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► **To cite this version:**

Christian Henriot. Slums, squats or hutments? Constructing and deconstructing an in-between space in modern Shanghai (1926-1965). *Frontiers of History in China*, 2012, 7 (2), pp.499-528. 10.3868/s020-001-012-0030-5 . halshs-00747262

HAL Id: halshs-00747262

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00747262v1>

Submitted on 12 Apr 2018

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Christian Henriot

Slums, Squats, or Hutments? Constructing and Deconstructing an In-Between Space in Modern Shanghai (1926–65)

Abstract Hutments—a term used to designate “beggars’ villages,” “straw-house villages” or more bluntly “slums”—became a standard feature of Shanghai’s urban landscape in the early 1920s. Located in peripheral areas, they became a central object of concern by the authorities that governed the foreign settlements in the city. Over time, due to economic crisis and above all war, “hutments” slowly colonized the whole urban space and became a massive housing issue and a problematic historical legacy after 1949. This paper argues that hutments arose mostly from the turmoil of the Civil War period. Their nature changed little from the time of their appearance in the 1920s to the early 1950s. Yet, perceptions and policies over three major periods under study here varied significantly. They were strongly influenced by the discursive constructions and distorting lenses the local administrations formulated around issues of nuisance, public health, and city beautification. Each era carried over the concerns and prejudices of the previous period. Yet, each municipal institution also brought in new cultural and political postures that changed the overall discourse and treatment of hutment dwellers.

Keywords Shanghai, hutment, slum, space, urban, housing

In 1962, the Institute of Economics of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences published a small book that hailed the achievements of the Shanghai Municipality in the transformation of the city’s *penghu qu* 棚户区, or hutments.¹ The 1962 book emphasized the shameful responsibility of Western imperialists and former Chinese authorities for such a disreputable legacy of neglect and exploitation of the laboring classes. On one single map—no date or source was

¹ *Shanghai penghu qu de bianqian*.

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provided—it showed a string of dense hutments all around the city and, most strikingly, all around the former foreign settlements (See Map 1). This particular distribution, the book pointed out, was due to the relentless and systematic demolition of huts in the foreign settlements and the forced evacuation of their occupants into Chinese-administered territory. There was definitely some truth to the claim, as can be seen below. Yet this glaringly politically-based interpretation overlooked most of the major factors that had led to the emergence and development of hutments in Shanghai. It obscured the various phases prior to the 1949 founding of the People’s government that had led to the hutment situation. This lack of a proper understanding, or rather desire to obliterate actual factors, can explain why the phenomenon did not vanish, but even expanded after 1949.²



Map 1 Main Concentrations of Hutments in Shanghai in the Late 1940s

Source: adapted from *Shanghai penghu qu de bianqian* (The transformation of Shanghai’s hutments, Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1962).

In English-language documents, the word hutment was a rarely used term used to designate the “beggars’ villages,” “straw-house villages” or more bluntly “slums” or “shantytowns” that became a standard feature of Shanghai’s urban landscape in the early 1920s. The variety of terms applied to these communities reflected the wide range of perceptions and misrepresentations held not just by officials. Over time, “hutments” slowly colonized the whole of Shanghai’s urban

² Chen Yinfang, “Kongjian yu shehui: zuowei shehuizhuyi shijian de chengshi gaizao—Shanghai penghu qu de shili (1949–1979),” 79.

space. The Chinese civil war (1945–49) eventually turned these *penghu* settlements into a massive housing issue and a problematic historical legacy. Despite all claims to the contrary and in spite of actual measures to address the issue, the Communist authorities were never able to solve the problem of hutments in Shanghai. After 1949, the fate of the population that lived in hutments actually received little attraction and attention in scholarly or official publications. The matter seemed to have been settled once and for all thanks to the efforts of the new regime and the mobilization of the masses themselves under the guidance of the CCP.³ Of course, this story did not hold water. I have had the small 1962 book in my library for more than three decades, perusing it occasionally with the idea that at some point I would tackle this issue. My own fieldwork in the late 1980s had convinced me that whatever the term, some areas in Shanghai looked shabby enough to warrant a serious look into the issue of *penghu*. Chinese academia has rediscovered this topic in the past few years with a few substantial articles and a book based on oral history.⁴ These works scraped away the official rosy version and established the persistent presence of hutments in the city, the half-measures taken to renovate these areas, and even the rebirth of the phenomenon in the 2000s, quite often in the very same areas where they had been located during the Republican period.

Hut dwellers typically represented an almost voiceless subaltern category in Shanghai society. While sociologists can approach and study slum communities in contemporary societies, historians have far more difficulties to understand these groups in the urban past. Hut dwellers most often left nothing behind. Their existence is revealed at the point of contact with power and authority, routinely as unfortunate victims of disasters and at times as objects of public policies.⁵

³ A book with a similar propagandistic tone was published in 1971. *Huan le renjian: Shanghai penghu qu de bianqian*.

⁴ Chen Yinfang, “Kongjian yu shehui: zuowei shehuizhuyi shijian de chengshi gaizao—Shanghai penghu qu de shili (1949–1979)”;

Chen Yinfang ed., *Penghu qu: jiyi zhong de shenghuoshi*. A few M.A. thesis and PhD dissertations have also addressed this issue: Jiang Jianjun, “Penghu qu bendi jumin de daiji liudong yanjiu” (A study of intergenerational mobility in Shanghai hutments), M.A. thesis, Huadong shifan daxue, 2004; Zhao Yeqin, “Wailaizhe de jinru yu penghu qu bendi jumin richang shenghuo de chongjian” (The influx of outsiders and the reconstruction of daily life by local hutment dwellers. A case study of C hutment block in Shanghai), M.A. thesis, Huadong shifan daxue, 2005; Zhang Xizhe, “Shanghai penghu qu gaizao wenti chutan” (A preliminary exploration of the reform of hutments in Shanghai), M.A. thesis, Tongji University, 2005; Meng Meijun, “Shanghaishi penghu qu kongjian bianqian yanjiu” (A study of transformation of hutment space in Shanghai), M.A. thesis, Huadong shifan daxue, 2006.

⁵ “It is through their encounter with officialdom that they are wrested from the night in which they could—and perhaps always should—have stayed [...]. These lives, fated to vanish from the realm of discourse without finding voice, have left nothing but fleeting, incisive and often enigmatic traces at their immediate point of contact with the State.” Michel Foucault, “La vie des hommes infâmes,” 240.

Zwia Lipkin has produced the most complete study of hut dwellers and Nationalist state policies in China in her superb study of Nanjing of the 1920s–1930s.⁶ She argued that if there was a genuine concern toward the less privileged by the ruling Nationalists, their efforts fell short of actually relieving the targeted communities of their misery. Eventually, practical as well as political considerations to make Nanjing the new capital outweighed their initial compassion. In her recent fascinating book, Janet Chen brought to light the fate of hut dwellers in Shanghai in the Republican period, with a focus on their living conditions, their capacity for resistance, and the half-hearted measures taken by the Shanghai Municipal Council to eliminate them and by the Shanghai municipal government (Shanghai shi zhengfu)⁷ to variously assist and control them. She also examines the agency of these people, the poorest in society, in protecting property and opposing the attempt by the authorities to confine them in workhouses or to send them to camps.⁸

My own take on this issue in Shanghai draws from the same sources, which were explored independently, in order to examine hutments from a different angle. I shall study these human settlements from the perspective of in-between spaces in fast developing and globalizing cities. Such spaces existed in Shanghai at the crossroad of conflicting discursive constructions based on distorted perceptions and anxieties regarding public order, nuisance, public health, or city beautification. These spaces were also real material places within urban space, which they altered profoundly through successive stages of occupation. In this paper I shall argue that this process did not end after 1949, even if it became muted under official censorship. The population of hut dwellers actually swelled in socialist Shanghai. All through the Republic and early PRC, changing perceptions were disconnected from the actual physical transformation of these spaces. The study of hutments in Shanghai cannot be detached from a genuine spatial approach. Hutments evolved from a peripheral and marginal phenomenon into a form of housing that not only encroached upon the central areas of the city, but also housed a very large segment of the population.

An Issue of Definition

A preliminary and unavoidable issue is one of definition and choice of terms so that we might designate the areas, communities or life style/living conditions

⁶ Zwia Lipkin, *Useless to the State: "Social Problems" and Social Engineering in Nationalist Nanjing, 1927–1937*.

⁷ There were in fact three separate jurisdictions that administered Shanghai; the Chinese municipal government, known by a variety of names until 1927, was one of them.

⁸ Janet Y Chen, *Guilty of Indigence: The Urban Poor in China, 1900–1953*.

inscribed in these spaces.⁹ The same “object”—hutments—could be construed as a nuisance to be gotten rid of at all costs, as in the International Settlement, or a quasi-normal category of housing under the new regime.¹⁰ Throughout this paper, I shall use “hutment” as a generic term. The expression appeared once in a 1938 newspaper article about the condition of hut dwellings and lack of suitable and affordable housing in the city.¹¹ It never became a standard expression in Shanghai. In English-language documents and press, “slum,” “shantytown,” “squatter village” were the most commonly used terms.¹² Yet “hutment,” a term more widely used in the context of modern Indian cities seems more appropriate for another reason.¹³ It strongly resembles the Chinese term most often applied to communities, *penghu*, or “hut household.” By extension, areas where whole communities formed were designated as “hut households area” (*penghu qu*), a fairly neutral term for these human settlements that “hutment” quite accurately reflects, in contrast to the derogatory term “slum.”

Hutments can be seen as simply a particular form of physical space or habitat. Yet they were more than shabby and unappealing forms of housing. Where they emerged in the city, they constituted places where newcomers negotiated, even if unconsciously, their entry into the modern city. I examine what hutments meant in terms of de Certeau’s distinction between place and space, and also Bhabha’s notion of in-between spaces.¹⁴ “These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.”¹⁵ This notion applies well to hutments

⁹ On the issue of how words influence the perception of a city, see Christian Topalov, ed., *Les Mots de la Ville: Divisions*.

¹⁰ Owing to the treaties signed after the Opium Wars, Shanghai was opened to foreign trade after 1842. Foreigners were granted the privilege of extraterritoriality and settled in designated areas (foreign settlements) with their own administration. As a result, the city of Shanghai was made up of three distinct jurisdictions and territories: the International Settlement, the French Concession and the Chinese municipality. It was officially unified in 1943, but it was not until 1945 that a genuine citywide administration came into being.

¹¹ “Hutment colonies,” *Shanghai Times*, 6/12/1938.

¹² In the French Concession, “straw huts” were never an issue. The lack of industry meant that poor people had little incentive to live in the area. No specific terms emerged beyond the mere description of individual *pailloles* (huts).

¹³ Shashikant B. Sawant, *The City of Poona: A Study in Urban Geography*; Geert de Neve, Henrike Donner, *The Meaning of the Local: Politics of Place in Urban India*; L. N. Mohanty, Swati, Mohanty, *Slum in India*; Gopal Bhargava, “Slums of Urban India: Planning and Policy Framework,” in Gopal Bhargava, ed., *Urban Problems and Urban Perspectives*, 197–217; Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India*.

¹⁴ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, 75–115; Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

¹⁵ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1.

as threshold between identities, in both a colonial and postcolonial context.¹⁶ From their formation at the periphery, to their later appropriation of bits of the urban fabric, hutments formed social spaces of lived experience and cultural expression, which, in Lefebvre's terms, produced representations of space beyond their quasi-anonymous and socially invisible existence.¹⁷

The existence of hutments in Republican Shanghai was not a phenomenon that developed from ordered planning. The power of attraction of cities created opportunities for new migrants to settle in the "voids of the city," spaces not yet developed, especially at the periphery of the commercial/residential quarters, or spaces created by destruction during military conflicts.¹⁸ The process of migration in large numbers over short periods of time overran the capacity of cities to establish housing, services and utilities that could match the demand from mostly low-income population: "Migrants occupied whatever land was available and constructed huts and shacks from material they could afford." This description from the *India Habitat Report* (1976) reflects accurately the process that took place in industrializing Shanghai.¹⁹ The existence of three separate urban administrations within the same city and the lack of interest on the part of colonial authorities in the foreign settlements in investing in measures to redress social needs contributed to the diffusion of poor communities to liminal area throughout the city, especially in industrial zones. As they spread through the city, hutments questioned and even challenged official notions of urban development, public health, and social order.

Early "Shantytowns": Unstable In-Between Spaces

Hutments were linked to two parallel processes: (1) the industrialization of the city and (2) the influx of refugee populations in times of natural disaster or armed conflicts in neighboring provinces. It is impossible to disentangle the two phenomena. Early records from the foreign concessions mention the presence of more or less large transient populations that came and went depending on troubles elsewhere. In the same manner, the censuses taken since 1865 always registered the "boat people" who lived permanently on the roofed vessels moored along Soochow Creek, the Huangpu River and the numerous creeks that ran

¹⁶ For a critical discussion of Bhabha's notion, see Lawrence Phillips, "Lost in Space: Sitting/citing the In-Between of Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*"; Michaela Wolf, "The Third Space in Postcolonial Representation."

¹⁷ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 41.

¹⁸ Andreas Huyssen, "The Voids of Berlin."

¹⁹ H. H. Singh and V. K. Kumra, "Slums: Threat to Urban Environment," 121.

through an as yet untouched rural landscape.²⁰ Neither the “transient population” nor the “boat people” (distinct categories in the census) became the hutment dwellers who would eventually appear throughout the city from the 1920s onward. They were, however, the forebears of all those who came to Shanghai in search of jobs in the increasingly prosperous city or in search of safety when they felt threatened back home.

While some scholars have described the development process of squatter areas in Shanghai as one of a transition from “water” to “land,” this is only partly true and, for the most part, too simplistic.²¹ Given the dense hydrographic network that ran through the rural landscape in the Jiangnan/Jiangbei region, most people came on small boats that served both as a means of transportation and housing. They settled along one of the numerous arteries that brought water into the city. Pictures such as Figures 1 & 2 were common views in and around late imperial and early Republican Shanghai. Over time, however such boats eventually accumulated to a point where it was no longer possible for them to move



Fig. 1 Boats near the Shanghai City Wall

Source: H1-1-9-18, Shanghai Municipal Archives.

²⁰ Nicholas Belfield Dennys, William Frederick Mayers, and Charles King, *The Treaty Ports of China and Japan*, 390.

²¹ Hanchao Lu, “Creating Urban Outcasts: Shantytowns in Shanghai, 1920–1950”; Xue Yongli, “Jiu Shanghai penghu qu de xingcheng”; Cai Liang, “Jindai Shanghai penghu qu yu guomin zhengfu zhili nengli.”



Fig. 2 Boats Moored in a Creek near Shanghai

Source: H1-1-8-82, Shanghai Municipal Archives.

(Figures 3 & 4), while stretches of canals and rivers came to be filled in with urban development.²² Through this process, there emerged more permanent



Fig. 3 A Creek Clogged with Boats in Shanghai (I)

Source: H1-1-8-42, Shanghai Municipal Archives.

²² See Wu Junfan, “Hedao, fengshui, yimin: jindai Shanghai chengzhou juluo de jieti yu penghu qu de chansheng.”



Fig. 4 A Creek Clogged with Boats in Shanghai (II)

Source: H1-1-8-42, Shanghai Municipal Archives.

settlements of people who eventually moved onto land, either because their boats decayed to a point where they might sink, or simply because it made sense to build a dwelling on land with whatever material was available. Such areas came to be dubbed “slums” in materials produced by Western officials and photographers alike (Figure 5 & 6).

While boat people were one of the demographic components of squatter areas, they were not the major element that contributed to their expansion. In fact, the rare notations in official records show there was hardly any worry about these communities by the authorities. Things started to change after 1895 when foreigners were allowed to open factories in China. This was a slow process, but by 1913 there were about 140,000–150,000 workers in the city. We know from M.-C. Bergère’s work that there was a quick and powerful surge during W.W.I and its aftermath. By 1919, the industrial workforce was well above 180,000.²³ Although industrial development followed an uneven and precarious path in the following years and decades, plants, factories, and workshops of all sizes sprang up throughout the city, with the Eastern and Western Districts of the International Settlement and Zhabei as the major industrial areas.²⁴

²³ Marie-Claire Bergère, *The Golden Age of the Chinese Bourgeoisie, 1911–1937*.

²⁴ Christian Henriot, “Regeneration and Mobility: The Spatial Dynamics of Industries in Wartime Shanghai.”



Fig. 5 “Slums” along the River

Source: *Shanghai by Night and Day. Illustrated by 23 Reproductions from Photographs* (Shanghai: Shanghai Mercury, 1897).



Fig. 6 Straw Huts over Stagnant Water

Source: H1-21-8-21, Shanghai Municipal Archives.

The “beggars’ villages,” as they were initially called in Shanghai Municipal Council (hereafter, SMC) documents, came for the first time to the attention of the authorities in 1921. This was not an extension of the previous boat people communities. Industry required labor in great numbers and drew its workforce from villages in a wide radius. The Shanghai Municipal Police (SMP) reported to the SMC about the erection of numerous “beggars’ villages” in the western part of the settlement, “practically all occupied by the families of the worst class of mill coolie, who formerly lived on boats or in Chapei [or, Zhabei: the Chinese-administered district adjacent to the settlement in the north].” The SMP bluntly stated that these hutments “will tend, in times of unrest, towards lawlessness.”²⁵ Inspections by the Public Health Department (PHD) not only confirmed the phenomenon, but it pointed out the unsanitary nature of these places and the potential danger for public health in the settlement. In this initial phase, strong prejudice prevailed in the assessment of the population that had set up homes in these dwellings. SMC officials lumped them together as refugees seeking safety and food in the city.

The dominant opinion was to get rid of these communities.²⁶ Yet, because the hutments were located beyond the limits of the foreign settlements, the SMC had to seek out the local Nationalist authorities to state its case and ask for removal of the unwelcome dwellers. The representative of the Bureau of Foreign Affairs expressed willingness to tackle the problem, although he also stated that this would take time, as these were hard-working people with little means. He also declared that this was a matter for the Chinese authorities and that the SMC was totally beyond its jurisdiction and had no right to infringe upon the rights of the hut dwellers.²⁷ On its own territory, in the Yangshupu area, the SMC was not markedly more successful. First, it decided to delay its action until the winter was over so as not to render these “poor people” homeless during the seasonal chill. By the end of spring, however, no action had been taken. This first round of reports and discussions revealed the difference between the assessments of the SMC and the Chinese authorities. The SMC perceived the hutments as unwelcome refugee encampments that polluted the sanitary situation of the settlement. The Chinese authorities saw them as workers who had merely used their meager resources to erect a badly needed roof over their heads. Landowners also objected to the eviction of their tenants until such time that they could secure a more profitable lease. The issue of porous “boundaries” emerged early as one of the most vexing problems for the SMC, an issue that other colonial powers

²⁵ Letter: SMP [Shanghai Municipal Police] to Secretary (7/6/1921), SMA U1-3-1372 [Shanghai Municipal Archives, hereafter SMA].

²⁶ Letter: Secretary to Watch Committee (9/6/1921), SMA U1-3-1372.

²⁷ Letter: Commissioner of Foreign Affairs (27/7/1921), SMA U1-3-1372.

elsewhere also found hard to address.²⁸

What SMC officials clearly perceived as “slums” was no more than the reproduction in the city of a housing model that dominated the countryside. Their shabby appearance notwithstanding, the huts built in Yangshupu recreated the living conditions of less affluent in villages (Figures 7 & 8). The SMC kept an eye on this development, but from the available records, did not address the issue again until 1926. By then, many more colonies of straw huts had clustered in the Eastern District around the factories that peppered the area. The same motive—preservation of public health—guided the authorities.²⁹ To take the full measure of the situation, the SMC decided to carry out a full survey of hut dwellings on its territory: it counted 1,282 straw huts with a total of 14,394 hut dwellers.³⁰ The survey was also an eye-opener for the highly prejudiced officials. Most of the hut dwellers were properly employed people, not “beggars” or “refugees.” Altogether, 1,396 men, 2,152 women, and 1,340 children worked in textile mills. The survey clearly showed few people were without a job (13%); beggars were almost non-existent, most women and many children worked in nearby factories, men labored in factories and a wide range of manual



Fig. 7 View of a Straw Hut

Source: H1-11-6-43, Shanghai Municipal Archives.

²⁸ Prashant Kidamb, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis: Colonial Governance and Public Culture in Bombay, 1890–1920*, 150.

²⁹ Letter: PHD [Public Health Department] to Secretary (22/9/1926), SMA U1-3-1370.

³⁰ Letter: PWD [Public Works Department] to Secretary (8/12/1926), SMA U1-3-1370.



Fig. 8 Straw Huts with Plastered Walls

Source: H1-11-6-42, Shanghai Municipal Archives.

occupations.³¹

The SMC was caught in a quandary. On the one hand, it wanted to rid the settlement of these unsanitary dwellings. On the other hand, it could not afford to evacuate by force the workforce that labored in the factories of the settlement. The SMC was aware that the major issue was the cost of housing: “The question would thus seem to be primarily a housing problem and not a question of unemployment.”³² From at least 1916 and all through the 1920s and 1930s, the Public Health Department (PHD) of the SMC deplored the state of overcrowding in Chinese houses that it attributed to the shortage of low-rent housing in the settlement.³³ Yet, in a contradictory way, the PHD remained a staunch adversary of the hut dwellings. Its obsession with public health—above all those of the “regular” residents of the settlement—made it prone to support high-handed measures of demolition of hut dwellings.³⁴ Yet hut dwellers had “produced

³¹ Letter: PWD to Secretary (21/12/26), SMA U1-3-1370. On the population in this area, see Luo Suwen, “Gaolangqiao: 1914–1949 nian Hudong yige mianfangzhi gongren shenghuoqu de xingcheng.”

³² Letter: PWD to Secretary (21/12/1926), SMA U1-3-1370.

³³ PHD “Annual Report,” 1921, 37; 1923, 39; 1924, 44; 1926, 43; 1926, 66; 1927, 61; 1928, 64.

³⁴ SMA U1-16-4690; PHD “Annual Report,” 1926, 67.

space” to meet their needs for housing that the authorities would find increasingly delicate to restrain, let alone to destroy.

In October 1925, the SMC ordered the SMP to distribute notices to hut dwellers to voluntarily demolish their huts, but relinquished its order when it realized this would throw people out of their homes on the eve of winter. New notices were issued in the following spring. As in 1921, the SMC again sought the cooperation of the Chinese authorities.³⁵ The paper trail shows that the hut dwellers balked at the idea of moving to a remote place, seven or eight *li* away from their workplace, with no basic facilities like hydrants or electrical lights.³⁶ They organized under a Kiangpeh [Jiangbei] Association to start negotiating with the SMC and offered to set up a proper organization, with a committee and a headman for ten families, to organize the cleaning of huts, ditches, the removal of night soil, prohibiting pigs, and to limit the number of huts. They also sought to obtain a right of residence in exchange for the payment of a small tax.³⁷ The SMC rejected the proposal.³⁸ Yet the Kiangpeh Association persisted in its application for a definite reply by the SMC.³⁹ What these documents unveil is the existence of fairly well-organized communities of people with a real stake in their housing and living places. Battling the authorities provided a terrain that could “initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation” in Bhabha’s terms.

The major ingredient that killed the demolition plan of the SMC, however, was the general political context in which hut dwellers erected their protest. As soon as the notices were served, they turned to various organizations like the Nationalist Party and the Chinese Ratepayers’ Association to seek their support against compulsory evacuation. These organizations in turn wrote to the SMC to advise relinquishing the demolition order. As this was less than a year after the May 30 Movement of 1925, marked by a strong Nationalist surge, the SMP quite realistically, advised against “anything drastic in the nature of eviction of the beggars.”⁴⁰ Another obstacle was the location of many such huts outside the boundaries of the settlement in the Western area, in that in-between contested space between the Chinese and foreign authorities. For the second time, and despite an even stronger urge and disposition to force hut dwellers out of the settlement, the SMC had to shelve its plan under the pressure of political factors.

³⁵ Letter: SMP to Secretary (4/9/1926), SMA U1-3-1370.

³⁶ Short distance between workplace and residence is a common feature—and money saving solution—for slum dwellers. H. H. Singh and V. K. Kumra, “Slums: Threat to Urban Environment,” 130.

³⁷ Letter: Kiangpeh Association (29/8/1926), SMA U1-3-1370.

³⁸ Letter: PWD to Secretary (3/9/1926), SMA U1-3-1370.

³⁹ Letter: Kiangpeh Association to Secretary (undated–1926), SMA U1-3-1370.

⁴⁰ Letter: SMP to Secretary (4/9/1926), SMA U1-3-1370.

There was continued pressure and bickering between the SMC and the Chinese authorities after 1927 about the heavy-handed measures taken by the SMC against straw huts. Although it failed to implement a general plan of demolition, the SMC regularly ordered the demolition of huts that “violated the Land regulations and posed a threat to public health.”⁴¹

By 1931, the SMC felt in a better position to address the issue of hut dwellers. In spring, it decided again to carry out a full survey, which confirmed the continued expansion of huts since 1926 and their concentration in the Eastern District. Altogether, there were 2,274 huts with 11,400 residents in the Eastern District.⁴² The same process unfolded: notification to hut dwellers to evacuate before a set deadline. The context, however, was once again more complex than the SMC anticipated. First, hut dwellers again organized into an association in an attempt to negotiate with the SMC. They even hired a lawyer who made several representations to the SMC.⁴³ Hut dwellers also sought the support from the Chinese Municipal Government, the Chinese ratepayers’ Association, the Chamber of Commerce, the Trade Unions, etc. Faced with pressure from all quarters, the SMC asked its assistant secretary to assess the situation. T. K. Ho produced a well-balanced and detailed memorandum that described in a fairly neutral tone the living conditions of hut dwellers, their mode of organization, the physical conditions (low lands, below water level), and the shortage of adequate cheap housings for the working population.⁴⁴

The Works Committee admitted that wholesale demolition was inadvisable and impracticable.⁴⁵ The SMC eventually adopted a general posture of phasing out total demolition plans over time. Each hut was registered and assigned a number by November 1931.⁴⁶ Each year ten percent would be selected for evacuation or demolition. In exchange for this relative stability and predictable demolition plan, the Kiangpeh [Jiangbei] Association was expected to guarantee that there would be no further addition.⁴⁷ The authorities would demolish new huts.⁴⁸ Basically, in view of the opposition from both the hut dwellers and their supporters, the SMC adopted a policy of containment—preventing further expansion—associated with a plan for gradual reduction. Politics, war, and spontaneous developments all confounded the designs of the SMC. In January

⁴¹ *Municipal Gazette* (8/7/27).

⁴² Letter: PWD to Secretary (11/9/1936), SMA U1-6-101.

⁴³ Letter: Yu Tse (16/6/31), Letter: Yu Tse (29/6/31), SMA U1-3-1371; Letter: Representatives of Hut Dwellers to SMC (1/12/31), SMA U1-6-582.

⁴⁴ Memorandum (7/7/31), SMA U1-3-1371.

⁴⁵ Work Committee Minutes (7/7/31), SMA U1-3-1371.

⁴⁶ Letter: PWD to Secretary (18/11/31), SMA U1-3-1370.

⁴⁷ Certificate SMC (30/11/31), SMA U1-6-582.

⁴⁸ Letter: Representatives of Hut Dwellers to Secretary (1/12/31), SMA U1-6-582.

1932, the first direct Sino-Japanese conflict in the city threw hundreds of thousands of people out of their homes.

In contrast to the policy of containment and outright demolition of the SMC, the Chinese municipality took a few initial steps to address the issue of hutments in a more positive way. On the one hand, the Shanghai Municipal Government pursued a policy of supporting hut dwellers in their claims for protection from SMC demolition, though with little success. On the other hand, it embarked on a policy of constructing low-rent housing (*pinmin zhushuo*). In 1927, it established a Committee for the management of poor people's welfare.⁴⁹ The first complex was built in 1928 on Qimei Road in Zhabei. Two more followed suit at one-year intervals on Pushan Road in Zhabei and Zhongshan Road near Damuqiao in Nanshi.⁵⁰ In 1929, the municipality carried out the first full survey on its territory to identify hut dwellers properly and to register their population. Each hut received a doorplate that made its existence official.⁵¹ Two years later, the municipality ordered a new survey of hutments. It recorded about 30,000 families living in straw huts scattered among 300 locations of various sizes.⁵² The intention was to locate where there was the greatest need for low-rent housing.⁵³ Five years later, the municipal government was still working on regulating hutments, yet military priorities and lack of funding limited the concrete achievements of the municipal government in that arena.⁵⁴

Throughout the prewar period, the SMC resumed its planned demolition of the registered huts and enforced the demolition of unregistered new huts.⁵⁵ By 1936, the SMC felt again confident enough to announce a thorough plan of demolition.⁵⁶ The International Settlement hosted by then 1,694 registered huts and 3,400 unregistered huts, with a total population of 30,439 residents.⁵⁷ The decision of the SMC generated a heated debate in the press. And again there unfolded the same process of intervention from various quarters to discourage the SMC from implementing its plan.⁵⁸ By the set date, July 15, 1936, the police

⁴⁹ SMA Q1-23-42.

⁵⁰ Christian Henriot, *Shanghai, 1927–1937: Municipal Power, Locality, and Modernization*.

⁵¹ Report GAJ [Gong'anju, Bureau of Public Security] (30/11/29), SMA Q1-23-24.

⁵² Letter: SZF [Shizhengfu, Municipal Government] to GAJ (5/5/31); Letter: GAJ (14/5/31), SMA Q1-23-24.

⁵³ Survey of Slums (June 1931), SMA Q1-23-24.

⁵⁴ Set of documents (1936), SMA Q5-3-3441. Henriot, *Shanghai, 1927–1937*, chap. 7. Zwia Lipkin came to the same conclusion about the *pinmin zhushuo* policy in the new capital, Nanjing, before 1937. Lipkin, *Useless to the State*, 124–28. On Shanghai, see also Chen, *Guilty of Indigence*, 116–20.

⁵⁵ See documents in SMA U1-4-3389.

⁵⁶ Letter: PWD to Secretary (11/9/1936), SMA U1-6-101.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

sent several squads to maintain public order and back up the workers of the Public Works Department (PWD). A barrage of women armed with their night soil cans engaged in a most unpleasant welcome.⁵⁹ The drive was postponed until September, but as before the police were greeted by an organized party of women with their night soil cans, while men attacked with stones and iron bars. The second charge managed to disperse the angry crowd.⁶⁰ Eventually, the SMC was able to dismantle the targeted huts.⁶¹ In April 1937, a new round of eviction notices was served to a group of some 470 huts targeted under the annual demolition quota. The dwellers protested and threatened to re-enact their action of forceful resistance as in 1936.⁶² Rather than risk a confrontation, the SMC paid \$14 to each dweller that accepted to move out voluntarily.⁶³ By mid-May, all the hut dwellers had moved to Zhabei.

What sort of places were “straw hut dwellings” before the Second Sino-Japanese war? It is clear that one cause for the strife between the SMC and hut dwellers was a difference in perception. Hut dwellers certainly did not perceive themselves in the same way that the SMC imagined them. Most were people with a regular form of employment. They usually rented the land on which they built their huts. They were not illegal occupants and found it hard to accept the arbitrary demolition of their housing. There was a wide range of quality, though most were elementary constructions. Yet visual evidence reveals that most of these huts differed little from dwellings in the countryside (Figures 7 & 8). Even the SMC had to admit that while some of the huts were built with materials salvaged from rubbish, almost all had straw roofs.⁶⁴ The presence of animals nearby was not very disturbing for the residents. Pigs were raised in villages, often behind the house. Whereas the PHD inspectors saw residents living in filth, amid their own excrement, there was a system of depositing night soil and other refuse in places where it was collected by coolies to be sold to peasants.⁶⁵ No doubt, PHD inspectors were right to point out the risks and deficiencies of this form of housing, especially where residents were in large numbers. High infant mortality told a story of deprivation and unsanitary conditions.⁶⁶

As the SMC came to realize at its own expense, the hutments were also organized into well-organized communities. Many came from the same region,

⁵⁹ *China Press* (13/7/1936).

⁶⁰ *North China Daily News* (3/9/1936).

⁶¹ SMP Report (14/9/1936), SMA U1-16-2199.

⁶² *China Press* (26/4/37); Report SMP (Special branch) (27/4/37), SMA U1-4-3393.

⁶³ *North China Daily News* (1/5/37).

⁶⁴ Letter: PWD to Secretary (11/9/1936), SMA U1-6-101.

⁶⁵ Report Inspector to PHD (25/3/31), SMA U1-3-1370; Report Inspector to PHD (undated–1929), SMA U1-3-1370.

⁶⁶ Christian Henriot, “‘Invisible Deaths, Silent Deaths,’ ‘Bodies Without Masters’ in Republican Shanghai.”

especially Jiangbei.⁶⁷ These were entire families or people with strong kinship ties. Unmarried males were not accepted, except when they lived with a relative. Within the community, senior figures with a “higher status” served as peacemakers to address the recurrent conflicts among residents. If this proved insufficient, residents took the culprit to the police.⁶⁸ In the absence of adequate resources, they found the best available solution for housing near their workplace.⁶⁹ From similar testimonies in the press, one gets the picture of rural communities making their transition into the urban world by erecting what can be seen as in-between spaces. Even with a proper income, many found straw huts the only way to accommodate a large family.⁷⁰ If manual workers dominated in the 1920s and 1930s, and remained prominent in the later periods, we shall see that a wide range of people eventually settled for this form of dwelling in the 1940s and 1950s.

Anti-Japanese War and Post-War “Squatter Villages”: The Great Transformation

The Japanese army blew away any hope the SMC might have entertained to eliminate straw huts. With Zhabei and parts of Hongkou razed to the ground, Chinese plant owners moved in large numbers into the International Settlement. Capital and machinery flowed in from the neighboring cities. While this allowed the city to recover quickly from its wounds, urban infrastructures did not keep up with this economic development.⁷¹ The housing shortage became even more pronounced than ever, especially in the Western District where large numbers of plants and workshops eventually settled down. In the Eastern District, the number of huts (1,177) initially decreased by 70 percent from its pre-war level in 1937 (4,341).⁷² Yet it increased again. By December 1938, the DPW had demolished no less than 10,004 huts since the end of the hostilities in the city.⁷³ Yet, all over Shanghai, migrants or homeless residents built huts and shacks, sometimes in the middle of ruins, to have a shelter in the city. Hutments were not just an issue of sheer poverty or refugees. It was clearly related to the redistribution of industries during wartime.⁷⁴

⁶⁷ On Jiangbei people and their “outcast” status in Shanghai, see Emily Honig, *Creating Chinese Ethnicity*.

⁶⁸ Memorandum Assistant Secretary (7/7/1931), SMA U1-3-1371.

⁶⁹ Letter: PWD to Secretary (11/9/1936), SMA U1-6-101.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Christian Henriot, “Shanghai Industries under Japanese Occupation: Bombs, Boom and Bust (1937–1945).”

⁷² Work Committee Minutes (21/12/1938), SMA U1-4-3394.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Henriot, “Regeneration and Mobility.”

Within its territory, the SMC basically gave up trying to contain hutment communities, and eventually entirely ceased to mention hutment demolition. In April 1938, there were 1,800 huts south of Soochow Creek and more than 4,300 in the Northern and Eastern Districts.⁷⁵ The expansion into the more central districts was unmistakable. The SMC remained keen on getting rid of those located in central neighborhoods.⁷⁶ For those located right at the border, there was nothing the SMC could do.⁷⁷ In June 1938, it could only observe the inexorable growth of hutments between the railway line and the Western District, 7,000 altogether with a population of 45,000 individuals, their numbers increasing daily.⁷⁸ There was no alternative, as the PHD admitted: "Owing to the conflict, large numbers of people who previously were sheltered are now homeless [...] it is impossible to abolish huts without running the risk of rendering large numbers of people homeless."⁷⁹ The decision was made to help improve the conditions of hut dwellers by organizing them into camps and providing manpower to make the minimal sanitary arrangements.⁸⁰ By 1940, in the Western District alone, 110,000 lived in straw huts.⁸¹

Shanghai came out of the war a devastated city. Areas like Zhabei or Hongkou had remained in their war-torn condition. In the post-war period, there was another dramatic shift in the size, spread, and nature of hut dwellings. This was no longer a form of housing linked somehow to economic development. Massive population influx actually turned the city into a massive hutment area. The control of the authorities during the war had been very weak and there was no interest in these deserted areas. The initial reaction by the new municipal authorities toward hut dwellings was to try to control their development. They had a real concern about *shirong* (city appearance), which became the main motto in public discourse.⁸² In September 1946, the municipality decided to enforce a plan of systematic removal of straw huts built before 1946 in the downtown area and to prohibit new constructions. They adopted such regulations for the sake of city beautification. Yet the municipal authorities faced a very different challenge.

As the tensions between the GMD and the CCP escalated into full war; streams of refugees sought protection in Shanghai. The scale of this migration was massive. And it was beyond the ability of the authorities to handle this issue. A deluge of migrants took over both vacant land and empty buildings. In the

⁷⁵ *Shanghai Times* (28/4/1938).

⁷⁶ Chen, *Guilty of Indigence*, 149.

⁷⁷ *Shanghai Times* (24/4/1938).

⁷⁸ Letter: PWD to Secretary (8/6/1938), SMA U1-4-3394.

⁷⁹ Letter: PHD to Secretary (2/5/1938), SMA U1-16-2195.

⁸⁰ Minutes Health Committee (20/5/1938), SMA U1-16-2195; *Municipal Gazette*, 3/6/38.

⁸¹ Memo PHD (30/8/1940), SMA U1-16-2195.

⁸² Cai Liang, "Jindai Shanghai penghu qu," 28.

1946–49 period, the population increased from 3.8 to 5.0 millions with no matching record in terms of construction. In other words, the newcomers had to make do with what they found. By November 1946, the chief of police noted that despite the new regulation, hutments had continued to increase—he estimated there were 50,000–60,000 huts in the city.⁸³ The City council itself eventually asked the municipality to refrain from removing squatter huts owing to the difficult circumstances of the population.⁸⁴ The Civil War period saw the transformation of Shanghai into a “squatter city.” It created the configuration depicted on the map published in the 1962 book about the transformation of hut dwellings (see Map 1).

The “birth of the slums” in Shanghai, such as has been often described, actually dates back to the post-war period and is related to the unfolding civil war that threw hundreds of thousands of peasants and townsmen on the road in search of safety and protection. This was a massive transformation far beyond the natural and progressive development discussed by Lu Hanchao. It was fully disconnected from earlier waves of migrants. It also happened when foreign authorities no longer existed that could suppress hutments or force them to relocate beyond their boundaries in Chinese-administered territory. Under these circumstances, hutments were no longer a “space of transition” between the countryside and the city. They received a deluge of despaired men and women who sought refuge in the city in the hope of better days. The move into the city was rapid, brutal, and massive. A wide range of people came that eventually settled in Shanghai for several decades or for good. The straw huts became their regular mode of housing. Although the large hutments concentrated in the peripheral areas where vacant land was available, many pockets, some of them substantial, encroached upon the dense urban quarters.⁸⁵

Hutments in the De-Globalizing Socialist City: From In-Between to Permanent

In 1949, the Communist authorities faced a vast expanse of hut dwellings

⁸³ Letter: GAJ to SZF (undated [1946]), SMA Q131-4-73.

⁸⁴ Letter: Taishan Police Substation 1/1947), SMA Q131-4-1581.

⁸⁵ While I agree with the main thrust of Janet Y. Chen’s interpretation of public policies toward hut dwellers, her reading overlooks the specific impact of the war, which razed all of Zhabei, parts of Hongkou and Nanshi, and made available large tracts of land in the Chinese-administered districts. While she points out the massive character of the refugee phenomenon in the postwar period, she misses the change in nature of the development of hut dwellings. The main flaw in her analysis here is the absence of a spatial perspective that would shed light on several intertwined factors in the successive stages of “squatterization” in Shanghai.

inhabited by the very “laboring masses” the CCP was keen to support and enlist. Yet the CCP’s priority after 1949 was not, and would never be, these populations *per se* or their housing conditions. The priority was on development and investment in heavy industry. The general strategy of development meant that no serious effort was made to eradicate hut dwellings. It became a neutralized and sanitized category of “housing.” Whereas Nationalist officials had had the ambition to rebuild the city and get rid of the shantytowns, the CCP accepted that reality without moral or other form of judgment. Conversely, however, it was not prepared to invest significant resources into housing renovation. In fact, one is struck by the very absence of “discourse” about hut dwellers beyond the recurrent and formulaic condemnation of foreign imperialists and Chinese reactionaries for having left such a pitiful legacy. The numerous reports made between 1950 and the mid-1960s all took for granted that hut dwellings existed and were part of the “housing market.”

It would be unfair to state that nothing was done or that city officials did not care. One obvious measure was to encourage the hut dwellers to leave Shanghai and to return to their original place. City officials sought a mix of voluntary compliance and forced repatriation under the monitoring of the Bureau of Public Safety.⁸⁶ As for concrete measures, however, they focused more on infrastructure improvement than actual renovation. For instance, the city deployed a denser grid of water hydrants that served to combat fires, but often also served as spots for water supply.⁸⁷ In the early 1950s the municipal government strove to pierce fire lanes through hutments to facilitate the access of firemen and avoid the major tragedies that struck large hutments in the past. In 1953, there were 1,944 alerts for the whole city and 538 (28%) in hutments. Yet of the 177 actual fires, 70 (40%) occurred in such areas.⁸⁸ In March 1954, the Bureau of Public Security proposed a plan for opening up fire lanes in all the hutments with more than 400 families.⁸⁹ Progress was made, but the statistical record revealed only limited achievements.⁹⁰

The second realm of intervention was sanitation and public hygiene. This concern matched that of the SMC before 1937, except that CCP officials targeted the populations living in the huts themselves. Attention to these problems translated into drains, sewers, running water and electricity. There was also an attempt to improve circulation and traffic within the hutments, even if by 1960 hut dwellers bitterly complained about not being able to bring in an ambulance or

⁸⁶ “Banfa” (22/9/1953), SMA B1-2-844-11.

⁸⁷ Letter: GAJ to SZF (6/3/1954), SMA B1-2-1536.

⁸⁸ “Benshi penghu diqu diaocha baogao,” (18/1/1957), SMA B6-2-303.

⁸⁹ Letter: GAJ to SZF (6/3/1954), SMA B1-2-1536.

⁹⁰ “Benshi penghu diqu diaocha baogao.”

remove a coffin from their home.⁹¹ These changes signaled a new dimension in public policy toward hutment areas. The concern was double. On the one hand, it was about improving circulation within the hutments by enlarging the alleys and allowing for smoother circulation. On the other hand, it was about eliminating structures that obstructed traffic in public space (along a road, at the entrance of a *linong*, etc.). This was easier to deal with, as these were mostly individual or small groups of huts.

The third level of intervention was housing improvement. City officials opted for a policy of “mobilization” and “self construction” (Fig. 9). They considered that it was beyond the financial capacity of the state—here Shanghai—to fund a complete overhaul. Besides a few profusely hailed “Workers’ Villages”—the first one opened in 1952—new constructions were limited (Figures 10 & 11).⁹² Certainly, local officials could have improved the situation markedly, but the city became the milk cow of the central government and lost control over its finances. One of the largest hutments, Fanguanong (Fig. 12), was listed in the first batch of renovation plan, but real action started only in 1960.⁹³ Over the years, the quality of hut dwellings improved slightly. For instance, straw roofs gave way to tiled roofs, which decreased the risk of fires. By and large, however, city officials transferred the responsibility for housing onto the shoulders of *danwei*, which in

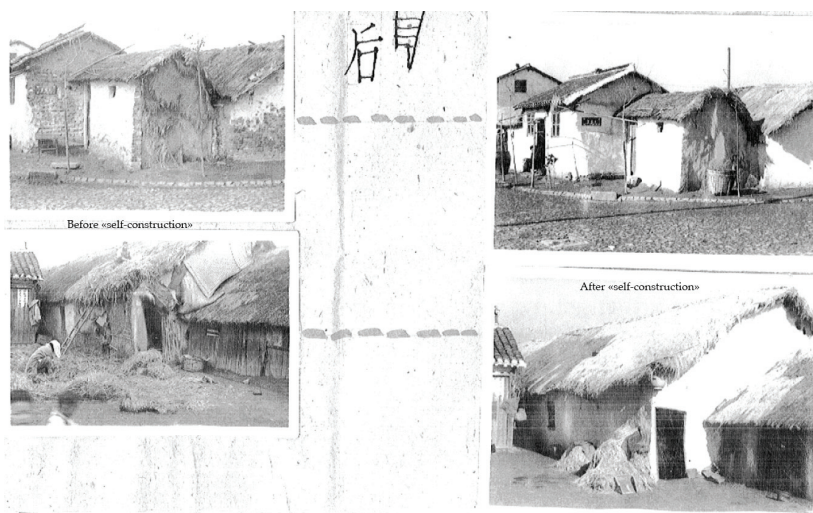


Fig. 9 Straw Huts before and after “Self-Reconstruction”

Source: Pic-B6-2-303 (Nov. 18, 1957), Shanghai Municipal Archives.

⁹¹ Report on Improvement of Xifang ziqiao penghu (12/1959), SMA A60-1-25-32.

⁹² Chen Yinfang, “Kongjian yu shehui,” 12–13.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 14.



Fig. 10 Hutment Residents Moving to New High-Rise Housing

Source: H1-11-6-44, Shanghai Municipal Archives.

turn created new inequalities in access to proper (non-hut) housing. State-run work-units had much higher revenues and capacity to build housing for employees, whereas those employed in collective units or neighborhood units could only rely on housing built by the municipality.

Basically, the municipality chose to delay or postpone the radical transformation of hutments. Their number hardly changed after 1949. Actually, it is striking to read in the reports that the municipality actually had difficulty assessing how many hutments there were in the city. The lack of a consistent system of record keeping among the various branches of the administration produced an imprecise picture of the social conditions there. Police and fire brigade stations did not record using the same units; it varied—number of families, or number of huts, or places with more than 300–500 huts (see Map 2), or entire areas as a unit, etc.⁹⁴ A general report prepared in January 1957 relied mostly on data from 1955 to which it applied a general discount of 15%. The report acknowledged that it was unable to know how many huts there were. It

⁹⁴ “Benshi penghu diqu diaocha baogao.”



Fig. 11 New Year Celebration in a New High-Rise Residence

Source: H1-11-6-45, Shanghai Municipal Archives.

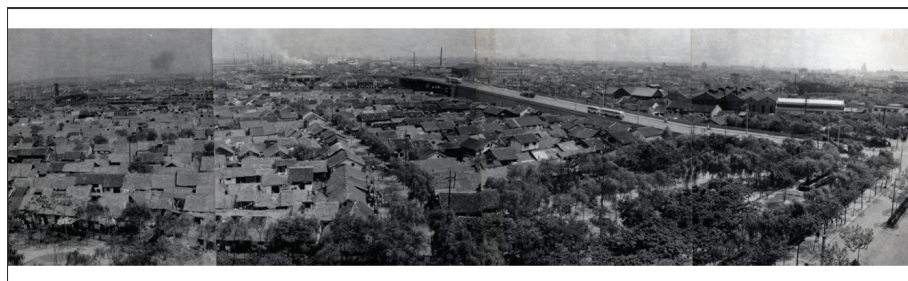
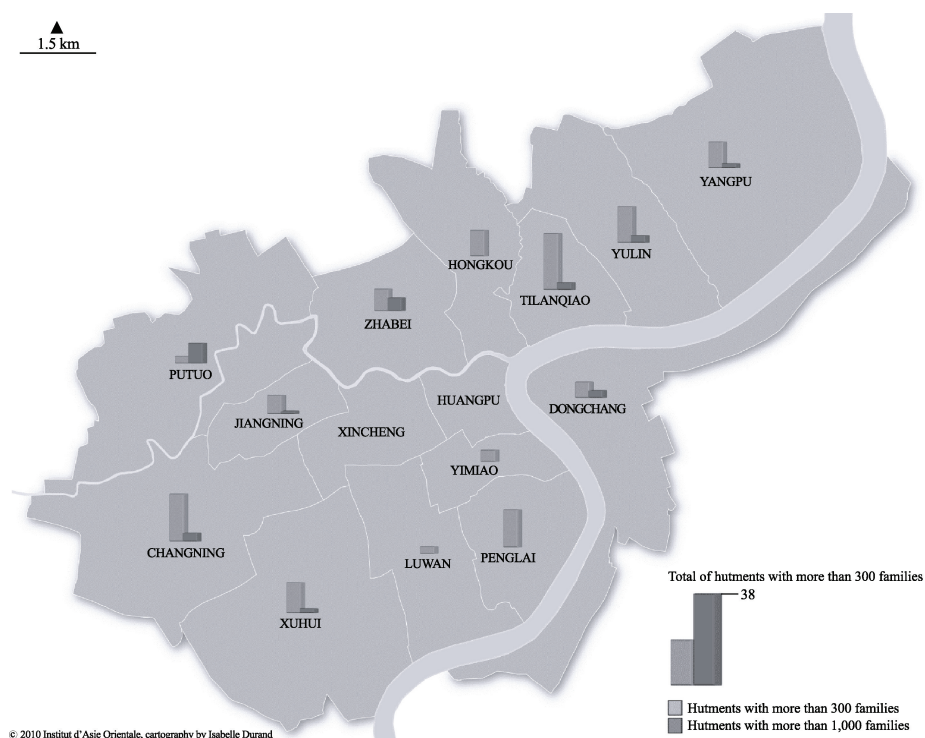


Fig. 12 General View of the Fanganong Hutment

Source: H1-11-6-41, Shanghai Municipal Archives.



Map 2 Locations of Hutments with More Than 300 Families in 1957

Source: B6-2-303, “Benshi penghu qu diaocha baogao” (Survey report on Shanghai hutments), Jan. 18, 1957, Shanghai Municipal Archives.

offered a total figure of 1.8 million square meters (3.6% of all Shanghai housing) with approximately 800,000 people (14.8% of the urban population).⁹⁵ Of the recorded 153,340 huts, 79,183 met housing conditions (52%). Conversely, 74,157 did not (48%).⁹⁶

Fundamentally, the government failed to address the issue of hutments. The initial drive to improve infrastructure faltered with the Great Leap Forward. As China came out of both the latter and the great famine badly shattered, city officials had even less resources at their disposal to work on a significant transformation of hutments. The reports of that period made it very clear how scarce resources were, and how sheer goodwill could not remedy such a lack. Once again, city officials called upon the time-tested method of people’s

⁹⁵ By comparison, in 1953–54, Madras had 306 slum localities with 59,573 huts and a population of 265,000 (for a total population slightly above one million). Singh and Kumra, “Slums: Threat to Urban Environment,” 129, 141.

⁹⁶ “Benshi penghu diqu diaocha baogao.”

mobilization, but they had little to offer beyond slogans.⁹⁷

By 1962, as economic recovery took hold, the municipality became aware of the population's heightened expectations for a better life. There was a new attempt at examining the situation—new surveys were made, stamped “secret”—and finding ways to do more than upgrade existing hutments. There was also a renewed concern about city appearance and the necessity to get rid of ugly straw huts in the city. In February 1963, the People's City Government (*shi renmin zhengfu*) adopted two resolutions prohibiting the erection of new structures.⁹⁸ By 1964, the municipality realized its efforts were fruitless. In May 1964, an internal report still blamed “imperialism and reactionaries” for the persistence of hutments in the city, but it stated plainly that state finances could not resolve the issue.⁹⁹ The People's government instructed its services at the local level to work toward dismantling unwanted structures “through discussion.”¹⁰⁰ The hutment population still represented 290,000 families (or 1.3 million individuals) living in 484,000 m². The figures were dramatic. There were 232 locations, about the same number as in 1952.¹⁰¹ In 1965, city officials observed that in the two previous years population and applications for building permits had increased: in 1963, straw huts represented 10,000 of the 15,000 applications; in 1964: they represented 20,000 of the 28,000 applications.¹⁰² They had failed to stop the process and to fundamentally transform the condition of the vast majority of hut dwellers. In the 1950s, hut dwellers represented almost a quarter of the population. In 1965, they represented only 14.5 percent of the population, but in absolute numbers they surpassed by far the pre-1949 figure. This process never stopped.¹⁰³

The process through which hutments emerged and developed in Shanghai exhibits several stages. In the early phase when hutments started to emerge in the city, they were functioned indeed as “in-between spaces” that met the most pressing needs of migrants on their way toward becoming “urban.” Located at the periphery of the core urban districts, or along the creeks and canals that crisscrossed the Chinese-administered districts, they presented an annoying, but remote problem. It took almost a quarter century after the beginning of

⁹⁷ Report (13/1/1960), SMA A60-1-25-7.

⁹⁸ The two resolutions were “Chengshi jiansheju guanyu zhizhi dajian pengwu de qingshi baogao” and “Guanyu zai shiqu jinzhi dajian pengwu de baogao,” in Report: *Shi renmin weiyuanhui gongyong shiye bangongshi* (10/3/1965), SMA B11-2-106-22.

⁹⁹ Report: *Jiansheju renmin weiyuanhui* (25/5/1964), SMA B11-2-81-1.

¹⁰⁰ Report: *Shi renmin weiyuanhui gongyong shiye bangongshi* (10/3/1965), SMA B11-2-106-22.

¹⁰¹ Report: *Jiansheju renmin weiyuanhui* (25/5/1964), SMA B11-2-81-1.

¹⁰² Report: *Shi renmin weiyuanhui gongyong shiye bangongshi* (10/3/1965), SMA B11-2-106-22.

¹⁰³ Chen Yinfang, *Penghu qu*, 20.

industrialization before the SMC took seriously notice of them. Over time and across the boundaries that fragmented the city, these spaces came to be perceived in different ways by the various and successive power-holders, as well as by the dwellers themselves. Whereas “threat,” “danger” (to public health, public order) or “eyesore,” “filth” were the most common “tags” attached to these areas, especially among Westerners, they were home to fairly well structured and organized communities, in part because many hailed from the same regions. Issues of identity, legal rights, customs became embroiled in larger concerns about sanitation, social control, categorizing, and eventually stigmatizing.

While industrialization and the need for an expanding workforce was the driving force behind the development of hutments—there was a close correlation between their distribution and the location of factories in the city—other factors played a role in the arrival of deprived and even destitute populations in Shanghai. Hut dwellers, in other words, were associated with the swelling ranks of the poor, which in turn became the target of increasingly authoritarian and less compassionate policies by modernizing elites. Yet the population that came under the various official schemes represented but a tiny proportion of all those who lived and labored in the hutments. Warfare in the summer of 1937 created a complete vacuum—an area devoid of any population and buildings—that laid the ground, literally, for a spontaneous takeover by refugees from all around Shanghai. By the time Chen Gongbo became mayor, the main hutment areas were already established. The Civil War that unfolded after 1946 spurred the further growth of hutments throughout the city. The pace and scale of this wave of construction were simply beyond control. Short of violent and bloody repression—an option never considered by the Nationalist authorities—there was nothing that could stem the flow of people. In 1949, all goodwill and sympathy notwithstanding, the Communist municipality simply left things as they were and, some technical marginal improvements aside, failed to come to terms with hutments for two decades.

Whatever the period, however, hut dweller groups hardly had any say in the way they were represented in official (and internal) reports or in the media. Hut dwellers were defined from outside and from above, even if they succeeded to gain a sympathetic ear from local Chinese political or social organizations. Hut dwellers had the capacity to voice grievances when faced with an eviction or demolition order, but they had little agency in obtaining a more positive action to improve their lot, not under the colonial regimes of the foreign settlements, the Nationalist municipality, or the Communist administration. After 1945 their sheer size made them “impregnable,” and Communist authorities, after 1949, designated them “dangerous places.” This situation led to a social and political stalemate: despite the desire of the leadership to improve and/or remove the

hutments, these liminal spaces became permanent features of the socialist urban fabric. As such, their existence was no longer a matter of public debate or a focus of social stigma in the press or elsewhere. Rather, they became a matter only discussed in internal administrative reports. Hutments actually continued to expand, becoming more extensive than any time before 1949, and to present social challenges. Yet their erasure from public discourse meant that the status quo continued without any overt public criticism.

The housing of the laboring poor and refugees was for decades social “non-places” in that apart from cursory notations in official reports and, more rarely, travel accounts, they barely came to the surface of the urban fabric. During the first sixty years of the foreign settlements’ existence, foreign and Chinese authorities were concerned with “vagrants” or “loafers” whose presence created anxieties about social order and, to a lesser degree, cleanliness. Yet during this period, peasants turned workers, peddlers, and others quietly but relentlessly started to build the in-between spaces that, when confronted with the threat of demolition, “provided the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiated new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation.” Shanghai hutments offer a more localized site of the grand vision discussed by Homi Bhabha of in-between spaces in a hybrid and incomplete colonial context. Until the late 1940s, they were places that mirrored the tensions and contradictions of an open, but fragmented society under a weak state. Eventually, the CCP brought these tensions and contradictions under a firm grip that stifled all contestation and agency, while setting a slow moving agenda for the eradication of hutments in Shanghai.

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