

The Paper Chase by Joseph Swan

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The Shanghai Paper Hunt Club was an emblem of continuous powerful presence of the British and other westerners in Shanghai. The Club typified the remarkable detachment of the foreign community to the turbulent events taking place in China in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Founded in the 1860s in the midst of the Taiping Rebellion (1850-64), the Club thrived through revolutions, warlord control, communist insurgency and suppression, the Japanese occupation and civil war.

The “Paper Hunt,” or “Hare and Hounds,” was a common sport played by athletic clubs of the major towns of England and eventually transplanted to other parts of the British colonial empire. Instead of hunting for animals, one member of the team would ride ahead to act as the hunted prey, marking the trail with colored paper. The sport attracted the young and ambitious among Shanghai’s traders, bankers and diplomats. Women were at first restricted to the “Ladies Paper Hunt,” but were permitted to join the men on a limited basis after 1929. That year, the Club also allowed a Chinese businessman to join the ranks of its stewards for the first time, Stanley Wang, educated at Cambridge.

The Paper Hunt took place in the countryside around Shanghai on the small local horses dubbed “China Ponies.” Trails were established through local farm lands from November to March, when the lands lay fallow. Riders complained of hostility from the local Chinese farmers, who resented this presumptuous encroachment on their lands and occasionally threw rocks or sabotaged the trails. Some trails ran perilously close to ancestral grave mounds (some seem visible in this clip), forcing riders to swerve around or occasionally leap over them. The Club made payments to local officials to placate the discontent, pay for damaged farmland and rebuild the bridges and trails in amounts ranging from \$18 in 1889 to \$5000 annually in the late 1920s.

While Hunt Club seemed moderately aware of the hostilities engendered by their sport, they dismissed the complaints as “obstructiveness and offensiveness” on the part of the local villagers, or as the work of political “extremists.” They saw the paper chase not as an imperialist exercise of arrogant privilege, but rather as “the finest and cleanest of sports.” “By learning to play the game together in sport,” claimed one author, “men learned to play the game together in their social, commercial and political life.”

Information and quotations from *A History of the Shanghai Paper Hunt Club, 1863-1930*, by Charles Noel Davis, published in Shanghai in 1930 by Kelly & Walsh, Ltd. See also Harriet Sergeant, *Shanghai: Collision Point of Cultures, 1910-1939*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1990.

February 17, 2008