ Living in such conditions could hardly create an ideal environment. On the whole, however, the number and nature of offences remained unimportant. In one camp, there were 382 cases in six months in a population of 6,000 people. One third of the offences were represented by smoking (102), followed by food 'secreting' (72), quarrelling (62) and fighting (42). The rest covered 'late return', property damage, water robbing, cigarette secreting, and stealing. In an even larger camp (26,000), registered offences amounted to 218 and covered spitting (95), quarrelling (76) and food secreting (47).⁸⁵ In other words, discipline was well maintained in camps. Even in a large concentration like the Jacquinet Safety Zone, order was imposed by strict rules and a military-like militia.

Feeding was, of course, the biggest challenge for camps. For the organisations involved in helping the refugees, it represented on average two-thirds of their expenses.⁸⁶ But the challenge was not just the problem of cost. There were three intertwined issues in feeding the refugees:

- *Supply of food*: for several months Shanghai was cut off from its hinterland and from overseas markets. The stocks available in the city were soon depleted. When fighting moved inland, relief came thanks to imports, but over time the cost of maintaining a population of hundreds of thousands of refugees was staggering. In just over six months, the SIRC served more than 5.5 million meals. Although the cost of feeding the refugees averaged no more than ten Chinese cents (US \$0.03) per day per person, when measured by the hundreds of thousands and by months of days it became a huge burden.⁸⁷
- *Distribution of food*: it was not enough just to gather staples, vegetables, etc. The primary foodstuffs had to be turned into meals. This required workers, but above all appropriate facilities and equipment. In the beginning, many camps lacked the basic facilities and

⁸⁴ Yapp, *Social service among the refugees*, p. 98.

⁸⁵ *SGJLGYB*, p. 54.

⁸⁶ *SGJLGYB*, tables.

⁸⁷ Boone, *Shanghai's refugee problem*, p. 63.

served minimal rations of rice. This poor diet was the most direct cause of disease among refugees. One way to solve the issue was the establishment of 'central kitchens' from which meals were dispatched to the various camps when no facilities existed. A whole fleet of trucks ran across the city. At every step, the managers were confronted with problems of 'leakages' that they tried to keep at a low level.

- *Diet*: as camp managers quickly discovered, filling up one's belly was not enough. Great attention had to be paid to the nature of the food itself, especially in terms of vitamins, fibre, etc. The delivery of plain rice gruel proved a mistake and inflicted damage that would cost refugees their lives. This issue is discussed below.

As supplies became more and more unattainable and costly, most of the refugee camps were only able to provide wheat flour, cooked as steam bread, once a day as the sole form of food. With few or no vitamins, the inadequate nutrition of refugees led to the development of various diseases, especially beriberi.⁸⁸ Many of these were of the severe acute type, requiring expensive medicine for treatment. Practically all the patients developed their diseases during their stay in the refugee camps. Skin infections and eye infections were also commonly seen in the camps.⁸⁹ A second issue was that of babies and children, and their mothers. Camp organisers had to secure milk for children, nursing mothers and the sick, as these often could not be fed with rice or wheat. This concern was met to some degree by supplying soya milk. By the end of 1937, 15,000 lb of bean milk was being provided daily to 15,000 children under six years of age.⁹⁰ Over two months the SIRC was able to produce 128,560 lb of soya bean milk, which was distributed to 50 refugee camps.⁹¹ The supply of bean milk helped tide over the most urgent problems and alleviated the needs of children in camps. Yet, as we shall see below, children remained the most vulnerable among the refugee population.

For shelter, refugees made do with whatever they could avail themselves of, especially when the weather started to turn colder. Condemned, leaking, unsanitary or half-built buildings, hastily erected mat-sheds—anything, anywhere, providing shelter for as many people as could possibly crowd in, was used, as well as some vacant well-built structures: schools, universities, dwellings, temples, theatres and

⁸⁸ Boone, *Shanghai's refugee problem*, p. 63.

⁸⁹ Note, 25 August 1937, U15-1-1032, SMA.

⁹⁰ Nagler, *The problem of food and shelter for refugees in Shanghai*, p. 68

⁹¹ Sze, Szeming, 'Medical care for Shanghai refugees', *China Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Winter 1937-1938), p. 78.

churches.⁹² Almost all the empty lots on the border of the International Settlement near Caojiadu were covered with straw and bamboo huts of a more rudimentary type than had existed before the war. These huts housed mostly workers from the plants that had moved to or reopened in the area.⁹³ There was a marked difference between refugee camps and squatter huts. The inhabitants of the latter were, in the main, more or less self-supporting, whereas the inhabitants of the refugee camps were practically destitute. It is more than probable that a population of 150,000 occupied these huts and in fact counted among those who found their own solution by resettling in the foreign settlements. Despite complaints by the local residents, mostly British, the Public Health Department remained reluctant to expel them.⁹⁴ Of course, the settlements' authorities preferred the formally organised camps of the various charity organisations, but had to accept reality, the more so as there was a shortage of straw, bamboo and matting for the erection of camps. Finally, to improve these hastily erected shelters, charity organisations used all the means at their disposal. Large donations of posters, received from the advertising departments of big firms, were used to paper the inside walls of mat-sheds as protection against cold winds.⁹⁵ Refugees could therefore live in a basic and often rudimentary shelter while enjoying a view of the most fashionable consumer products on their walls.

When winter set in, all the refugees were still in the settlements, with no hope of returning to their homes—if they still existed. Almost none of the refugees were equipped to meet the cold weather, even in a place like Shanghai. The issue was addressed by a Clothing Committee appointed by the Chinese Medical Association. It took charge of donations of old clothes and organised their distribution to the refugees. From three women sorting old clothing, it eventually grew to more than 200 workers.⁹⁶ Altogether, limited resources were devoted to clothing. From the records of the Shanghai International Relief Committee, it appears that only 12.6 per cent of the expenses went on clothing.⁹⁷ Apart from local donations, the largest shipments of clothing were received from Hong Kong and Singapore. Unfortunately, most of the clothing received was for summertime and had to

⁹² Nagler, *The problem of food and shelter for refugees in Shanghai*, p. 68.

⁹³ *Bulletin mensuel*, 23 March 1938.

⁹⁴ 'Conditions in the Western extra-settlement area', 27 June 1938, U15-1-2108, SMA.

⁹⁵ Nagler, *The problem of food and shelter for refugees in Shanghai*, p. 68.

⁹⁶ New, W.S., 'The problem of clothing refugees in Shanghai', *China Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Winter 1937-1938), p. 71.

⁹⁷ *Shanghai guoji juyihui nianbao*, p. 2.

be patched together to be turned into 'winter' clothing.⁹⁸ There was an obvious large pool of workers among the refugees to do this job. Yet, because there was a risk of transmission of disease, it was not possible to ask women in one refugee camp to sew for those in other camps. The women who were employed were really refugees but were living in houses with friends or relatives.⁹⁹ On the whole, the issue of clothing was easier to solve than that of food.

Even in normal conditions, a population requires medical care. The concentration of a large destitute population in unsanitary conditions with insufficient food was a cause of the development of various diseases. At the same time, there was great pressure on all hospitals because of the large number of wounded refugees and soldiers. Moreover, medical supplies were not adequately stocked in the city and were drawn upon as soon as fighting began. Because of the Japanese naval blockade, foreign ships, especially American and Canadian, no longer called at Chinese ports. The organisation of supply was taken up by the Chinese Medical Association, which accredited agents all over the world and established four collecting offices overseas. Eventually, medical supplies were shipped to Hong Kong and, from there, to four main centres, including Shanghai.¹⁰⁰ As the area of fighting shifted away from Shanghai after November, the situation changed and gifts of medical supplies from abroad eased the situation, but for three months medical staff had to work with limited amounts of medicine to meet the huge demands of war, for both wounded soldiers and the civilian population.

The question of sanitation in refugee camps was not tackled by the Shanghai International Relief Committee until the end of December, as sanitation was primarily the responsibility of the authorities of the settlements. The Chinese Medical Association took over the task of surveying the medical situation, making recommendations to the authorities and organising medical care. The Shanghai International Red Cross had no medical technical staff to help.¹⁰¹ On the preventive side, it worked towards the extension of delousing work and bathing facilities in refugee camps. To assist the undermanned staff, refugee girls received training in caring for the sick in the camps.¹⁰² Whenever a camp was established, the refugees were vaccinated within 24

⁹⁸ New, *The problem of clothing refugees in Shanghai*, p. 72.

⁹⁹ New, *The problem of clothing refugees in Shanghai*, p. 72.

¹⁰⁰ 'Medical supplies are a big problem', Special Red Cross Supplement, 4 December 1937, p. 10.

¹⁰¹ Sze, *Medical care for Shanghai refugees*, p. 77.

¹⁰² Sze, *Medical care for Shanghai refugees*, p. 79.

hours.¹⁰³ Yet, despite all these efforts, vaccination never covered the whole refugee population. In the six camps of the Shanghai International Relief Committee, 35,722 individuals were treated out a total of 61,350.¹⁰⁴ In May 1938, there was an outbreak of cholera, but the epidemic remained under control. Altogether, there were 3,120 cases, with 372 deaths.¹⁰⁵

On the curative side, the emphasis was placed on both supporting existing refugee clinics and forming new ones as demand required. Support was given in the form of medical supplies based on the size of the population in each camp. These clinics were inspected on a regular basis. By the end of December, there were 19 camp clinics (82,000 inmates) and nine mobile clinics (reaching 65 camps with a population of 58,000). It was estimated that 10 per cent of the population required medical treatment.¹⁰⁶ In general, the sick in the camps were averse to entering hospitals; they preferred to stay in beds in the camps.¹⁰⁷ Hospitals would readily admit contagious cases, but sometimes—such as during the epidemic of measles that killed hundreds of children—mothers would rather have their children die in their arms than have them removed from their care.¹⁰⁸ In the Jacquinet Zone, eight clinics and hospitals were established to meet the needs of the 250,000 refugees, but after the takeover of the area by the Japanese army on 15 December, the work of the clinics was greatly reduced.¹⁰⁹

In a population of 61,350, there were 41,258 cases of 'slight ills' between August 1937 and August 1938 and 3,131 cases of 'serious illness'.¹¹⁰ In Refugee Clinic No. 2, a total of 3,575 patients were admitted over a period of six months. Men formed the largest contingent (2,240), followed by women (937) and children (398). An average of 30 per cent came out completely cured, while half were still in treatment in the clinic. A small number walked out or were transferred to other establishments. Between 10 and 15 per cent died. The pro-

¹⁰³ Note, Public Health Department, December 1937, U15-1-1032, SMA.

¹⁰⁴ *Shanghai guoji jiujihui nianbao*, p. 31.

¹⁰⁵ Monthly report, August–September 1938, 181, 1146, SMA.

¹⁰⁶ Sze, *Medical care for Shanghai refugees*, p. 80; 'Position in refugee camps', *North China Herald*, 15 September 1937. The most widespread diseases were gastro-intestinal diseases and skin infections. Both were lethal when untreated, especially for children. Tuberculosis was also a serious issue for people who lived in crowded camps.

¹⁰⁷ Yapp, D.K.F., 'Social service among the refugees', *China Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Winter 1937–1938), p. 97.

¹⁰⁸ Yapp, *Social service among the refugees*, p. 97

¹⁰⁹ Sze, *Medical care for Shanghai refugees*, p. 77.

¹¹⁰ *Shanghai guoji jiujihui nianbao*, p. 34.

portions were practically the same in Clinic No. 1.¹¹¹ In the SIRC refugee hospital, 2,976 persons were treated. The largest number was cured (1,497) or partly cured (609), but there were 726 deaths (close to a quarter).¹¹² Going to hospital was definitely not a good sign. The age distribution of the patients was skewed towards the younger ones, with 19 per cent aged 1–9 years and 16 per cent aged 10–19 years.¹¹³ In Refugee Camp No. 5 (formerly Jiaotong University) more than 17,000 people were accommodated. Between 15 November 1937 and February 1938, the small local hospital received 16,963 patients. On average, every day close to 200 patients were admitted. In the meantime, 163 babies were born.¹¹⁴ In the six camps of the Shanghai International Relief Committee, there were 280 new births over a year.¹¹⁵

Despite all care, people died in numbers among the refugees, although it is impossible to come up with general figures. Only those living in camps were counted, and even in this case the figures are scattered in various reports. Going to hospital was certainly a chance to get properly treated, but it was also a sign that the illness was serious. In two refugee clinics, a total of 818 persons died over six months out of a total of 6,658, or 12 per cent.¹¹⁶ In the first six months (August 1937–January 1938), the six camps of the Shanghai International Relief Committee lost 2,135 individuals out of an average population of 19,100 (or 11 per cent).¹¹⁷ Sex made no difference: there were as many men as women. In the following six months, only 506 persons died.¹¹⁸ Infant mortality was very high among refugees. Of the 2,135 individuals who died in the six camps, 52 per cent were under six years and 8 per cent were between 6 and 14 years.¹¹⁹ In Camps No. 3 and No. 6 of the SIRC, children were 77 per cent and 79 per cent respectively of the registered deaths. The *North China Daily News* found the figure quite reasonable: a death toll of 225 per 1,000 ‘is not considered excessive in this country’.¹²⁰ Undoubtedly, war took its toll on children, mostly through disease. Measles and dysentery represented 42 per cent and 16 per cent respectively of the causes

¹¹¹ *SCTLJZWN* 2, p. 50 and p. 54.

¹¹² *Shanghai guoji juyihui nianbao*, p. 40.

¹¹³ *Shanghai guoji juyihui nianbao*, p. 40.

¹¹⁴ *SGJLGYB*, pp. 32–33 and p. 48.

¹¹⁵ *Shanghai guoji juyihui nianbao*, p. 35.

¹¹⁶ *SCTLJZWN* 2, p. 50 and 54.

¹¹⁷ *SGJLGYB*, p. 48.

¹¹⁸ *Shanghai guoji juyihui nianbao*, p. 36.

¹¹⁹ *SGJLGYB*, p. 52.

¹²⁰ *NCDN*, 7 September 1938.

of death.¹²¹ In another report, dysentery came first (25 per cent), followed by pneumonia (21.2 per cent) and acute enteritis (13.3 per cent). Measles came fourth (6.6 per cent).¹²²

In order both to prevent the children missing out on schooling and to avoid a situation of complete idleness, the refugee camps endeavoured to organise a system of education for the young as well as for the adults. For the former, classes were organised on a more limited scale than usual—basically two to three hours a day—wherever there was enough space to establish a school. One of the acute problems was providing desks and chairs. Often, they were replaced by pieces of stiff cardboard that the children balanced on their knees while they sat on biscuit tins as stools. Teaching was provided by volunteers, especially any teachers who were in the refugee camps. By December, schools had been created in 205 camps and served 27,948 children, but 39 camps with about 5,000 children still had no provision for education.¹²³ In the 46 camps under the care of the Shanghai Federation of Charity Organisations, an average of 7,500–8,000 individuals attended classes between March and August 1938, with children representing more than half.¹²⁴ A similar though more limited effort was made to provide education to refugees, especially to the illiterate ones. It consisted of lectures, physical exercises, films (hygiene) and story-telling.¹²⁵ An attempt was also made at vocational training in an effort to help refugees return to work and earn some money. But this came in the form of work directed at women, like embroidery, sewing, etc. For men, little work was provided. In some camps, basket-weaving, woodwork and carpet-weaving were introduced, but on the whole it remained marginal.¹²⁶

Conclusion

There are few cases of a city being overwhelmed by a million refugees in a matter of weeks as happened in Shanghai in late 1937. Although the challenge was tremendous, it was met more or less adequately thanks to a few advantages: Shanghai was a wealthy city where stocks of food and other materials did exist; the foreign settlements provided

¹²¹ *SGJLGYB*, p. 52.

¹²² *Shanghai guoji jiujihui nianbao*, p. 44.

¹²³ Chen, H.C., 'Education of the refugees in Shanghai', *China Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Winter 1937–1938), p. 85.

¹²⁴ *SCTLJZQNW* 2, tables.

¹²⁵ Chen, *Education of the refugees in Shanghai*, p. 86.

¹²⁶ *SGJLGYB*, pp. 46–47.

a place where goods could still be imported after fighting receded; there was a solid administrative and sanitary infrastructure that was quite able to cope with an acute emergency situation; Chinese society was structured by a dense network of associations, especially native-place associations, that bore the brunt of supporting and managing the refugee population; the largest number of refugees did find a solution by their own means or through their family, relatives and friends. In fact, at most a third of the whole refugee population was taken care of in camps. Most refugees worked towards finding a way out to live 'normally' again. Eighteen months after the beginning of the conflict, most had found a solution, as can be seen from the drastic drop in camp population at the end of 1938. In other words, despite the trauma and the damages of war, the refugees were quick to turn themselves back into Shanghai residents with a place to live and a job to support their families. Undoubtedly, the resumption of economic activity in the second half of 1938 and in 1939 created favourable conditions for the absorption of this population. Even if a minority seem to have been inclined to live off public charity (and probably simply could not find proper means to live), refugees were hardly tempted by conditions in the camps. They were eager to bounce back into their previous lives as active residents of Shanghai.

The fully fledged war that erupted in Shanghai created a situation that called for innovative solutions. In the past, battles had mostly been fought outside major urban areas. While initiatives were taken from all sides, sometimes in competition with each other, reasonable cooperation and coordination was established between the major supporting committees. The Shanghai International Relief Committee managed to provide support for 5.2 million refugee days, maintaining the per capita cost at 12.1 cents per day (or \$3.64 per month).¹²⁷ The people in charge of refugees in Shanghai worked with a clear consciousness that they were addressing issues of a new kind and scale, that they were trying to invent solutions to meet these new challenges, and that their experience and the system they worked out would serve for reference in the future. They elaborated routines, they drew charts, they set up schemes with proper records and a will to leave behind 'recipes' and sets of measures that could be reproduced in other places should a similar situation occur. In particular, the Jacquinet Safety Zone was certainly the first initiative of its kind whereby goodwill and mediation managed to convince the belligerents to allow the civilian population to assemble in a 'neutral' place

¹²⁷ *Shanghai guoji juyihui nianbao*, p. 2.

to be protected from the ongoing fighting. In more recent conflicts, other similar forms of 'safety' zone (safety corridor, etc.) have been opened with the same purpose.

Gender is an issue that often draws lines in several ways during an armed conflict. On the side of those providing assistance, there was a clear division of labour. Even if all volunteers were welcome in all tasks, women were directed 'naturally' towards some duties, such as clothing. On the side of the victims, one can observe a higher proportion of women in the refugee population that could not possibly reflect the sex balance in the population at large. Moreover, men were far more numerous among those who became ill and were treated in the refugee clinics. In other words, the proportion of sick men was far higher than that of women. We cannot draw any solid conclusion without a more detailed study of medical cases, but this imbalance is striking. A tentative conclusion could be that Shanghai residents made clever use of camps, mostly to take care of women, children and more vulnerable men, while the able-bodied men sought ways to bounce back outside. As in any conflict, the most vulnerable were the older people. They were few in numbers and many in the ranks of hospital patients. Nevertheless, the highest death toll was to be found among children. Insufficient diet, sanitary conditions and epidemics of benign though untreated diseases all contributed to a massive loss of life.

War affected the population unevenly. Fighting took place in the most populous and most popular districts. As in most modern cities, social segregation was reflected in the distribution of the population in the various districts. In particular, the foreign settlements were home to the majority of the better-off, the new middle classes, etc., even if they also housed ordinary people. Zhabei, Hongkou, Yangshupu and Nanshi figured prominently as popular districts with a population ranging from slum dwellers to workers, petty merchants, craftsmen, etc. These were people who either were on the brink of survival or had modest revenues. Few had substantial savings. When war threw them out of their homes and workplaces, they had nothing to rely on. They wandered in the streets, and slept in alleys and wrecked buildings. Most went unaccounted for, as statistical records generally fail to include these hundreds of thousands of unsupervised refugees. They were human beings struck down by tragedy. The effects of the battle of Shanghai cost millions, but above all caused immense civilian suffering. The case of refugees, however, also reveals the remarkable resilience of Shanghai residents and associations.