




RESEARCH ARTICLE

Slum clearance in a ‘semi-colony’: coercion and restraint in policing practices in 1930s Shanghai

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Abstract

Slum clearances expose hostility between municipal authorities and residents fighting to claim urban space. In colonial contexts, these processes created conflicts between rulers and the ruled. Focusing on the ‘semi-colonial’ Shanghai International Settlement, this article examines interactions between the Shanghai Municipal Police (SMP) and slum-dwellers amid an evolving crisis of urban governance in the 1930s. This case-study, grounded in Shanghai’s complex socio-political climate, reveals how ordinary Chinese residents negotiated with the authorities and points to the frailties of semi-colonial governance, showing how the SMP deployed coercion only when it was unavoidable in slum clearances.

Introduction

The 1930s were one of the most turbulent decades in Shanghai’s history. The Shanghai Municipal Council (SMC), the British-dominated institution that administered the International Settlement, Shanghai’s industrial and commercial heartland, faced an ongoing series of crises. Most significantly, the period was marked by the outbreak of hostilities between China and Japan in 1932 and 1937, with the latter conflict resulting in an occupation lasting until 1945. Large numbers of Chinese refugees made their way to Shanghai seeking sanctuary. The urban environment in Shanghai became increasingly pressured due to the growth of Shanghai’s population, economic pressures and the growing strength of nationalist and anti-imperialist political movements, especially following the establishment of a Nationalist government under the Guomindang (Nationalist Party, GMD) in 1927.

The initial rationale for the existence of the Settlement in the mid-nineteenth century had been to provide a separate space for foreign mercantile communities, but the Settlement’s celebrated wealth had made it a magnet for Chinese migrants from the neighbouring provinces and hinterlands. In 1937, on the eve of the Japanese invasion, there were 39,750 foreigners compared with about 1.2 million Chinese within the Settlement.¹ Although there were a few ‘rags to riches’ stories, a large

¹C. Henriot, *The Population of Shanghai (1865–1953) – A Sourcebook* (Leiden, 2018), 97.

proportion of Chinese migrants ended up residing in slum huts for survival.² From the mid-1920s, slums or 'hut house areas' (*penghu qu*) became a prominent feature of the Settlement. A typical hut was constructed of bamboo poles, having matting and mud-covered walls and a thatched roof. The floor area was about 8 by 15 feet, and residents could barely stand up inside.³

For the SMC, slum abodes made from salvaged material without proper drainage systems represented potential breeding grounds for infectious diseases and fire traps, threatening the well-being of residents, not least the foreigners.⁴ Foreign residents wrote to the local newspaper, complaining that slums were 'offensive to the eye' and impacted the city's day-to-day operation.⁵ Anxieties were exacerbated in the 1930s, when the Settlement was overwhelmed by the massive number of slum huts erected by wartime refugees within and bordering its boundaries.⁶

Along with their crampedness and lack of sanitation, the slums became a hotbed of protests in the 1930s when various political agitators attempted to intervene in the affairs of the Chinese in the Settlement. In response to the slum issue becoming a prominent part of the broader political crisis and undermining the order and stability of the Settlement in 1931, the SMC decided upon a quota-based demolition programme to systematically remove 10 per cent of these dwellings each year.⁷ Issues of urban management, for instance, land occupation or the regulation of rickshaws, have been shown by historians of treaty-port China, including Tim Wright and Chen Song-Chuan, to have been flashpoints for dissent against foreign-run administrations, especially when capitalized on by anti-imperialist political movements.⁸ Slum clearances in Shanghai provoked intense opposition and required careful management.

The first section of this article explains the nature of semi-colonialism in Shanghai and situates the case-study in relation to wider literature on colonial policing. We then chart the growth of slums in Shanghai and examine how the SMC's policies on urban management evolved in response. Minutes of the SMC's annual reports and meetings are deployed to demonstrate how slum clearance policies were formulated and policed. The article then explores the crucial role of the SMP in the SMC's clearance programme, showing how they dealt with quotidian urban governance alongside managing political issues as agitators mobilized slum-dwellers against 'semi-colonial' authorities. Drawing on police reports and cross-departmental correspondence on slum clearance from the Shanghai Municipal Archives and SMP Special Branch files, this article reveals how ordinary Chinese residents negotiated

²H. Lu, 'Creating urban outcasts: shantytowns in Shanghai, 1920–1950', *Journal of Urban History*, 2 (1995), 563.

³G. Schwenning, 'An attack on Shanghai slums', *Social Forces*, 6 (1927), 128.

⁴C. Henriot, 'Slums, squats, or hutments? Constructing and deconstructing an in-between space in modern Shanghai (1926–65)', *Frontiers of History in China*, 7 (2012), 499–528.

⁵Institute of Economics of Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, *Shanghai Penghu Qu de Bianqian* (The Development of Hut House Areas in Shanghai) (Shanghai, 1966), 20–2.

⁶*Ibid.*, 28.

⁷I. Jackson, 'Habitability in the treaty ports: Shanghai and Tianjin', in T. Lincoln and T. Xu (eds.), *The Habitable City in China: Urban History in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2016), 180.

⁸T. Wright, 'Shanghai imperialists versus rickshaw racketeers: the defeat of the 1934 rickshaw reforms', *Modern China*, 17 (1991), 76–111; S. Chen, 'Shame on you!: competing narratives of the nation in the Laoxikai incident and the Tianjin anti-French campaign, 1916–1917', *Twentieth-Century China*, 37 (2012), 121–38.

with the authorities and points to the frailties of semi-colonial governance, showing how the SMP deployed coercion only when it was absolutely unavoidable in slum clearances.⁹ Reports on slum demolitions in newspapers such as *The China Press* and *Shen Bao* enable us to investigate the slum-dwellers' attitudes and efforts to prevent demolitions. Finally, the article examines breaking points where violence was deployed as a last resort. This case-study reveals power dynamics between the rulers and the ruled in 1930s Shanghai and points to the frailties of semi-colonial governance during this period of crisis.

Policing a 'semi-colony': the SMP and slums in Shanghai

Scholarship on colonial policing has burgeoned in the last few decades to examine the complexities of urban governance across geographical and chronological contexts. Pioneering scholars studied colonial policing from an institutional perspective, showing how, as Britain moved into its age of imperialism in the nineteenth century, police forces developed models adapted from the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC, 1822–1922) for their own contexts.¹⁰ They demonstrated how colonial police normally operated as paramilitary forces to uphold the power structures of colonial rule, suppressing those who might disrupt stability and threaten imperial supremacy.¹¹

Newer studies have focused on the specifics of policing in the diverse social, political and economic contexts of individual colonies and territories, showing that colonial police forces were far from monolithic in the ways they preserved order.¹² Recent scholarly works have examined the policing of lower-class communities in local populations, emphasizing the police's heavy-handed tactics in addressing urban issues, such as repressing strike actions in the British Caribbean island of Trinidad during the 1930s, and combating bandits and hemp smokers in the Belgian Congo (1908–60).¹³ Georgina Sinclair, examining policing in Hong Kong, Kenya and Malaya, argues that colonial policing was multi-faceted, including paramilitary and civil practices and extraneous duties dependent on the requirements of the territory in question.¹⁴ Recognizing this heterogeneity is especially important in the case of Shanghai, a city that fits awkwardly into models of colonialism and of empire.¹⁵

Unlike British-run Hong Kong, Shanghai was not an outright colony. In the early twentieth century, politicians offered competing descriptions of the distinctive pattern of colonialism in China. Vladimir Lenin labelled China a 'semi-colony',

⁹On the role of the SMP's Special Branch, see R.M.J. Martin, 'Police work in Shanghai', *Metropolitan Police College Journal*, 2 (1936), 47.

¹⁰C. Jeffries, *The Colonial Police* (London, 1952), 31.

¹¹G. Sinclair, 'The "Irish" policeman and the empire: influencing the policing of the British empire-commonwealth', *Irish Historical Studies*, 36 (2008), 185.

¹²M. Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order: Police, Workers and Protest in the European Colonial Empires, 1918–1940* (Cambridge, 2012); D.M. Anderson and D. Killingray, *Policing the Empire: Government, Authority and Control, 1830–1940* (Manchester, 1991).

¹³Thomas, *Violence and Colonial Order*, 235–55; S. De Nys-Ketels, 'Colonial policing and urban space in the notorious *Commune Rouge* of Lubumbashi, Democratic Republic of Congo', *Urban History*, 49 (2022), 129–48.

¹⁴G. Sinclair, *At the End of the Line: Colonial Policing and the Imperial Endgame, 1945–80* (Manchester, 2010), 2.

¹⁵R. Bickers, 'Incubator city: Shanghai and the crises of empires', *Journal of Urban History*, 38 (2012), 868–70.

occupying a 'transitional stage' on the way to becoming a formal colony.¹⁶ Sun Yat-sen defined China as a 'hypo-colony', subjected to multiple forms of colonialism but accruing none of the possible benefits of having an imperial patron.¹⁷ Mao Zedong paired 'semi-colonial' with 'semi-feudal' to describe the socio-economic formation that he believed had inhibited China's transition to capitalism.¹⁸

Historical scholarship has also contemplated the complicated nature of colonialism in China. For instance, Jürgen Osterhammel suggested using the term 'informal empire' to describe zones of imperialist intrusion distinct from formal colonies.¹⁹ Focusing on the diverse functions of the SMC, Isabella Jackson has introduced the idea of 'transnational colonialism', characterized by autonomous governance by local elites instead of officials administered from the imperial metropolis, such as London, which made urban governance in Shanghai 'more akin to an independent city-state under foreign colonial control'.²⁰ Others have pointed to the impossibility of capturing the complexity of colonial formations in China with any one term.²¹

The use of the term 'semi-colonialism' in this article is inspired by Anne Reinhardt's observation that both sides of the hyphen are worthy of attention. 'Semi' denotes the distinctiveness, incompleteness and diverse manifestations of colonialism in China. 'Colonialism' underscores China's comparability and connection with formal colonies, contextualizing China within the global network of European empires.²² Through examining how the police addressed the issue of Shanghai's sprawling slums, this article sheds light on how foreign authorities exercised power in this 'semi-colony' and underscores the limits of that power during the crisis of the 1930s.

Despite the qualifier 'semi', semi-colonialism was secured by force. By the 1920s, Shanghai had overtaken Hong Kong to become the *de facto* headquarters of the British presence in China.²³ The SMC defended its territory much like a colony. It maintained its armed police force to protect life and property from internal and external threats.²⁴ It also maintained close links to British forces. For example, in early 1927, when the Settlement was threatened by a combination of a general strike, an armed communist uprising and the advance of the GMD's Northern Expedition, the SMC called on British naval forces to safeguard the lives of British subjects.²⁵

¹⁶V. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism: A Popular Outline* (New York, 1939), 79.

¹⁷Y. Sun, *San Min Chu I: The Three Principles of the People*, trans. F.W. Price, ed. L.T. Chen (Shanghai, 1927), 38–9.

¹⁸Z. Mao, *On New Democracy* (Beijing, 1954).

¹⁹J. Osterhammel, 'Semi-colonialism and informal empire in twentieth-century China: towards a framework of analysis', in W.J. Mommsen and J. Osterhammel (eds.), *Imperialism and After: Continuities and Discontinuities* (London, 1986), 290–314.

²⁰I. Jackson, *Shaping Modern Shanghai: Colonialism in China's Global City* (Cambridge, 2018), 16.

²¹See B. Goodman and D.S.G. Goodman, *Twentieth-Century Colonialism and China: Localities, the Everyday and the World* (New York, 2012), 3–9.

²²A. Reinhardt, *Navigating Semi-Colonialism: Shipping, Sovereignty and Nation-Building in China, 1860–1937* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), 3–7.

²³R. Bickers, 'Ordering Shanghai: policing a treaty port, 1854–1900', in D. Killingray, M. Lincoln and N. Rigby (eds.), *Maritime Empires: British Imperial Maritime Trade in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 2004), 175–6.

²⁴I. Jackson, 'Expansion and defence in the International Settlement at Shanghai', in R. Bickers and J.J. Howlett (eds.), *Britain and China, 1840–1970: Empire, Finance and War* (London, 2016), 187–204.

²⁵*Hansard British Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 203, cc2112–63, 16 Mar. 1927.

Some 20,000 British troops were promptly dispatched as a Shanghai Defence Force.²⁶ This military presence made a visible statement about British power in the region, reflecting the Settlement's status as a British-dominated expression of imperialism in China.

Although the SMP was not a colonial police force, as they applied Land Regulations and Byelaws as opposed to 'the law', they operated like colonial police in many ways.²⁷ As Frederic Wakeman contended, the SMP was part of global colonial networks of imperial control systems.²⁸ The SMP had followed the models of the Hong Kong Police Force and RIC, sending many SMP officers to the RIC depot for training and recruiting men directly from that force. Many senior posts were occupied by men with RIC backgrounds, such as K.J. McEuen, who arrived from Ireland as an officer cadet in 1900 and later became commissioner of police (1914–25).²⁹ Thus, although not formally colonized, the Settlement shared colonial characteristics in terms of the exercise of power, and studying the SMP's practices can enrich our understanding of the dynamics of policing across formal and informal empire.

As the police force of the largest settlement in China, the SMP have been the focus of research on urban management in China's treaty ports over the last two decades.³⁰ Isabella Jackson has investigated how both the foreign administrators and the local Chinese shaped the urban governance and operation of the Settlement and the role the SMP played in this.³¹ Robert Bickers has explored the SMP's practices of policing by consent of Chinese residents on an 'everyday' basis.³² However, he also notes that policing activities could be contentious as the police were prone to heavy-handed tactics.³³ Concentrating on Sikh policemen in the SMP, both Jackson and Cao Yin argue that the force routinely used violence and intimidation against the Chinese in the Settlement.³⁴ Building on this scholarship on the role of the SMP in urban management, this article demonstrates that rather than simply coercing and dominating the local Chinese population, the SMP adopted a range of policing tactics to regulate urban space in the 1930s. By examining how the SMC and SMP dealt with

²⁶E.S.K. Fung, 'The Sino-British rapprochement, 1927–1931', *Modern Asian Studies*, 17 (1983), 83; R. Bickers, *Empire Made Me: An Englishman Adrift in Shanghai* (London, 2003), 93–4; R. Bickers, *Britain in China: Community, Culture and Colonialism 1900–1949* (Manchester, 1999), 5.

²⁷Jackson, *Shaping Modern Shanghai*, 5.

²⁸F. Wakeman, *Policing Shanghai 1927–1937* (Berkeley, CA, 1995), 142.

²⁹Bickers, *Empire Made Me*, 36–8.

³⁰See X. Zhu, *The Police of the French Concession in Shanghai (1910–1937)* (Beijing, 2017); D. Newman, 'British colonial censorship regimes: Hong Kong, Straits Settlements, and Shanghai International Settlement, 1916–1941', in D. Biltereyst and R. Vande Winkel (eds.), *Silencing Cinema: Film Censorship around the World* (New York, 2013), 167–90.

³¹Jackson, *Shaping Modern Shanghai*.

³²R. Bickers, 'Citizenship by correspondence in the Shanghai International Settlement (1919–1943)', in Y. Chevriaux, A. Roux and X. Xiao-Planes (eds.), *Citadins et citoyens dans la Chine du xxe siècle* (Paris, 2010), 227–62.

³³R. Bickers, 'Who were the Shanghai Municipal Police, and why were they there? The British recruits of 1919', in R. Bickers and C. Henriot (eds.), *New Frontiers: Imperialism's New Communities in East Asia, 1842–1953* (Manchester, 2000), 177, 187–8.

³⁴Y. Cao, *From Policemen to Revolutionaries: A Sikh Diaspora in Global Shanghai, 1885–1945* (Leiden, 2017), 84; I. Jackson, 'The Raj on Nanjing Road: Sikh policemen in treaty-port Shanghai', *Modern Asian Studies*, 46 (2012), 1672–704.

the slums, a central concern for the Settlement's social order and public security, this case-study highlights the role of the SMP in diffusing potential crises, especially those exacerbated by nationalist movements weaponizing struggles over housing for their own political ends.

The development of slums in the Settlement and the SMC's clearance policies

Although slums became a prominent feature of the Settlement in the 1920s, their development in modern history parallels the rapid urban growth of Shanghai, which can be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century. Opened as a treaty port under the 1842 Treaty of Nanking, the Settlement was initially set aside for foreign subjects to continue their mercantile pursuits.³⁵ However, the Chinese population of the Settlement grew due to the Taiping Rebellion (1850–64) and subsequent disturbances.³⁶ Some foreigners welcomed the influx of Chinese as they appreciated the profits they might gain from sub-letting land to Chinese refugees or renting premises to them.³⁷ From the mid-1890s onwards, foreigners were allowed to open factories in China and former peasants flocked to work in factories in the Settlement.³⁸ Housing for this workforce was essential for the Settlement to operate, but many low-income Chinese were excluded from the housing market and huts began to be erected in the industrial areas at the periphery of the Settlement.³⁹

The Settlement had long been depicted by foreign residents as a 'Model Settlement' with modern municipal institutions and an orderly urban landscape.⁴⁰ According to the SMC's 1926 annual report, out of 570 dwellings (including on extra-Settlement roads, areas out of the Settlement's boundaries but regulated by the SMC and provided with essential services such as policing) that caught alight and were destroyed, 91 per cent (521) were slum huts.⁴¹ English-language newspapers portrayed these dwellings as conflagration traps that should be swept away.⁴² Unsatisfactory ventilation and sewage also drew the attention of the SMC's Public Health Department (PHD). Characterizing slums as a breeding ground for communicable diseases in a meeting in July 1929, the commissioner of public health recommended that the SMC should cause these to be removed as expeditiously as possible.⁴³ This could be done under the Byelaws and Chinese Building Regulations issued by the SMC in 1900, which had been updated in 1916. According to Article XXXIII of the Byelaws, 'no one was allowed to undertake the building of any straw or

³⁵W.W. Lockwood, 'The International Settlement at Shanghai, 1924–34', *American Political Science Review*, 28 (1934), 1032.

³⁶H. Lu, *Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century* (Berkeley, 1999), 34.

³⁷R. Feetham, *Report of the Hon. Mr. Justice Richard Feetham*, vol. I (Shanghai, 1931), 32–3.

³⁸Osterhammel, 'Semi-colonialism', 301–2.

³⁹Lu, *Beyond the Neon Lights*, 116.

⁴⁰The term first appeared on 5 Feb. 1859 in 'Comment' in the *North China Herald*, when it hailed with pleasure the prospect of some intellectual amusement in the Settlement. Since then, it has been at the heart of the SMC's constructed history and active policies.

⁴¹SMC, *Report for the Year 1926* (Shanghai, 1927), 14. On extra-Settlement roads, see Jackson, 'Expansion and defence', 194.

⁴²*China Press*, 3 Jun. 1929, 1; *Shanghai Morning Post and Mercury*, 4 Nov. 1931, 1.

⁴³SMC, *The Minutes of the SMC Vol. XXIV*, 10 Jul. 1929, 230.

Table 1. Slum occupants and foreign population in the Settlement, 1926–36

Year	Total slum huts in the Settlement limits ^a	Total occupants in slums	Total foreign population in the Settlement limits ^b
1926	1,282	5,600	29,947
1931	2,274	11,400	17,993
1936	5,094	25,345	28,823 ^c

Notes and sources

^aFigures of slum huts and occupants from SMC, *Municipal Gazette of the Council for the Foreign Settlement of Shanghai Vol. XXIX*, 23 Oct. 1936, 351.

^bSMC, *Shanghai Municipal Council Censuses, 1865–1942*: www.virtualshanghai.net/Texts/E-Library?ID=1354, accessed 15 Dec. 2023.

^cSMC, *Report for the Year 1936* (Shanghai, 1937), 110.

other buildings, and the Council may remove, alter or pull down any work begun or done'.⁴⁴ Slum huts transgressed these requirements in many fundamental ways. However, the SMC made little progress in the 1920s without a plan for systematic clearances.

Table 1 shows the development of slums in the Settlement from 1926 to 1936. In 1926, most slum huts were in Yangshupu, an industrial area north-east of the Settlement, numbering 1,282 with 5,600 occupants.⁴⁵ The situation became more alarming as slums spread into the Settlement's Northern and Western Districts, and the number of slum abodes doubled to 2,274 with 11,400 occupants in 1931. In 1936, more than 25,000 people resided in slums, nearly equalling the total foreign population (28,823) in the Settlement (excluding the extra-Settlement roads area).⁴⁶ The crisis peaked with the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–45), which exacerbated overcrowding in the Settlement. According to the SMC's annual report of 1938, about 10,222 more huts, housing more than 100,000 occupants, were found in the Western District.⁴⁷ Of these, 10,044 were in the western extra-Settlement roads area.⁴⁸ By contrast, the city's French Concession had relatively fewer problems with slums throughout the period because it lacked industry and discouraged labouring Chinese from settling there. The Concession authorities prohibited any form of non-permanent and inflammable construction, immediately demolishing any illegal constructions, including pony sheds and slum huts.⁴⁹

In the Settlement, clearance efforts were complicated by a range of factors, including a recognition that slum-dwellers were a necessary part of the industrial workforce, and a wariness of the opposition clearances provoked. In a report to the council of the SMC in December 1926, the commissioner of public works detailed the composition of slum occupants, countering the general notion of hut-dwellers as beggars and found that almost 87 per cent among the nearly 14,400 surveyed were gainfully employed, including 1,340 children who worked in textile mills.⁵⁰ T.K. Ho,

⁴⁴W.H. Widdowson, *Police Guide and Regulations* (Shanghai, 1938), 512; F. Tang, *Dushi Jianzhu Kongzhi* (Urban Building and Governance) (Nanjing, 2009), 76–97, 143–55.

⁴⁵J.Y. Chen, *Guilty of Indigence: The Urban Poor in China, 1900–1953* (Princeton, 2012), 81–2.

⁴⁶SMC, *Municipal Gazette of the Council for the Foreign Settlement of Shanghai Vol. XXIX*, 23 Oct. 1936, 351; SMC, *Report for the Year 1936* (Shanghai, 1937), 110.

⁴⁷SMC, *Report for the Year 1938* (Shanghai, 1939), 206, 218.

⁴⁸Shanghai Municipal Archives (SMA) U1–4–5767, commissioner of public works' report on squatters' huts, 21 Dec. 1938.

⁴⁹Henriot, 'Slums', 503; Zhu, *The Police of the French Concession*, 51–2.

⁵⁰SMA U1–3–1370, report to the secretary of the SMC, 8 and 21 Dec. 1926.

assistant secretary of the SMC, noted in a 1936 report that most hut-dwellers were manual workers and that almost no beggars resided in the huts.⁵¹

Having recognized that slum-dwellers were an essential part of the industrial workforce, the SMC decided to evict them gradually to limit the impact on the cost of labour supply for industrial production.⁵² The SMC had decided upon a quota-based demolition policy to address the slum problem on 7 July 1931.⁵³ This entailed an annual reduction of 10 per cent of slum dwellings. The process started with registering existing slum huts in November 1931.⁵⁴ All slum huts and dwellings of a similar kind in the Settlement erected without sanction from the authorities after that registration period were considered by the SMC to be unregistered and would be demolished as soon as they were detected.

The task of slum clearance was assigned to the SMC's Public Works Department (PWD). However, considering the scale of the problem, F.G. Helsby, the deputy commissioner of public works, argued that police participation was necessary. He asked the SMP to supervise demolitions and prevent any untoward incidents arising from resistance by slum-dwellers.⁵⁵ The SMC approved the SMP's assistance in slum clearances in October 1932.⁵⁶

Clearances took place in 1932 and 1933, but were suspended in 1934 due to opposition from Chinese political authorities and social organizations.⁵⁷ However, the SMP and PWD continued to remove newly erected huts. The number of demolitions was insignificant, and the number of huts rapidly increased.⁵⁸ In his report in 1936, J.H. Jordan, the commissioner of public health, re-emphasized that the slums were hotbeds for vermin and flies, assisting in the spread of diseases in the Settlement.⁵⁹

There were increasing complaints from residents about slums, publicly asking the authorities to eradicate them aggressively. In November 1936, a ratepayer complained about huts 'increasing day by day' through the *North China Daily News*. Treating them as a source of noise and disorder, the resident urged the SMC to remove the constructions, keeping the district 'quiet and silent'.⁶⁰

Mercantile communities also complained to the SMC, asking it to take immediate action against the slums, which had increased to such a level that severely affected business.⁶¹ Under pressure from the PWD, PHD and ratepayers, the SMC was compelled to consider a social housing scheme proposed by Yu Qiaqing, a Chinese councillor on the SMC. Yu had received letters from the slum-dwellers suggesting the establishment of areas for poor people like the model 'People's Villages' constructed by the Chinese Shanghai Municipal Government.⁶² Mayor Zhang Qun had

⁵¹SMA U1-14-5275, huts in the Settlement, assistant secretary of the SMC, 20 Jun. 1936.

⁵²*North China Daily News (NCDN)*, 16 Oct. 1936, 11.

⁵³*China Press*, 14 Jul. 1931, 4.

⁵⁴*Shanghai Times*, 17 Jul. 1931, 6.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 19 Nov. 1931, 4.

⁵⁶SMA U1-14-5762, demolition of unregistered beggar huts, 20 Oct. 1932.

⁵⁷SMA U1-14-5676, commissioner of public works to secretary of the SMC, 19 Apr. 1937.

⁵⁸*NCDN*, 16 Oct. 1936, 11.

⁵⁹SMC, *Report for the Year 1936*, 174.

⁶⁰*NCDN*, 20 Nov. 1936, 2.

⁶¹See SMA U1-16-2200, manager of Patons & Baldwins to commissioner of public health, 9 May 1936.

⁶²*Shishi Xinbao*, 4 Sep. 1936, 2; SMC, *The Minutes of the SMC Vol. XXVII*, 14 Oct. 1936, 75-6.

established a People's Housing Committee in the Chinese-administered area of Shanghai in 1929 to build 3,000 units in six villages with a budget of \$600,000 from government funds and bank loans. Between 1929 and 1931, the committee constructed more than 700 units for the urban poor but suspended the project in 1932 due to the Sino-Japanese conflict (January 28 Incident).⁶³ However, the SMC did not implement a similar plan. Notably, the council of the SMC was mainly comprised of members of the mercantile community, and it primarily served the interests of the business elites and qualified land renters.⁶⁴ A project like this would have to primarily depend on private investors and philanthropic enterprises. Shanghai's economy had been affected by the Great Depression from the United States and Europe after 1932, and funding was not forthcoming.⁶⁵

Considering it necessary and desirable, the SMC resumed quota clearances between 1936 and 1938, when the quota-based removal scheme was again suspended. In a meeting, the commissioner of public works proposed that continuing would be unwise, given an increasing influx of refugees due to the Second Sino-Japanese War.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, individual clearance works continued. As the commissioner of police wrote to the secretary in 1938, the police would continue assisting in slum clearances when dwellings caused an obstruction and if residents occupied private properties without permission and the owners complained.⁶⁷ We now turn to examining policing methods and SMP interactions with slum-dwellers during the slum clearances by quota described above.

Semi-colonial policing and confrontations with slum-dwellers

The first quota demolition was on 25 October 1932, when 550 slum huts in the eastern and the western areas were removed.⁶⁸ A detachment of police was sent out from the Yangshupu Station in the eastern area and Pootoo Road and Gordon Road Stations in the western area, co-operating with approximately 150 PWD coolies, to urge the residents to remove their own huts from the scene.⁶⁹ Under police monitoring, 650 slum huts were demolished in 1933 (see Table 2). Although quota-based demolitions ceased in 1934, the SMP continued removing newly erected slums. The SMC restored its drive to clear slum huts in 1936.⁷⁰

It was rare for slum clearances to proceed without confrontation. Facing resistance and sometimes aggressive reactions from slum-dwellers, the SMP avoided employing coercive measures and pursued negotiation wherever possible. One notable instance involved a slum removal in the Eastern Settlement on 10 July 1936. To demolish four slum huts in Yangshupu, more than 50 detectives from the Yulin Road Police Station proceeded to Qiqihar Road along with armed police officers from the Reserve Unit (the SMP's riot squad) of the Antung Road sub-station of the Yangshupu Police

⁶³Chen, *Guilty*, 117–18.

⁶⁴Jackson, *Shaping Modern Shanghai*, 66–7.

⁶⁵SMC, *The Minutes of the SMC Vol. XXVII*, 14 Oct. 1936, 75–6.

⁶⁶SMA U1–14–3394, work committee minutes, 21 Dec. 1938.

⁶⁷SMA U1–14–5767, defence perimeter, 17 Feb. 1938.

⁶⁸SMC, *Report for the Year 1932* (Shanghai, 1933), 211.

⁶⁹SMA U1–14–5762, demolition of unregistered beggar huts, 20 Oct. 1932.

⁷⁰*China Press*, 16 Oct. 1936, 13–14.

Table 2. Slum huts removed within the Settlement^a

Year	Total slum huts demolished
1932	550
1933	650 ^b
1934	34 ^c
1935	253
1936	419
1937	659

Notes and sources

^aFigures from SMC, *Report for the Year 1931–37*.

^bIn addition to the slum huts demolished, 402 pig pens were removed by the PWD coolies in co-operation with the SMP. See SMC, *Report for the Year 1933* (Shanghai, 1934), 193, 277.

^cThis figure is from the report regarding slum huts in the Settlement by T.K. Ho, assistant secretary of the SMC, in 1936. See Shanghai Municipal Archives U1–14–5275, 20 Jun. 1936. The figure was incomplete because it only counted demolished slum huts in the Western Settlement.

Station and several PWD employees.⁷¹ On arrival, the SMP officers were met by approximately 600 slum occupants blocking the road with sticks, bars and bricks. Women and children were in front, staging a barricade with ordure nightsoil buckets. The residents became increasingly defiant, showing their determination by throwing the buckets on the ground. Later, a crowd of approximately 2,000 slum-dwellers gathered, some of whom came from nearby areas scheduled to be demolished later in the year.⁷² Encountering such a threatening crowd, the police employed consultation with slum-dwellers' representatives, and finally, the police and the PWD workers agreed on a five-day extension for them to remove the huts themselves.⁷³ The demolition was later temporarily postponed until late summer 1936 under the mediation of Yu Qiaqing.⁷⁴

One factor driving the SMP to avoid deploying coercion stemmed from their understanding of how slum-dwellers' resistance was organized. In a report submitted to the SMC secretary on slum huts on 31 July 1936, the commissioner of police acknowledged that drastic action, such as baton charges, would effectively facilitate slum clearances. However, he doubted the advisability of such an option because the slum-dwellers were a powerful collective body and would defend what they considered to be their rights by force. Several clashes with the SMP had already taken place. More importantly, the SMP believed that the slum-dwellers were organized by 'loafers', referring to local gangsters and low-level thugs, as well as the 'watchman' of the land employed by the land-renters, who collected protection fees or 'rents' from these communities.⁷⁵ Realizing that successful demolition would remove a source of revenue, these 'undesirable elements' would urge slum-dwellers to oppose evictions with violence. John Fairbairn, a Special Branch officer, contended that to solve slum problems, detecting and arresting 'undesirables' would likely yield better results than using coercion against ordinary residents.⁷⁶

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 13 Jul. 1936, 9.

⁷²SMA U1–16–2200, squatter huts demolition attempt failure, 10 Jul. 1936.

⁷³SMA U1–14–5275, a report on the straw huts by the PWD, 18 Jul. 1936; *Da Gong Bao*, 12 Jul. 1936, 14.

⁷⁴*Shen Bao*, 16 Jul. 1936, 12.

⁷⁵SMA U1–14–5275, a report on beggar huts, 18 Jul. 1936.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, a report on squatter huts, 31 Jul. 1936.

External political forces, notably the GMD, attempted to mobilize Chinese citizens residing in the foreign concessions against the British presence, further complicating the urban context and influencing the SMP's policing tactics. The SMC's slum clearance could be escalated by the GMD into diplomatic issues between Britain and China.

Collaboration between slum-dwellers and the GMD is discernible in the activities of the Hut-Dwellers' Association in the 1930s. The association, established in 1936, was initially put forth by slum-dwellers as an organization for mutual assistance and as a vehicle for collective negotiation with the authorities.⁷⁷ However, as a Chinese organization, it was subject to the Regulations on People's Organizations (*Renmin Tuanti Zuzhi Fang'an*), passed by the Chinese government in 1929. According to these regulations, self-organized bodies should receive state instructions regarding their ritual and educational activities and accept the 'leadership and guidance' of representatives of the GMD's Party Branch Office in Shanghai and the Bureau of Social Affairs in their meetings.⁷⁸

The SMP's intelligence noted that Chen Jiufeng, a committee member of the First Special District Citizens' Federation (FSDCF), was directing slum-dwellers' affairs in the Settlement.⁷⁹ Formerly known as the Federation of Street Unions (1919–30), the FSDCF was reorganized and inaugurated in December 1931 under the GMD as an organ looking after Chinese affairs in the Settlement, arranging political movements and anti-imperialist propaganda among the Chinese and agitating against the SMC.⁸⁰

It was also reported that two representatives of slum-dwellers, Tang Anping and Xu Xiguang, after the establishment of the association, went to the office of the FSDCF for 'citizenship training' by the GMD Branch Office in Shanghai.⁸¹ A letter to the chairman and the secretary of the SMC in October 1936, signed by 7,000 hut-dwellers, stated that during a meeting regarding how to persuade the SMC to rescind the demolition order, Tang and Xu had made inflammatory speeches with slogans such as 'Down with Imperialism'.⁸² Recognizing that slum demolitions could become flashpoints for political unrest in a heated political environment, the SMC acknowledged that there were significant risks that any heavy-handed measures might provoke radical and collective resistance at the grassroots.⁸³

The quota demolition in the spring of 1937, when the SMP dealt with recalcitrant slum-dwellers in the Eastern District, is a noteworthy case to illustrate how the police, restrained from exercising 'corporal punishment' against the Chinese population, strategically maintained urban order.⁸⁴

⁷⁷*Da Gong Bao*, 8 Aug. 1936, 14.

⁷⁸US National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) D3358, Citizens' Federation, 8 Mar. 1938; B. Goodman, *Native Place, City and Nation* (Berkeley, 1995), 292.

⁷⁹NARA D7479, Squatters' Federation meeting, 28 Aug. 1936.

⁸⁰NARA D3358, Citizens' Federation, 22 Mar. 1932.

⁸¹*Shen Bao*, 13 Aug. 1936, 13; Shanghai Shi Tongzhiguan Nianjian Weiyuanhui, *Shanghai Shi Nian Jian*, 1936 (Yearbook of Shanghai, 1936) (Shanghai, 1946), 590.

⁸²SMA U1-4-3392, letter to the chairman and secretary of the SMC by 7,000 hut-dwellers in east and west Shanghai, 21 Jul. 1936.

⁸³SMC, *The Minutes of the SMC Vol. XXVII*, 28 Apr. 1937, 148–9.

⁸⁴*Li Bao*, 8 May 1937, 3; *Shanghai Times*, 10 May 1937, 1.

Around 500 huts in the Eastern District were scheduled for removal by early May 1937.⁸⁵ An increasing number of petitions from slum-dwellers appeared to save their homes from removal. In a manifesto published in *Min Bao* (16 April 1937), slum-dwellers declared, in a threatening tone, that ‘we will protect our homes whatever the cost and another May Thirtieth Incident is not far away’.⁸⁶ Here, the protestors were referring to the nation wide anti-imperialist movement of 1925 that had begun with the SMP firing on protestors in Shanghai. As a precaution, from 16 April, the SMP dispatched foreign and Chinese detectives to patrol the area daily and encourage voluntary demolitions by residents.⁸⁷

Despite these precautions, as the date of demolition approached (3 May 1937), the SMP met with demonstrations and resistance from hut-dwellers who attempted to make slum clearance an international issue. From 8.30 in the morning of 26 April, slum-dwellers gathered along Chaoyang Road, and several detectives and police officers were sent from the Yangshupu Police Station to attempt to disburse the crowd. At 9 o’clock, the crowd had grown to such proportions, around 3,000, that the station police present sent a riot call to the Reserve Unit. Further, as more than 300 marchers managed to reach Jiangxi Road, the city centre, the Central Police Station called on the Russian Regiment of the Shanghai Volunteer Corps to guard the SMC’s administration building, forestalling any possible disturbances.⁸⁸ Despite this tense situation, especially when Detective Superintendent Kao Yen-ken, in charge of the Yangshupu Police Station, identified GMD-linked Tang Anping and Xu Xiguang as the leaders of the march, the SMP were unwilling to resort to lethal force to disperse the crowd as they had done in 1925.⁸⁹ The police escorted and monitored the crowd, before parleying with the demonstrators, who agreed to appoint 12 delegates to talk to T.K. Ho, assistant secretary of the SMC, while the police observed and contained the remainder.⁹⁰

In addition to agitation by the GMD, this clearance was also opposed by the Chinese Ratepayers’ Association (CRA), a group that represented the Chinese bourgeoisie in the Settlement and closely co-operated with the SMC in urban governance.⁹¹ The CRA excoriated the SMC’s actions for transgressing Chinese laws. Slum-dwellers identified themselves as residents whose lives and property should be protected by the laws and regulations. In pushing for concessions on slum clearances, occupants strategically solicited help from social bodies to defend their position. Upon receiving a petition from protestors, the CRA wrote to the SMC in mid-April urging postponement.⁹² It particularly underscored that the SMC’s actions breached Article X of the Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China, which stated that ‘the residences of the people must not be invaded, searched or sealed’.⁹³

⁸⁵SMC, *Report for the Year 1937* (Shanghai, 1938), 194.

⁸⁶*Min Bao*, 16 Apr. 1937, 7.

⁸⁷*Da Gong Bao*, 29 Apr. 1937, 7.

⁸⁸*Shanghai Times*, 27 Apr. 1937, 4; NCDN, 29 Apr. 1937, 9.

⁸⁹SMA U1–14–5676, Squatters’ Federation activities, 27 Apr. 1937; SMC, *The Minutes of the SMC Vol. XXVII*, 28 Apr. 1937, 147.

⁹⁰NCDN, 27 Apr. 1937; NARA D7479, an appeal by the squatters of the Eastern District against the demolition of their huts, 26 Apr. 1937.

⁹¹Jackson, *Shaping Modern Shanghai*, 75.

⁹²*Min Bao*, 13 Apr. 1937, 7.

⁹³*Shenzhou Ribao*, 26 Apr. 1937, 5; F. Zhu, *Zhonghua Minguo Xunzheng Shiqi Yuefa Xiangjie* (Explanation on the Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China for the Period of Political Tutelage) (Shanghai, 1936), 7.

The SMC tried its best to refrain from escalating disputes over the life of ordinary Chinese into diplomatic discussions between the general consulate of Great Britain and Chinese authorities. To preserve its semi-colonial presence and avoid repeating the events of 1925, the SMC began to offer compensation to slum occupants.⁹⁴ The SMP's policy of exercising restraint in conflicts with slum-dwellers was broadly effective: the occupants of 473 slum huts took down their sheds under the deterrence of armed police officers and claimed compensation from the SMC for voluntary demolitions on 10 May 1937.⁹⁵

The Second Sino-Japanese War altered the Settlement landscape. Apart from the annual quota of demolitions, the commissioner of public works, in his annual reports for 1937 and 1938, noted that a large quantity of registered slum huts were destroyed in areas affected by hostilities.⁹⁶ According to the minutes of the Works Committee dated 21 December 1938, there were 1,177 registered slum huts in the Settlement at the end of 1938, compared with 4,341 at the outbreak of hostilities, showing a reduction of more than 70 per cent.⁹⁷ The SMC was 'between the devil and the deep blue sea', however, because, as a public health official commented, the number of slum occupants remained so significant that if they were evicted, they would scatter throughout the Settlement, upsetting the social order and public security.⁹⁸ Considering that it would not be wise to provoke unrest during a crisis by continuing demolitions by quota, the SMC suspended this programme.⁹⁹

However, the SMP's involvement in removals continued in cases where huts caused an obstruction or where squatters occupied private properties without permission. At the request of landlords, the SMP demolished several slum huts in November 1938.¹⁰⁰ In one example, the Shanghai Silk Piece Goods Dealers' Association, the landowner of a piece of land on Cunningham Road (one extra-Settlement road in the Western Settlement), petitioned the SMC to remove slum occupants so that the site could be developed.¹⁰¹ Representatives of the SMP, PWD and the landlord told occupants on 12 November 1938 to remove themselves by 30 November. Those who failed to comply would have their huts forcefully destroyed.¹⁰²

During the process, the police officers identified the occupants as 'Kompo' people. The word 'Kompo' was used in the Shanghai dialect to refer to the impoverished Jiangbei region to the north of Shanghai. The commissioner of police perceived them as potential troublemakers who should be expelled from the Settlement.¹⁰³ However, most of them were working people, and previous confrontations had taught the authorities that coercive interventions produced strikes, impacting the Settlement's industrial production and day-to-day operation.¹⁰⁴ The SMP tried to avoid clashes

⁹⁴SMC, *Report for the Year 1927* (Shanghai, 1928), 114–18.

⁹⁵*Shanghai Times*, 10 May 1937, 1.

⁹⁶SMC, *Report for the Year 1937*, 182; SMC, *Report for the Year 1938*, 206.

⁹⁷SMA U1–14–5767, commissioner of police to acting commissioner of public works, 6 Jun. 1938.

⁹⁸*China Press*, 29 May 1938, 3.

⁹⁹SMA U1–14–5767, squatters' huts, 29 Dec. 1938.

¹⁰⁰SMA U1–14–3394, refugees in the Ta Kong Li, 3 Nov. 1938.

¹⁰¹SMA U1–4–3395, Shanghai Silk Piece Goods Dealers' Association to T.K. Ho, 29 Oct. 1938.

¹⁰²SMA U1–6–582, notice to the hut-dwellers on land at no. 1 Cunningham Road, 11 Nov. 1938.

¹⁰³SMA U1–4–3395, hut-dwellers on Cunningham Road, 3 Nov. 1938. For more on 'Kompo' people, see E. Honig, *Creating Chinese Ethnicity: Subei People in Shanghai, 1850–1980* (New Haven, 1992), 63–8, 94.

¹⁰⁴SMA U1–14–5275, a report on squatter huts, 31 Jul. 1936.

with the industrial workforce, preserving order in the Settlement. Under the SMP's supervision and day-to-day patrolling in the vicinity, the 'Kompo' people in question voluntarily demolished their huts, and no clashes occurred.¹⁰⁵ The SMP chiefly functioned as a deterrent, monitoring and patrolling where possible to discourage hut-dwellers from resisting. Their non-direct intervention and non-lethal tactics were shaped by their understanding of the slum-dwellers' nature and the potential social and political consequences of direct confrontation.

A 'challenge to law and order': when the SMP resorted to coercion in slum demolition

Despite the SMP's caution in policing slum clearances, when order was at stake and violent collective resistance appeared, the SMP exercised strong-arm tactics to guarantee clearances. Once coercion commenced, the SMP employed force until demolition work was completed. As the commissioner of public works reported to the Works Committee of the SMC in October 1936, it was essential for the SMP to forcefully overcome slum-dwellers' opposition when needed, ensuring that these occupants had no false hope that the authorities could be intimidated and that their houses could be made permanent.¹⁰⁶

Fierce fighting between the SMP and the hut-dwellers in the Eastern District in September 1936 can well exemplify the coercive side of the SMP's policing. On 28 August 1936, PWD officers observed an addition to slum hut number 448, occupied by Wang Baoliang, under construction. The PWD notified Wang that his construction violated Article XXXIII of the Byelaws. Despite repeated requests from PWD officers, accompanied by the inspector in charge of the Yangshupu Police Station, on 29 August and then on 1 September, Wang was adamant about keeping the structure, ignoring the warnings.¹⁰⁷ To enforce the demolition, a party of PWD coolies, assisted by two foreign policemen and four Chinese police constables, arrived at the site at 9.15 on 2 September. They were met by around 400 occupants, including Wang, some of whom would face eviction later in the year. They had gathered sticks and stones, hoping to force the authorities to repeal the order.¹⁰⁸ Given previous warnings and the crowd's hostility, the SMP considered this a threatening mob with which it was impossible to negotiate. Thus, the officers called in 50 armed police to complete the demolition. The arrival of reinforcements stirred the wrath of the hut-dwellers, and a crowd of women proceeded to throw ordure at the police. As the police attempted to disarm the women, the hut-dwellers immediately attacked the officers with bricks, sticks and other objects.¹⁰⁹ Consequently, the SMP ordered a baton charge. This 45-minute clash resulted in injuries to 15 police officers, and 7 slum-dwellers were arrested.¹¹⁰ With heavy-handed tactics, the SMP guaranteed the clearances, demonstrating that the SMC could not be disobeyed.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵*Xin Wen Bao*, 3 Dec. 1938, 20.

¹⁰⁶*NCDN*, 16 Oct. 1936, 11.

¹⁰⁷*Shishi Xinbao*, 10 Sep. 1936, 10; *Shanghai Times*, 4 Sep. 1936, 4.

¹⁰⁸SMA U1-14-5275, squatter huts, 3 Sep. 1936.

¹⁰⁹NARA D7479, demolition of squatter hut results in riot, 3 Sep. 1936; *NCDN*, 3 Sep. 1936, 9.

¹¹⁰*NCDN*, 10 Sep. 1936, 10.

¹¹¹SMA U1-16-2200, squatter huts general situation, 14 Sep. 1936.

Conclusion

As a commercial and industrial centre, the Settlement accommodated a large population of Shanghai's urban poor, many of whom resided in slums. From the early 1920s, the SMC considered slums a great source of trouble and a stain on the reputation of the 'Model Settlement'. Their efforts to clear slum areas became a focal point for conflicts between the SMP and ordinary Chinese slum-dwellers, some of whom had the backing of political organs or local gangsters. This article has shown how the SMP addressed this issue in the 1930s, one of the most turbulent times in Shanghai's history.

It has shown how, in contrast to policing activities elsewhere in the formal British empire conventionally identified as oppressive and brutal, the SMP deployed flexible policing tactics and adjusted their strategies to avoid conflicts with Chinese slum residents where possible. Their caution in deploying violence resulted from an awareness of the increasingly volatile environment of the 1930s, in which the SMC's political position was threatened. Through pragmatism and flexibility, the SMP tried to diffuse tensions, maintaining order and safeguarding the semi-colonial headquarters of the British presence in China.

Resistance from below further complicated urban governance in semi-colonial Shanghai. When direct negotiations with authorities to safeguard their homes failed, slum-dwellers resorted to various Chinese social-political organs to turn local issues into diplomatic matters, pushing the SMC to make concessions. Groups of social 'undesirables', pursuing their own interests, also instigated grassroots communities to protest violently against the police.

The SMP resorted to armed force when aggressive resistance affected removal actions. Once the use of coercion commenced, it was deployed until demolitions were completed to convince hut-dwellers of the SMC's determination to carry out clearances. By doing this, the police ensured that subsequent actions were implemented without disorder while preserving the position of the semi-colonial authorities.

The article has explored the role of the SMP as a vehicle for the foreign authorities to exercise power and impose order on society in slum clearances in semi-colonial Shanghai. It has elucidated a crucial dimension of how and to what extent foreign authorities exercised power at the grassroots during the crisis era of the 1930s and illuminated power dynamics between the rulers and the ruled in this semi-colonial urban space. Future comparative works could explore policing slums across different 'informal colonies' or the policing of different sub-groups of the local population, including prostitutes and ragpickers, bringing insights into heterogeneity in governing practices within a wider global process of European expansion.

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