



A Neighbourhood under Storm Zhabei and Shanghai Wars

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Abstract

War was a major aspect of Shanghai history in the first half of the twentieth century. Yet, because of the particular political and territorial divisions that segmented the city, war struck only in Chinese-administered areas. In this paper, I examine the fate of the Zhabei district, a booming industrious area that came under fire on three successive occasions. Whereas Zhabei could be construed as a success story—a rag-to-riches, swamp-to-urbanity trajectory—the three instances of military conflict had an increasingly devastating impact, from shaking, to stifling, to finally erase Zhabei from the urban landscape. This area of Shanghai experienced the first large-scale modern warfare in an urban setting. The 1927 skirmish established the pattern in which the civilian population came to be exposed to extreme forms of violence, was turned overnight into a refugee population, and lost all its goods and properties to bombing and fires.

Keywords

war; Shanghai; urban; city; civilian; military

War is not the image that first comes to mind about Shanghai. In most accounts or scholarly studies, the city stands for modernity, economic prosperity and cultural novelty. It was China's main financial centre, commercial hub, industrial base and cultural engine. In its modern history, however, Shanghai has experienced several instances of war. One could start with the takeover of the city in 1853 by the Small Sword Society and the later attempts by the Taiping armies to approach Shanghai. Eventually, the lack of coordination between the two groups and the intervention of Western forces led to the elimination of the rebels from the walled city. The cost was severe as the whole commercial district along the Huangpu River was burnt down. This set a pattern that would repeat itself in later conflicts. Fighting and destruction took place in the

Chinese-administered districts, while the foreign settlements remained immune to the violence around them. Foreign authorities actually devised systems to insulate their territories, through a combination of military reinforcements and defence constructions (especially iron gates on the roads at their boundaries). In the following decades, the spectre of war almost disappeared. The 1911 revolution in Shanghai was quite uneventful. In the 1920s, even if civil wars raged in the neighbouring provinces, actual violence was kept at bay. The city enjoyed a long period of peace.

This period came to an end on the heels of the Northern Expedition, the military campaign launched by the Guomindang from Canton to fight the various regional warlords and bring China under a unified government. The wealthy Jiangnan area, and Shanghai in particular, became a major tug of war for the different contenders. Yet the most serious threat came with the rising tensions between China and Japan. On two occasions, the city became a genuine battleground. If one examines these ‘wars’ closely, however, it becomes obvious that ‘Shanghai’ or the ‘city’ are misnomers for these tragic events. In fact, war touched only parts of Shanghai and, mostly, one particular neighbourhood—Zhabei—that suffered from three successive waves of military operation at five-year intervals. This paper will attempt to explore why this happened and what impact these conflicts had on the area. Basically, I shall argue that Zhabei, because of its location and facilities, was exposed to military contest and, as a result, its population became hostage to conflicts that in various turns brought enormous violence. Eventually, Zhabei was fully destroyed and did not regain its pre-war composure until well after 1949.

Birth of a Neighbourhood

Zhabei counts as one of the major new-born urban neighbourhoods of Shanghai outside the original walled city. It developed on the northern bank of Soochow Creek, where a sluice had been built in 1737.¹ The area north of

¹ A first sluice was built in 1672. It was taken away by a tidal wave a few years later. A second was rebuilt on the original location in 1675. It came to be known as the Laozhao (‘old sluice’) when a new sluice was constructed in 1737 at some distance downstream. The new sluice was called Xinzha. Both gave their names to districts or areas on both sides of the river. The Sinza area was a police district of the International Settlement (which actually absorbed existing villages nearby). Laozhao was also the name of a police district in the same settlement. Hua Yang, ‘*Zhabei de youlai, zainan, chongzhen*’ (The origin, calamities, and rebirth of Zhabei), in *Shanghai shi zhabei wenshi ziliao* (Collection of Historical and

the sluice was called Xinzhabei, then Zhabei. It was an undefined area that belonged to Gaochang Township. Except for a small area that was carved out and included in the American Settlement, it remained under Chinese administration throughout its history. On its eastern and southern border, Zhabei was contiguous with the International Settlement. This presented various advantages, especially a shared river (Soochow Creek), but also problems. As foreigners also bought land in this area, the Shanghai Municipal Council started to send its police to patrol the streets and raise taxes. As in other contiguous areas—commonly known as ‘external road areas’—in western Shanghai, this unauthorised extension of SMC power created frictions and even serious tensions with the local Chinese authorities. To oppose this covert extension, in 1900 local elites set up a Zhabei General Bureau of Public Works similar to the office created in the walled city.²

Zhabei, therefore, was born as much as a result of a natural process of human settlement as of political factors. After the abolition of all self-government bodies by Yuan Shikai in 1914, Zhabei came under the authority of the Shanghai Township. It became a sub-office of the Shanghai General Bureau of Public Works, Police and Taxes (Shanghai gongxunjuan zongju). Yet this also meant that, for the first time, it was united to its southern sister as a part of Shanghai, Chinese Shanghai. In 1921, however, self-government organs were allowed again. Zhabei local elites strove to set up an autonomous body. A self-government agency under various designations did exist in name, but not in law. Eventually, Zhabei was absorbed into the Shanghai–Wusong Port Directorate established by Sun Chuanfang in 1926, then by the Nationalist municipality in July 1927. From then onward, Zhabei became fully part of Shanghai.³

The presence of Soochow Creek was a major factor in the development of Zhabei. In the past, the river had served mostly as a waterway connecting the walled city and the Huangpu River. With the emergence of the foreign settlements, however, the spatial layout of the city took a new turn. With

Literary Materials on Zhabei, Shanghai) (Shanghai: Zhongguo Renmin Zhengzhi Xieshang Huiyi Shanghai Shi Zhabei Qu Wei Yuanhui Wenshi Gongzuo Wei Yuanhui, 1992), vol. 4, p. 28.

²⁾ The best summary of the attempts by the SMC to obtain a territorial extension in Zhabei can be found in Anatol Kotenev, *Shanghai: Its Municipality and the Chinese* (Shanghai: North China News and Herald, 1927), pp. 41–50.

³⁾ For a brief overview, see Christian Henriot, *Shanghai 1927–1937. Municipal Power, Locality, and Modernization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 11–13.

the increased flow of vessels on Soochow Creek, small local markets started to coalesce on its northern bank within an area that remained largely rural; in 1906, there was only one cotton mill in Zhabei. The second major factor that played a fundamental role was the building of the Nanjing–Shanghai railway line and its train terminal in the middle of Zhabei. There was an initial experiment in 1874–1876 with the building of a railway line between Shanghai (Zhabei) and Wusong. It created a sensation that attracted thousands of visitors, vendors, etc. It also caused strong resentment from the villagers along the line who believed the train affected the local *fengshui* and disturbed the graves of their ancestors. By the autumn of 1877, the first railway line was gone.⁴

The railway did not return to Shanghai until October 1898. Again it was a line that connected Shanghai to Wusong. By 1903, the line was linked to the Shanghai–Ningbo line under construction. When the new line was completed in 1908, a new station opened the following July. With ten daily departures, it could carry 1,000 passengers. In 1916, Shanghai was connected to Hangzhou. The station received larger quantities of freight, but above all higher numbers of travellers. Its capacity rose to 10,000 daily.⁵ Zhabei became the place where trains unloaded their countless passengers coming to Shanghai. With the traffic that came by boat on Soochow Creek, Zhabei became the ‘Great Northern Gate’ of Shanghai, a central node for transportation to and from the city. A whole new economy developed around the train station and the wharves. Shops, taverns, hotels, restaurants and banks literally mushroomed in the neighbourhood. By 1930, there were no fewer than 86 large shops, selling food (11), shoes and hats (11), houseware (7), cigarettes and sugar (4) or offering various services (38).⁶ As passengers needed to get to the other sectors of Shanghai, especially the foreign settlements, or to the nearby villages, various modes of transportation offered their services around the station: wheelbarrows, rickshaws, buses, etc.

These transportation facilities and the availability of cheap land attracted Chinese capital. On the heels of services came industry, mostly in the form of light industry workshops. They processed cotton, silk, leather; they produced

⁴ Stanley Spector, *Li Hung-chang and the Huai Army: A Study in Nineteenth-century Chinese Regionalism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1964), p. 298; see also Peter Crush, *Woosung Road: The Story of China's First Railway* (Hong Kong: The Railway Tavern, 1999).

⁵ Cai Liang, ‘*Jindai zhabei de subeiren (1900–1949)*’ (Subei people in Zhabei in the modern era, 1900–1949) (Shanghai, East China Normal University, MA thesis, 2006), p. 19.

⁶ Cai Liang, *Jindai zhabei de subeiren*, p. 19.

soap, music instruments, flour, books, etc. Most workshops were concentrated on Baoshan, Xindaqiao, Xinzhaqiao, Kongjiang, Ximin or Baotong Roads, next to or near the train station. To promote industrial development and placate the influence of foreigners, Chinese merchants established a power and water treatment plant that became operational by 1911. Zhabei eventually rose to prominence. In the late 1920s–early 1930s, it was home to 256 large factories in twenty different fields of industrial production. In 1930, it represented a substantial portion of the city's total industrial production: textiles (42.6 per cent), chemical industry (23 per cent), food (22.4 per cent), printing (29 per cent) and electromechanics (16 per cent).⁷ One of the most prestigious companies was the Commercial Press, founded in 1897. It occupied a large plot with its presses, warehouses, its famous library and living quarters for its employees.

These developments stimulated a boom in construction. In 1909, there were hardly 30 residential lanes (*lilong*) in Zhabei, but by 1926 the built-up area had grown to 721 lanes.⁸ Zhabei benefited from the rising cost of real estate in the foreign settlements, especially in the International Settlement.⁹ Urbanisation, however, primarily reflected the steady demographic increase. The most radical shift took place in the early 1920s, with a massive population increase—from 23,000 in 1910 to 154,684 in 1926—and the sprouting of all kinds of commercial and industrial ventures. On the eve of the second Japanese attack, residents numbered close to 700,000. Within the Zhabei district, some police wards like Menggulu had the highest population density in the city, above 160,000 people per square kilometre.¹⁰ Mostly, the residents were natives from the neighbouring provinces or from Guangdong. Non-natives represented 63 per cent of the total population in 1926, with a significant share of migrants originating from the poorest areas of Jiangbei.¹¹

⁷ Cai Liang, *Jindai zhabei de subeiren*, p. 20.

⁸ Zhang Xiaochuan, 'Meiyou deng xia de shijie. 1937 nian qian shanghai zhabei chengqu de richang shenghuo' (In the light of gas lamps. Everyday life in the Zhabei urban area before 1937), in *Xin wenhuashi yu zhongguo jindaishi yanjiu* (New Cultural History and Modern Chinese History) (Shanghai: Guji Chubanshe, 2009), Ch. 4, p. 3.

⁹ *SB*, 16 October 1922, 13 [Vol. 185, p. 359].

¹⁰ Zhang Xiaochuan, *Meiyou deng xia de shijie*, p. 4. On top of its permanent resident population, Zhabei often received a large influx of population, especially soldiers, in times of conflict around the city, as in the early and mid-1920s.

¹¹ Zhang Xiaochuan, *Meiyou deng xia de shijie*, p. 7.

The sociological profile of Zhabei residents revealed a large proportion of skilled workers, craftsmen and merchants from Jiangnan, Zhejiang and Guangdong. Certainly, its location and function as a major transportation hub also played a role in the diversification of its population and activities. Compared to Yangshupu, the other major industrial base of Shanghai, Zhabei offered far more resources for education and entertainment. In 1931, there were 160 primary schools, 40 middle schools, 20 technical schools, 10 advanced schools and six libraries. In particular, there were several establishments for the professional training of girls. Obviously this was a population that cared about the education of its children and could afford the cost of tuition fees. This reflected also the higher level of literacy and general education of the local population. Another indicator, for instance, was the number of companies that edited, printed and distributed publications (74) or the number of journals (25) published there. These were activities that required skilled and literate workers.¹² The population of Zhabei, therefore, presented a particular social mix of workers and employees, middle-class urbanites from various parts of China, yet with a significant share of poorer labourers who settled in makeshift squats.¹³

The history of Zhabei could have been a success story. With its hundreds of workshops and its capacity for innovation, it was a powerful engine that nourished the development of the city. Yet the history of Zhabei is also one of tragedy. The source of its woes was twofold. The first element was the presence of the North station in its midst. The train station and its connected lines, as we shall see, became both a tug of war and a major military target every time opposing forces went into fighting in the city, as in 1927, 1932 and 1937 (Map 1). The second element was its proximity to Hongkou, a sector included in the International Settlement where a large part of the Japanese community had settled.¹⁴ The rise of Chinese nationalism from 1919 onward was fuelled by various incidents and events that took Japan as their target. In Shanghai, strong protests and demonstrations, most often at the initiative of students, created serious tensions, but until 1931 they were limited to the boycott of

¹² Cai Liang, *Jindai zhabei de subeiren*, p. 21.

¹³ See the illuminating paper by Zhang Xiaochuan, *Meiyou deng xia de shijie*.

¹⁴ Christian Henriot, '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 [in Chinese: 'Shanghai de "xiao dongjing": yi ge duiwai geju de shehui' (trans. of 'Shanghai's "Little Tokyo": an insulated community (1875–1945)'), *Shanghai yanjiu luncong* (Papers on Shanghai Studies), No. 12 (1999), pp. 350–382].



Map 1: Major districts and railway lines in Shanghai.

Japanese goods. The invasion of Manchuria by the Japanese army in September 1931 created an uproar that soon turned into massive demonstrations and pressures on the Shanghai Japanese community. The Japanese navy brought in reinforcements, seeking a pretext to strike and punish the Chinese military. Five years later, the tensions between the two countries escalated into a fully fledged war. Shanghai—and Zhabei in particular—again became a ferociously disputed battleground.

Death of a Neighbourhood

Zhabei became engulfed in war at successive and increasingly destructive intervals. In the early 1910s, revolutionary movements had already twice caused a 'scare' among the population, especially merchants, when the risk of fighting arose in Zhabei. In 1911, the revolutionary forces had established their headquarters in the area. Yet the resistance of the authorities just crumbled away before actual fighting took place. Two years later, when the revolutionaries made a feeble attempt to oppose Yuan Shikai, representatives of the local elites

managed to convince their leaders to move their headquarters and forces out of Zhabei. The area again suffered no more than a little panic.¹⁵ The ‘Nanking decade’ that saw the establishment of a modern municipality by the Nationalist government and a determined effort to build a new city should have brought stability and prosperity. Yet for Zhabei it turned out to be the ‘warring decade’. Within ten years, the newborn but thriving neighbourhood was turned into a heap of rubble.

1927: Civil War in a ‘Revolutionary’ Quarter

By early spring 1927, the Northern Expedition launched by the Nationalists from Canton had reached the outskirts of Shanghai. Twice the revolutionary forces had tried to force the hand of destiny and topple the authorities that ruled the Chinese districts of the city. Twice they had failed, at a high human cost.¹⁶ By mid-March, however, the Nationalist armies were closing in on Shanghai. The revolutionary forces decided once again, under the initiative of the CCP, to organise an uprising and a general strike. Tensions quickly built up around the Zhabei train station from where warlord soldiers were being evacuated. On the morning of 20 March, troops swarmed the platforms. All pedlars and rickshaw pullers were expelled from the station. Access to the station was severely guarded and regular trains were suspended.¹⁷ The Nationalist army reached Shanghai from the south. It met with little resistance and quickly seized control of the area south of the French Concession.¹⁸ In the northern districts, however, the warlord armies made a last-ditch effort against the combined assault by soldiers and workers’ militia (Figure 1).

Fighting took place mostly around the train station where warlord soldiers and a battalion of White Russian mercenaries held their position from an armoured train (Map 2). Fighting raged for only a couple of days, but it had a

¹⁵ Zhang Xiaochuan, ‘Zhanzheng yu jindai shanghai zhabei chengqu de yanbian’ (War and the transformation of the Zhabei urban area in modern Shanghai), *Suzhou keji xueyuan xuebao* (Journal of the Suzhou Institute of Technology), No. 2 (2009), p. 82.

¹⁶ The classic account of these eventful days is by Harold Robert Isaacs, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961). Much can also be gleaned from Jean Chesneaux, *The Chinese Labor Movement, 1919–1927* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968). For a more contemporary study, see Patricia Stranahan, *Underground: The Shanghai Communist Party and the Politics of Survival, 1927–1937* (Lanham, MD, and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).

¹⁷ *SB*, 21 March 1927, 9 [Vol. 282, p. 445].

¹⁸ *SB*, 22 March 1927, 9 [Vol. 282, p. 465].



Figure 1: Review of workers' militia in Zhabei in 1927.

Source: Virtual Shanghai, Image ID 60

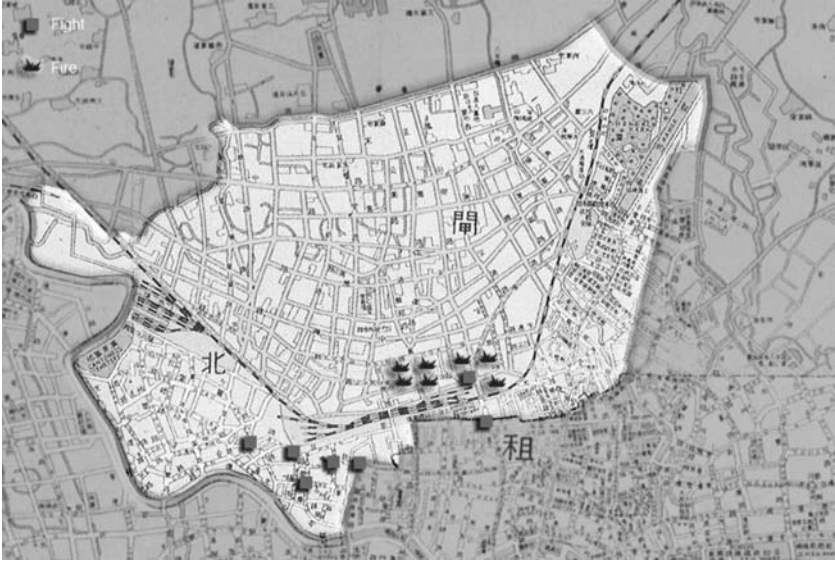
strong impact on neighbouring residential blocks.¹⁹ The streets south of the station were the scene of heavy fighting and shelling (Figure 2). By the end of the second day of fighting, however, the warlord troops withdrew to the north or sought refuge in the International Settlement, leaving behind about 70 dead (Figure 3).²⁰ Yet fires had erupted in several places, especially around Baoshan Road and Jukong Road, destroying about 1,000 houses, including the fire station. The Zhabei 'big fire' (*Zhabei dahuo*), as the press reported it, left thousands homeless (Figure 4). Altogether, about 2,000 houses were said to be lost to the fire and 5 million yuan worth of properties and goods had been destroyed.²¹ Yet a later survey revealed lesser damage, although the survey dealt only with the area most affected by the fighting. The report published on 29 April 1927 recorded 395 destroyed houses and 300,000 yuan worth of goods.²²

¹⁹ For a survey of fighting, see *SB*, 22 March 1927, 9–10 [Vol. 282, pp. 465–466].

²⁰ *SB*, 23 March 1927, 9 [Vol. 282, p. 483].

²¹ *SB*, 23 March 1927, 10 [Vol. 282, p. 484].

²² *SB*, 29 April 1927, 14 [Vol. 283, p. 552].



Map 2: Location of major fighting and fires in Zhabei (March 1927).



Figure 2: North Chekiang Road, Shanghai, March 1927.
Source: University of Bristol—Historical
Photographs of China, Image.ID.19501



Figure 3: Dead Russian soldiers, Shanghai, March 1927.
Source: University of Bristol—Historical
Photographs of China, Image.ID.19502



Figure 4: A fire among factories in Zhabei.
Source: University of Bristol—Historical
Photographs of China, Image.ID.19497



Figure 5: Workers' militia at their headquarters in Zhabei.

Source: Virtual Shanghai, Image ID 61

Different kinds of people were involved in the fighting or in peace-keeping forces. Zhabei, thanks to the presence of myriads of workshops and factories, had a large population of workers. Hence it was a major stronghold of trade unions and CCP activists. The General Labour Union had its headquarters in the area. Workers' militias took an active role in taking control of the whole district even before the arrival of the NRA (Figure 5). Yet the situation of relative disorder that prevailed brought all kinds of problems. The voluntary peace-keeping militia (*baoweituan*), for instance, was exposed to violence by thugs and rowdies who took advantage of the fighting and resulting disorder to threaten people with weapons and steal from houses. Although most encounters were inconsequential, one man lost his life and several were wounded.²³ Workers involved in fighting or support to the NRA also fell victim to stray bullets. The Shanghai General Labour Union reported 29 casualties for Western Shanghai, almost all of them on the front line in Zhabei. Seven eventually died from their wounds.²⁴ Civilians were caught in the crossfire, although most victims actually died from being trapped when their houses were set ablaze. In

²³ *SB*, 24 March 1927, 11 [Vol. 282, pp. 501].

²⁴ *SB*, 27 March 1927, 11 [Vol. 282, pp. 555].

the Baoshan–Jukong Road area, about 100 people were killed. This was the heaviest loss. Total civilian casualties amounted to some 150 people.²⁵

Although a municipal administration had been set up by the warlord ruler, it dissolved with the conquest by the Nationalist army. In between, a new municipal organisation was established under the auspices of the revolutionary organisations with the clear purpose to create a *fait accompli* and pre-empt the takeover of the city by Jiang Jieshi's forces. Yet again, this organisation dissolved before the 12 April coup by Jiang Jieshi.²⁶ When an official municipality was established in July 1927, the fighting in Zhabei was a bygone event and its victims hardly a matter of concern. Mostly, they sought relief by organising a Zhabei Federation of Fire Victims (Zhabei huozai ge hu lianhehui). Little is known about its activities and degree of success. It held its first meeting on 28 March to hear a report by its chairman. Only 400 families had joined, but the chairman attributed this to the scattering of families in the foreign settlements. Mostly, the victims had received help from local charities, in particular the Zhabei Charity Association (Zhabei cishantuan).²⁷ As an emergency measure, the Chamber of Commerce and the Chinese Red Cross had sent 2,000 yuan.²⁸ Later on, the federation wrote to a wide range of organisations, including the municipal government, the trade unions, the student federation, the Shanghai and county chambers of commerce and the local GMD headquarters to seek assistance. They also urged them to pressure the reluctant insurance companies to facilitate the reimbursement of damages for those who had such insurance.²⁹

The federation met again on 11 April, but little progress seems to have been made beyond reassuring words. Insurance companies considered the incident a matter of military concern (not a regular fire) and seemed reluctant to indemnify the victims.³⁰ After further negotiations, however, an agreement was discussed between the insurance syndicate and the federation. Yet no concrete measure resulted from these contacts and the federation again called the Chamber of Commerce as well as the Shanghai and Baoshan county authorities to intervene on behalf of the 53 insured families.³¹ Out of 250 registered

²⁵ *SB*, 24 March 1927, 10 [Vol. 282, pp. 500].

²⁶ Christian Henriot, 'La rupture GMD-PCC en 1927: suicide ou assassinat?', *Cahiers d'études chinoises*, Paris, INALCO (1986), pp. 45–99.

²⁷ *SB*, 29 March 1927, 10 [Vol. 282, pp. 590].

²⁸ *SB*, 29 April 1927, 14 [Vol. 283, p. 552].

²⁹ *SB*, 30 March 1927, 11 [Vol. 282, pp. 607]; 1 April 1927, 15 [Vol. 283, p. 15].

³⁰ *SB*, 12 April 1927, 15 [Vol. 283, p. 231].

³¹ *SB*, 17 April 1927, 15 [Vol. 283, p. 327]; 22 April 1927, 10 [Vol. 283, p. 423]; 23 April 1927, 14 [Vol. 283, p. 434].

families, only 53 had insurance policies. The Chamber of Commerce played its role of intermediary with the insurance companies to convince them they should assume their responsibilities. After a thorough survey, 55 families and enterprises received compensation for their losses. For those without insurance, the Chamber contributed a lump sum of 500 yuan for each family.³² The Zhabei Charity Association also issued 15 yuan per person to help people return to their home village or town. A few hundred chose to leave. This was a classic mode of intervention in times of crisis, as we shall see below. The scale of the operation was limited, as well as the supply of temporary housing. Eventually, there remained about 100 people in the care of the association. They were given some money and urged to seek a job.

The 1927 incident was the very first instance of modern warfare in the city proper and more specifically in a neighbourhood that would later become the major battleground between Chinese and Japanese troops. The major parameters were set: fighting around the train station, complete disregard for the civilian population, absence of official support to the victims. The extent of casualties was limited. Again, actual records are missing, but the press reported on only a small number of killed or wounded residents. The concentration of fighting in one single location can explain the limited impact of the conflict. In the years that followed, the Chinese municipality quickly repaired the damage done to the train station and railways. Private initiative took care of the reconstruction of destroyed houses. War scars disappeared from the surface of the city and probably, too, from people's minds.

1932: Military Conflict and Civilian Violence

Five years later, however, war flared up again in Zhabei. The Manchurian crisis—the invasion of Manchuria by the Guandong army in September 1931—generated a powerful outcry in China and a strident call to boycott Japanese goods throughout the country.³³ Mostly, however, the Nationalist movement developed in cities. In Shanghai, student organisations, merchants' associations and trade unions mobilised to protest against Japanese encroachment in the northeast. Anti-Japanese feeling ran high in the city. The Chinese national government overcame its previous division and regrouped to face the

³² *SB*, 29 April 1927, 14 [Vol. 283, p. 552].

³³ Shinichi Yamamuro, *Manchuria under Japanese Domination* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Hans J. Van de Ven, *War and Nationalism in China, 1925–1945* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

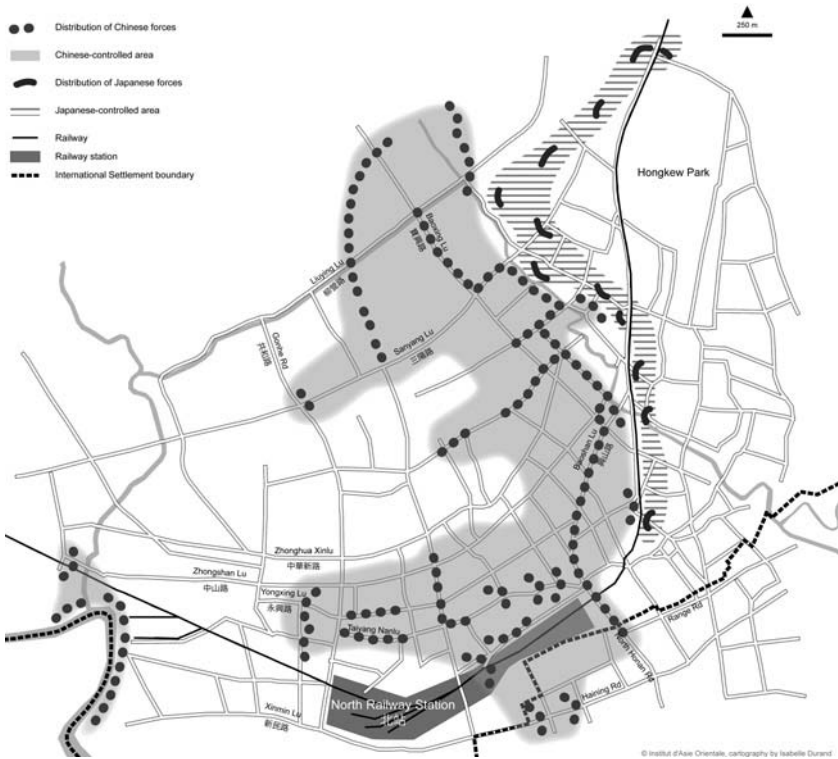
Japanese military threat. Yet it also strove to deflect Chinese public animosity, especially in Shanghai, and to prevent new incidents and a possible extension of the conflict. The Japanese diplomatic and military representatives, however, exerted strong pressures on the municipal administration to actually curtail the anti-Japanese movement and demonstrations. They even demanded the dissolution of the local branch of the National Salvation Association. Although the mayor eventually bent to all demands, the Japanese military decided to use force to impose the departure of Chinese regiments from Shanghai.³⁴

On 28 January 1932, the Japanese army launched a powerful attack on Nationalist forces. Officially, the attack was justified by the need to protect the Japanese civilian community—many had actually been shipped back to Japan—and to obtain a demilitarisation of Shanghai in a radius of 30 km around the city. While Japanese officials had anticipated a quick *Blitzkrieg*, the conflict lasted 28 days with repeated waves of frontal attack on both sides. The Cantonese troops stationed in and around the city fought back with fierce determination and little regard for the consequences on the local population.³⁵ The civilian population was literally trapped in a war zone. Fighting affected mostly Zhabei where the Chinese had concentrated their troops (Map 3).³⁶ The Japanese used their gunboats and the Yangshupu area—officially a neutral territory of the International Settlement—to carry out their operations. Zhabei was subject to heavy shelling, including the use of aerial bombing. As in 1927, the train station and the railway lines became a central stake as the Chinese used it to bring in supplies and move armoured trains around. The raised roadbed of the railway solidified the main battle front in the very heart of Zhabei. The train station was turned into a genuine fortress and soon became the symbol of Chinese resistance.

³⁴ The 1932 conflict has been studied by Christian Henriot, *Shanghai 1927–1937. Municipal Power, Locality and Modernization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), Ch. 4. Its diplomatic and military dimensions have been fully analysed by Donald A. Jordan, *China's Trial by Fire. The Shanghai War of 1932* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

³⁵ The 19th Army had been stationed in Shanghai as part of the measures taken by the divided and Cantonese-dominated national government under Sun Fo to keep an eye on the city. After Chiang Kai-shek's return to power, however, the 19th Army followed the instructions received from the capital. It was joined by the 5th Army in the course of the conflict.

³⁶ Fighting developed also around Wusong, the small harbour town commanding entry into the Huangpu River and, after the successful landing of troops, in the whole Jiangwan area north of the city. However, we shall only examine the case of Zhabei in this paper.



Map 3: Distribution of Chinese and Japanese forces (January 1932).

The population was caught by surprise and locked into a conflict that brought enormous devastation. Post-conflict reports indicated that 180,816 families (814,084 people) resided in the areas directly affected by war.³⁷ The Chinese civilian population could not count on any official protection. In Hongkou and Yangshupu, both parts of the International Settlement, the Shanghai Municipal Council had withdrawn its policemen and firemen for fear of exposing them to fighting. It also sealed off the central districts, south of the Soochow Creek, by installing checkpoints and barbed wire on the bridges leading into the International settlement (Figure 6). The Japanese navy was formally in charge of the whole sector, according to the defence plan that attributed Sector D (Hongkou and Yangshupu) to Japanese troops in case of

³⁷ *YHZZ*, 29 March 1932.

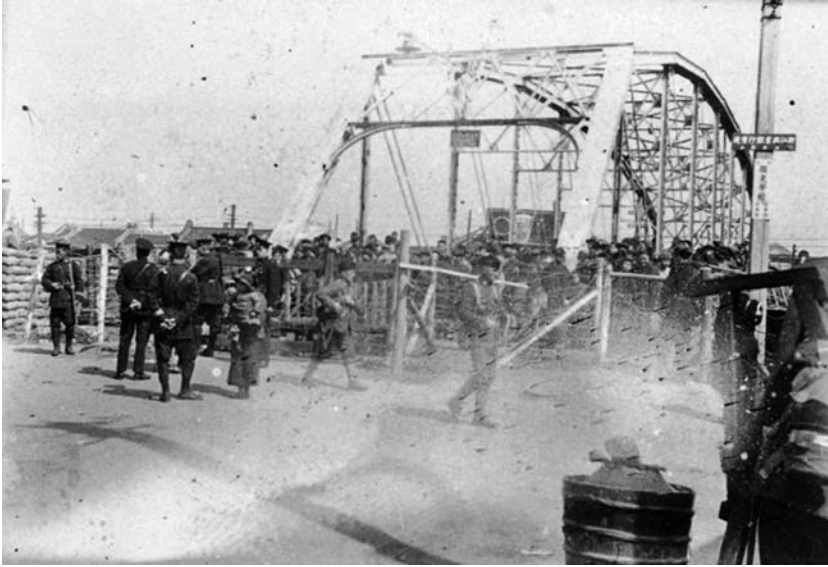


Figure 6: Waiting by police barricade on bridge.

Source: University of Bristol—Historical Photographs of China, Image.ID.19510

Chinese aggression. Yet in 1932 these exceptional conditions were exploited to the extreme by the Japanese military to carry out its military operations in Chinese territory, namely Zhabei. In the absence of SMC regular officials, the Japanese navy entrusted peacekeeping to Japanese civilians wearing armbands. These vigilante-like groups took over authority and behaved arbitrarily with no restraint. Calling themselves *ronin*, they served as auxiliaries to the Japanese army, regulating traffic, searching houses and guiding Japanese soldiers through the maze of Zhabei streets. They became notorious for their violence and brutal treatment of the Chinese civilian population (beatings, rapes, executions). When they suspected the presence of Chinese snipers, these Japanese militiamen, many of them reservists of the Japanese army, torched the buildings where they were allegedly hiding.³⁸

The *ronin* reservists rounded up Chinese civilians suspected of resisting the Japanese. Yet the sheer number of those arrested—by the hundreds—is an obvious proof of the arbitrary character of these arrests. On one occasion,

³⁸) Joshua Fogel, 'Shanghai–Japan: The Japanese Residents' Association of Shanghai', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (2000), p. 936; Jordan, *Trial by Fire*, p. 49.

150 civilians were summarily shot, while their companions were enrolled into forced labour for the Japanese army.³⁹ As war escalated and spread to the neighbouring areas, frightened peasants attempted to seek refuge in the city, through Hongkou. Many were simply gunned down. Protests by foreign consuls forced the Japanese consul to rein in the use of *ronin* reservists and to turn over their functions to regular troops once an area was stabilised. The degree of violence exercised against the Chinese population by the unruly *ronin* reservists and Japanese soldiery shocked the Western community. Few had expected such behaviour from a country perceived as a quasi model of organisation, modernity and adherence to Western standards of diplomacy. Yet violence prevailed, as attested by direct testimonies by foreign residents.⁴⁰ While these acts of brutality could easily be blamed on some Nationalist extremists, Japanese civilian involvement went well beyond such individuals. The Japanese Residents' Association (Shanghai Kyoryūmindan) had been very vocal against the Chinese boycott and had called forcefully for military intervention.⁴¹ Even before the conflict, some of them had been seen in direct action against anti-Japanese demonstrators or in punishing expeditions against shops that displayed anti-Japanese posters.⁴² The Japanese community, therefore, included a wide and belligerent segment ready to take action against what they perceived as Chinese aggression. It provided a ready-made group of auxiliaries that came under the command of the Japanese military and mostly followed its instructions.

Civilian involvement in the conflict was actually very high and unusual. It had to do, on the Chinese side, with the vigorous Nationalist sentiment in a city mobilised for months against the Japanese invasion. It also had to do with a very practical consideration: war had stopped economic activity in the war-affected areas. Tens of thousands of workers and coolies were available, and in fact large numbers volunteered to carry supplies and dig trenches for the Chinese troops. Within days of the beginning of the conflict, 4,000 workers and 500 students had joined in combat or logistical support.⁴³ Besides the destruction wrought upon the buildings by bombs, the ground was crisscrossed by trenches dug deeper and deeper. Their military value notwithstanding, this turned Zhabei into a fully devastated area. Another reason for civilian

³⁹⁾ Jordan, *Trial by Fire*, p. 81.

⁴⁰⁾ *A Month of Reign of Terror in Shanghai. What the Foreigners See, Say and Think from January 28 to February 27, 1932* (Shanghai: China Weekly Herald, 1932).

⁴¹⁾ Fogel, *Shanghai–Japan*, pp. 934–935.

⁴²⁾ Jordan, *Trial by Fire*, p. 80.

⁴³⁾ Jordan, *Trial by Fire*, p. 78.

involvement in direct combat was the protection afforded to Japanese troops by the foreign settlements. The Chinese high command had received instructions not to penetrate into these areas so as to avoid a military confrontation with Western troops.⁴⁴ While Chinese soldiers strictly abided by this rule, both military and civilian snipers slipped into Japanese-occupied zones in Zhabei, Hongkou or Yangshupu, and continuously harassed Japanese soldiers.⁴⁵ The Green Gang under Du Yuesheng sent snipers, generously paid, to join the fray (while others from the same Green gang co-operated with the Japanese in maintaining order or frightening the Chinese population).⁴⁶

During the conflict, the Japanese made use of the whole range of available modern weaponry. Annoyed and even infuriated by the stubborn Chinese resistance, they deployed heavy armament and subjected the central sectors of Zhabei to intense bombing by land batteries, naval guns and aircraft bombs.⁴⁷ This was without any contest the most intense bombing ever dropped on a city in history. For Shanghai, nothing had ever come close to this degree of military violence. Failing to break the military backbone of the Chinese troops, the Japanese command had brought 100 military aircrafts in February to crush their defence line.⁴⁸ By the end of the same month, it had concentrated more than 200 planes, one half of the whole national air force.⁴⁹ The Chinese never had a chance in the sky, but the high number of planes is a testimony to the degree of violence brought upon the city and, as I argue, on Zhabei. The buildings, or what remained of them, were repeatedly ploughed up by a heavy ‘rolling’ pattern of bombardment. The Japanese used incendiary bombs that caused huge firestorms. When the Chinese troops withdrew from Zhabei, they also started a fire to hide their movement behind a screen of smoke.⁵⁰ The 1932 conflict certainly served as an invaluable training and experimental ground for the Japanese army. It had the opportunity to test new weaponry,

⁴⁴ In anticipation of the growing tensions, the authorities of the two settlements had declared a state of emergency and called for reinforcement from their home countries. Ships and troops were sent from Indochina and Hong Kong to maintain order and prevent an invasion of the settlements. Yet Japan was left free to use the Yangshupu area—the eastern district of the International Settlement—as a rear base for its operations.

⁴⁵ Jordan, *Trial by Fire*, p. 84.

⁴⁶ Jordan, *Trial by Fire*, pp. 78, 223.

⁴⁷ For a general view of the conflict on the ground, see the map published in 1932, ‘*Map showing Japanese-Chinese warfare now in Shanghai*’ (Map ID 139—Virtual Shanghai).

⁴⁸ Jordan, *Trial by Fire*, p. 141.

⁴⁹ Jordan, *Trial by Fire*, p. 169.

⁵⁰ Jordan, *Trial by Fire*, p. 178.

especially artillery, and experiment with aerial photography as a source of military intelligence. Although they learned their lesson the hard way, Japanese military officials made an extensive study of the 1932 conflict that no doubt served them in the 1937 confrontation.⁵¹

This second and more drastic instance of military might was far more devastating than the 1927 conflict. More than 100 *lilong* (lanes) and thousands of houses were destroyed.⁵² Among factories, the damage was huge with 896 destroyed facilities. Of the 77 silk factories, only 27 remained after the fighting. A survey by the Bureau of Social Affairs showed that altogether Zhabei had lost 4,204 shops and 841 workshops, but schools, temples, associations, etc., also lost heavily.⁵³ Caught unaware, the population was literally trapped in the combat zone. Escape was difficult, with all access to the International Settlement closed. Thousands of residents managed to flee with the help of volunteers who drove trucks hired by native-place associations. About 75,000 people were rescued through these risky expeditions.⁵⁴ On 12 February, a short truce also allowed residents to leave the war zone.⁵⁵ The war-free areas of the city—except the foreign settlements—received the overflow of population in hastily set-up refugee camps. Altogether, 135,000 went through these camps. Yet, due to the cost and difficulty of maintaining such a large population arriving on top of the refugees from the previous 1931 Yangzi flood, the relief committee organised the evacuation of large number of refugees back to their home town or village. More than 137,000 were shipped away from Shanghai by boat or train.⁵⁶ The official number of casualties among civilians was limited, at least by official count—1,739 dead, 719 wounded, 985 missing—but many residents, hundreds and even thousands, went missing.⁵⁷ The *Bankers' Weekly*

⁵¹ The Japanese army produced a complete and detailed cartographic survey of the conflict, including a total of more than 70 documents, as well as a full account of the operations. This unique set of maps is available on *Virtual Shanghai* (type 'Sino-Japanese conflict' in the search box).

⁵² For the whole war zone, official estimates placed the number of destroyed houses at 180,000 units (actually 'rooms'), or 80 per cent of the total. Jordan, *Trial by Fire*, p. 194.

⁵³ Cai Liang, *Jindai zhabei de subeiren*, p. 25.

⁵⁴ *Shanghai zhanqu nanmin linshi jiujiuhui gongzuo baogaoshu* (Report of the Association for Temporary Assistance to the Refugees from the War Zones of Shanghai) (Shanghai: Shanghai Nanmin Linshi Jiujiuhui Bian, 1933).

⁵⁵ Bing-shuey Lee, *Two Years of Japan–China Undeclared War* (Shanghai: Mercury Press, 1934), p. 246.

⁵⁶ *Shanghai zhanqu nanmin linshi jiujiuhui gongzuo baogaoshu*.

⁵⁷ Jordan, *Trial by Fire*, p. 192.

claimed 6,080 dead, 2,000 wounded from the war. Another 10,400 were recorded as ‘missing’.⁵⁸ Of those some simply left the area and never came back, but many died at the hands of the Japanese military and their civilian henchmen.⁵⁹ Zhabei came out of the conflict badly shaken, materially and psychologically.

The conflict left about 4,000 killed and 7,700 wounded among Chinese troops (for an estimated force of 63,000), well above Japanese casualties with less than 1,000 killed and 8,600 wounded (out of a total of 47,000). In both cases, however, figures vary very much, despite various studies by military historians to come up with reasonable estimates.⁶⁰ Another indication is the number of corpses collected and buried by Chinese charities after the conflict. The total amounted to around 7,000 bodies, including civilians and soldiers.⁶¹ These various figures do not match, but they do convey very clearly that the short-lived conflict was extremely violent and costly in material terms and human lives. On the Japanese side, however, the toll paid ‘to teach a lesson’ to the Chinese also proved very costly, far more than the military invasion of Manchuria. While the Japanese army learned its lessons, stubbornness and misconceived strategy would make the 1937 conflict even more costly to the Chinese army.

The municipal government lost considerable resources both during and after the conflict, which limited its capacity to help the population and initiate reconstruction.⁶² The municipality established a committee for the reconstruction of the Shanghai–Wusong war zones (Song-Hu zhanqu shanhou weiyuanhui) made up of all the directors of municipal bureaux as well as the most influential members of Shanghai’s business and financial circles.⁶³ Basically, the authorities concentrated their effort on public facilities. They strove to prevent the area from being turned into a slum area. The police were instructed to take steps to prevent the erection of thatched huts.⁶⁴ The Bureau of Social Affairs initially drew up a three-year reconstruction plan, assessed at

⁵⁸ *YHZB*, 29 March 1932. See Henriot, *Shanghai 1917–1937*, p. 94.

⁵⁹ In later publications, the Chinese would accuse the Japanese military of ‘crimes against humanity’ for not leaving sufficient time for non-combatants to evacuate the war-threatened areas. Bing-shuey Lee, *Undeclared War*, p. 241.

⁶⁰ Jordan, *Trial by Fire*, pp. 189–190.

⁶¹ *Shanghai zhanqu nanmin linshi jiujiuhui gongzuo baogaoshu*.

⁶² During the conflict, the tax revenue dropped to 25 per cent of pre-war levels. *YHZB*, 29 March 1932.

⁶³ *SB*, 24 May 1932, 9:2 [Vol. 292, p. 437].

⁶⁴ *CWR*, 21 May 1932, p. 381; 1 October 1932, p. 203.

\$ 5,000,000, that focused on the swift construction of people's dwellings, the rehabilitation of the rural zones and the financing of social assistance through the people's credit institutions.⁶⁵ This plan, however, was rejected in favour of a scheme from the Bureau of Public Works that shifted most investments to the civic centre in Jiangwan, with the hope that the connections established between the civic centre and Zhabei would help the latter to take off again.⁶⁶

Fundamentally, the municipal government just gave up the idea of rebuilding Zhabei at government expense and decided to let private initiative take the responsibility for it. It reduced tax rates and even suspended taxation for a period of time to help merchants and craftsmen recover from their losses.⁶⁷ As in 1927, there was much haggling about insurance cover, but in any case only 4,200 families had subscribed to a policy.⁶⁸ Zhabei remained a badly shattered area. Some years later, tourists would still be taken to the area to witness the havoc wrought by the Japanese army.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, Zhabei recovered from its wounds. According to the 1936 *Shanghai Yearbook*, 574 workshops were registered in the area (one-third of the pre-war total). People came back or were replaced by new migrants, even if population failed to reach the pre-conflict level in most neighbourhoods.⁷⁰ Slums were on the rise, despite all efforts by the municipality. One-fifth of the residents lived in such areas. By and large, however, Zhabei became again the humming and thriving small-industry and commercial quarter spread around the train and bus stations. The train station itself underwent its second reconstruction, without knowing its new lease of life would not last more than five years.

The 1932 conflict does not figure prominently in the collective memory, despite its violence and its destructive impact on the population. 'Shanghai' was not affected beyond the stoppage of transportation for the duration of the conflict. In spite of the clear warning that the city could be exposed at any time to modern warfare—Zhabei was indeed the first urban area to undergo the sad experience of a mix of modern military warfare and civilian violence—the city

⁶⁵ *YHZB*, 25 October 1932.

⁶⁶ The ambitious rehabilitation plan remained unfulfilled for lack of actual funding, in particular the removal of the train station out of Zhabei to an area north of the Zhongshan ringroad. 'Greater Shanghai Municipality plans: rehabilitation of war-torn areas', *CWR*, 2 July 1932.

⁶⁷ *YHZB*, 23 June 1932.

⁶⁸ *YHZB*, 14 June 1932.

⁶⁹ Henriot, *Shanghai 1927–1937*, pp. 98–99.

⁷⁰ Zou Yiren, *Jiu shanghai renkou bianqian de yanjiu* (A Study of Population Change in Old Shanghai) (Shanghai: Renmin Chubanshe, 1980), p. 95.

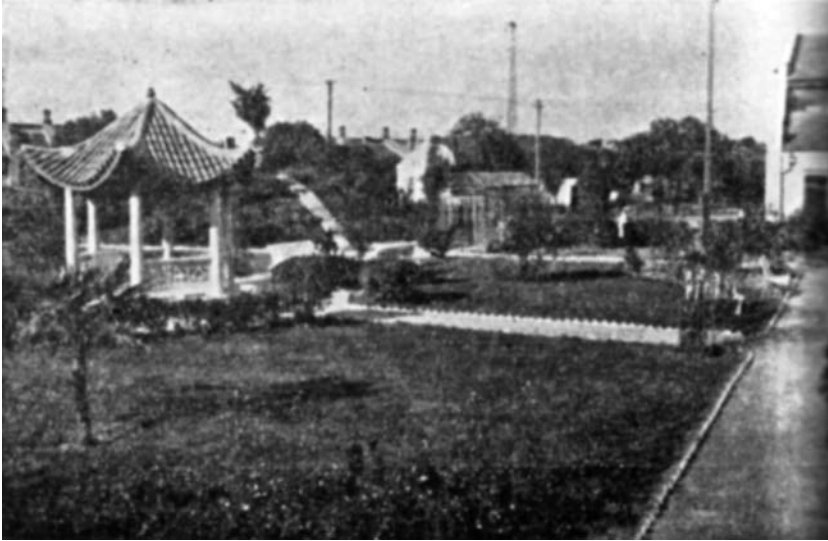


Figure 7: Memorial of the 1932 conflict in Shanghai.

Source: Virtual Shanghai, Image ID 15239

leaders chose to ignore the risks involved in the prevailing Sino-Japanese tensions. Although commemorative volumes were published, mostly to celebrate the bravery of the armies involved in fighting back the enemy, the whole event was deliberately pushed aside and, from the government's perspective, better left forgotten. Even cinematographic production veered away from the topic, not for lack of interest and the will to capture the event, but because official pressures managed to push this violent conflict back into oblivion and amnesia.⁷¹ Chinese officials created a memorial for the soldiers killed during the conflict, though with little activity after its installation (Figure 7). While commemorative ceremonies were held each year until January 1937, none were held in this location. Assemblies took place in the Chinese Chamber of Commerce, in party headquarters and in the civic centre, some with the offering of a wreath on the tomb of the unknown soldier in Jiangwan. There was no mention in the news report of the fate of the civilian victims.⁷²

⁷¹) Anne Kerlan-Stephens, '“The enemy is coming”: the 28th January 1932 attack on Shanghai in Chinese cinema', in Christian Henriot and Yeh Wen-hsin (eds), *History in Images. Pictures and Public Space in Modern China* (Berkeley: Research Monographs of the IEAS, University of California, 2011 [forthcoming]).

⁷²) *SB*, 29 January 1933, 1 [Vol. 300, 573]; 29 January 1934, 9 [Vol. 312, 743]; 29 January

1937: Final Disaster

The second Sino-Japanese conflict in the summer of 1937 was the disastrous final blow to Zhabei's destiny. Yet the civilian population did not suffer as much from direct fighting and bombing as in 1932. Forewarned by the ongoing conflict in the north, a local incident involving Japanese marines and Japanese reinforcements to Shanghai, the Zhabei residents lost no time in leaving the area well before the start of the conflict. Experience had taught them they were easy pawns in any conflict that overtook them. The Zhabei–Hongkou area and even Yangshupu lost almost all their population. When a ceasefire was established on 1 September, only 6,000 frightened residents were rescued from Yangshupu.⁷³ Everywhere else, people had fled to safer ground and crowded into the foreign settlements.⁷⁴ Zhabei then just became a battleground. The duration and extent of the conflict was far worse than in 1932. It lasted for three full months, with most of it taking place in the Zhabei area. The nature of the weaponry had further improved since 1932 and made the fighting much more destructive. Zhabei was the target of 136 attacks, 48 shellings and 98 aerial bombings.⁷⁵ The Japanese troops set the entire neighbourhood on fire to force the Chinese army out of the area and likewise the Chinese torched houses to hide their own retreat. Zhabei burned for three whole days in late October. At the end of the 80 days of fighting, Zhabei was basically razed to the ground. Close to 95 per cent of all constructions were destroyed (Map 4).

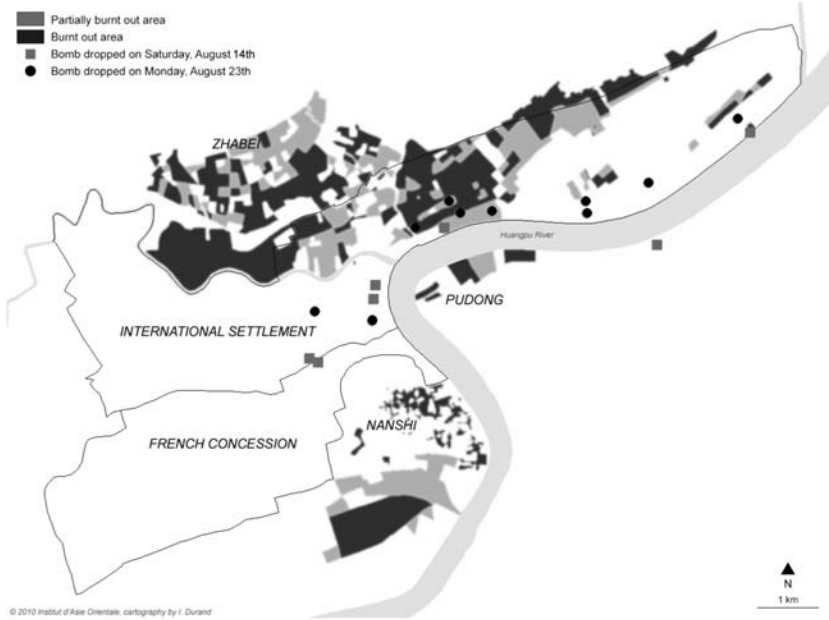
While material destruction was almost complete, there were few direct casualties among civilians. As noted above, the population had evacuated the area *en masse* before the first bullets were exchanged. The rest escaped in the first days of fighting. Civilian casualties resulted from accidental bombings in the heart of the foreign settlements. On two occasions—'Bloody Saturday' on 14 August, and again on 23 August—Chinese planes accidentally dropped bombs on major commercial areas, killing thousands in seconds. Aside from the victims of fighting in Zhabei and peasants killed in their villages around Shanghai, these two incidents represented the highest toll of civilian casualties during the whole war. But this does not mean that no lives were lost. Tens

1935, 9 [Vol. 324, 747]; 29 January 1936, 12 [Vol. 336, 548]; 29 January 1933, 9 [Vol. 348, 573].

⁷³) *NCH*, 8 September 1937.

⁷⁴) Christian Henriot, 'Shanghai and the experience of war: the fate of refugees', *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2006), pp. 217–248.

⁷⁵) Cai Liang, *Jindai zhabei de subeiren*, p. 25.



Map 4: Bombed and destroyed areas in August–October 1937.

of thousands actually died, mostly infants and children, from malnutrition, disease and sheer poverty. In 1938 alone, charity organisations picked up more than 60,000 exposed bodies and abandoned coffins in the streets of Shanghai.⁷⁶ On the military side, three months of bitter fighting left 250,000 casualties out of 700,000 engaged for the Chinese army and 40,000 casualties out of the 300,000 Japanese engaged.⁷⁷

By the end of the war, Zhabei was a ghost city. The area remained closed to the Chinese until spring 1938, but even after its reopening few families returned. Zhabei was mostly taken over by refugees, many of them from Subei.⁷⁸ Yet the population increased to 54,600 people in January 1938, a

⁷⁶ Christian Henriot, “Invisible deaths, silent deaths”. “Bodies without masters” in republican Shanghai’, *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (Winter 2009), pp. 408–437.

⁷⁷ Yeh Wen-hsin (ed.), *Wartime Shanghai* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 2.

⁷⁸ Subei was a derogative term to designate the migrants from the Jiangbei area—northern Jiangsu—to Shanghai, where most ended in the most menial and least skilled jobs. On Subei people in Shanghai, see Emily Honig, *Creating Chinese Ethnicity. Subei People in Shanghai, 1850–1980* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

far cry from its original 700,000 pre-war residents. The area was used for refugee camps, while former residents or newcomers simply settled among the ruins in makeshift huts. There were only six middle schools and 43 primary schools. Municipal authorities had little funds and failed to restore the area to its previous situation, even for the basic facilities. In 1939, aerial photographs by the Japanese army showed an entirely empty area.⁷⁹ By 1940, little progress had been made, as a detailed military map shows.⁸⁰ For the most part, the area was represented with ‘grass’ as its major symbol.⁸¹ Of the 590 *lilong* extant in 1927, 388 had been destroyed.⁸² Only six new ones were built during the war. Zhabei was unable to recuperate from its war losses. Absent or ineffectual municipal administration until 1939 failed to bring any kind of resources. Yet even after the establishment of a more stable municipality under Chen Gongbo, the authorities lacked the financial capability to launch a reconstruction programme. By 1942, the population was back to 220,742, including 25,000 Japanese residents.

After 1945, the civil war brought more misfortune. Refugees streamed into the abandoned area. While the population stood at 216,900 in July 1945 (its 1920s level), it surged to 299,591 in 1946 and 548,400 in 1948. The massive influx of population, however, did not reflect a new prosperity. Zhabei became an enormous refugee camp for refugees from the Subei area. Migrants represented 93 to 97 per cent of the population in 1950, with high rates of illiteracy and unemployment.⁸³ As housing had not yet been rebuilt and because the new migrants came with few resources, they ended mostly in slums. In 1948, Zhabei was home to more than 120 slums with more than 100 families each. The slum population represented 42 per cent of the total population of Zhabei in 1948, yet it consumed only 4 per cent of electrical power distributed in the area.⁸⁴ Despite official plans to restore the area and to redevelop it, none of the fund-starved projects ever materialised.

⁷⁹ See ‘Aerial view of Shanghai in 1939’ (Map ID 199) on *Virtual Shanghai*.

⁸⁰ See ‘Shanghai shi seinanbu gosenbun no ichi zu’ (Map of the southwest of Shanghai Municipality, 1 / 5000) *part 1* (Map ID 542) and *part 2* (Map ID 543) on *Virtual Shanghai*.

⁸¹ This was exactly how a Chinese journalist described Zhabei in late 1938. *SB*, 10 October 1938, 7 [Vol. 359, p. 25].

⁸² Cai Liang, *Jindai zhabei de subeiren*, pp. 156–179.

⁸³ Zhang Xiaochuan, *Zhanzheng yu jindai shanghai zhabei*, p. 86.

⁸⁴ Zhang Xiaochuan, *Meiyou deng xia de shijie*, Ch. 4, p. 2.

Conclusion

When it comes to war, the view from Shanghai is quite appalling. The city was not just a stake for conflicts that unravelled in its hinterland. War struck in its very heart. Yet war hardly figures in the common trope about the city, except perhaps for the last instance of fighting in 1937, though even in this case the military phase and its tragic consequences are given much less attention than the subsequent 'lone island' (*gudao*) myth. The 1932 conflict, for its part, has been reduced to an 'incident' in most historiographical renderings of the event, either for purposes of propaganda by the Japanese contenders or because its short duration did not warrant the use of 'war', in either the reports of the time or later historical narratives. Even in contemporary Chinese publications, it is most often recalled as 'the 1.28 incident' (*yi.erba shibian*) or more appropriately '1.28 anti-Japanese war' (*yi.erba songhu kangzhan*), whereas in the immediate aftermath of the conflict the most commonly used expressions were 'the Wusong–Shanghai War' (*Song–Hu zhan*) or 'the Wusong–Shanghai Bloody War' (*Song–Hu xuezhan*). The second violent attack, five years later, is part of the broader master narrative on the War of Resistance against Japan, and it either pales in view of subsequent instances of military violence (e.g. the Nanking massacre) or is written off in favour of another dominant *topos* (e.g. *gudao*, the 'lone island').

Yet war in Shanghai was real, even if using 'Shanghai' tends to generalise an experience that was not felt in the same way throughout the city. The most striking pattern of military conflicts in Shanghai was their concentration on the Chinese-administered areas. In the nineteenth century, when the walled city represented the whole city, the rebellion by the Small Sword Society and its repression by the imperial armies in 1853–1855 left the city badly hurt. Most of its commercial area along the Huangpu River went up in flames, while large tracts of buildings were destroyed within the wall. With the loss of importance of the walled city and the rise of a new neighbourhood in the north, beyond Soochow Creek, war also moved north, skipping the foreign settlements, to strike repeatedly in Zhabei and Hongkou. War hit the city very hard, but in a very localised manner. The political fragmentation of Shanghai's urban territory was reflected in the lopsided distribution of military violence, with a disproportionate share concentrated in one area.

The foreign settlements formed real enclaves that were protected from the war that unravelled literally just across the river (Soochow Creek) and crushed thousands of lives. Without the privileges of extraterritoriality and the relative concern of Japanese troops not to get involved in a conflict with Western

powers, there is little doubt that war would have affected the city more broadly, not just a single district. In 1937, the show took on a new dimension, with hundreds packed on the Bund to watch the scores of Chinese planes descending on the prized Izumo gunboat. People were mesmerised by the sounds of explosions and the huge splashes of water from the Huangpu River each time a bomb hit the surface, until a plane missed and dropped a bomb on the crowd, killing more than 800 people in one stroke. War had finally descended on the highly protected foreign settlements. The representatives of the two settlements protested and vocally proclaimed their ‘neutrality’. Indeed, the settlements served as a haven—a dire haven, nonetheless—for the hundreds of thousands of residents who had fled the war zone. The Chinese army showed restraint, indeed, as it chose to battle only in the Chinese-administered districts and refrained from launching operations through the foreign settlements.

The most significant aspect of war in Shanghai—one that certainly highlights a difference with the European experience—was the direct involvement, even if passively, of the civilian population and the high degree of violence and destruction it was subjected to. Mostly, civilians were taken hostage, with little support or protection from their own authorities. War erupted unannounced in 1932 and left the local residents at the mercy of unrestrained violence, with no support thereafter. In 1937, the population ‘voted with its feet’ to escape a similar predictable fate at the hands of battling troops and found a limited degree of support through refugee camps and transportation back to their native places in the countryside. Yet in both cases the scale of violence, and hence of material destruction, was enormous. Housing and urban infrastructures were smashed to the ground, Zhabei was laid bare. There is hardly any case of a city being subject to such a degree of destruction and forced repatriation of its population before WWII. The civilian population, however, was also involved in combat and logistical support to a degree unknown in the European experience, even during WWII. This was a far cry from the Vietnamese or Lao experiences, as shown in Christopher Goscha’s and Vatthana Pholsena’s papers in this issue. Yet on both sides, Japanese and Chinese, civilians mobilised, gathered intelligence, carried weapons, dug trenches, etc. They were not mere passive observers or victims. Civilian direct participation in the war effort was probably a key feature of wars in modern East and Southeast Asia.

This preliminary study of military conflicts and civilian violence in Shanghai hopes to highlight the relevance of examining these phenomena, not just from the broad angle of war in a given place but to reflect upon the diversity of experiences in a single place. Shanghai, thanks to its particular political

configuration, may offer an unusual perspective, as people could literally be slaughtered on one side of the city while others went about their business almost ‘as usual’ on the other side. A clear indication of this is the perspective of ‘war as a show’ that resulted from the division of the city into Chinese-administered districts and foreign settlements. Such an observatory stance has its roots in the early conflicts that took place in the 1850s when foreign observers ran near to the walled city to watch the imperial armies and the rebels fight each other, or just observed these ‘most amusing performances’.⁸⁵ The scale of warfare in 1937 made this posture both more comfortable and more exciting. From the rooftops of high-rises, at a safe distance from actual fighting, Western (and Chinese) residents could watch the ‘war show’ as bombs rained on Zhabei and gigantic fires erupted throughout the area, as in 1932. Quite clearly, war meant very different experiences over time and space in Shanghai.

⁸⁵ Robert Fortune, *A Residence among the Chinese* (London: John Murray, 1857), p. 128; Arthur Millac, *Les Français à Shanghai en 1853–1855* (Paris: Ernest Ledoux, 1884), p. 30.