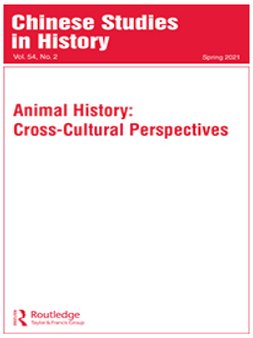

Chinese Studies in History

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/mcsh20

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To cite this article: Ning Jennifer Chang (2021) Women in the chase: Sports, empire, and gender in Shanghai, 1860–1945, Chinese Studies in History, 54:2, 130-148, DOI: 10.1080/00094633.2021.1926166

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00094633.2021.1926166

Published online: 17 Aug 2021.

CHINESE STUDIES IN HISTORY
2021, VOL. 54, NO. 2, 130–148
https://doi.org/10.1080/00094633.2021.1926166

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Women in the chase: Sports, empire, and gender in Shanghai, 1860–1945

Ning Jennifer Chang

ABSTRACT
This paper adopts the idea of informal empire and focuses on women in treaty port Shanghai. Examining two British equestrian sports, called "the chase" at the time, i.e. horse racing and paper hunt, this article shows how, notwithstanding racial differences, British and Chinese elite women in Shanghai adopted the same strategies to empower themselves. By joining the chase, as actual hunters, leading horse owners or trainers, they successfully broke the physical, psychological, and social constraints society imposed on them. This article argues China's treaty ports created rare opportunities for both British and Chinese women. On the one hand, the strict class system of the home country was temporarily broken and reshaped, and on the other hand, the traditional Chinese social hierarchy of literati, peasants, artisans, and merchants was also disrupted and rearranged. Exploiting this rift and using equestrianism as a tool, elite women subverted the tradition of sport as a male domain and dramatically expanded the space for their public life.

KEYWORDS
Sports; gender; colonial society; Shanghai

Sports involve many issues including class, empire, gender, and body, and occupy a special place in modern history. Of them, the relationship between sport and the empire is undoubtedly the most intriguing and worth examining in depth. The overseas expansion of Western Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries not only initiated the global homogenization of societies, cultures and institutions, but also diffused Western sports to the rest of the world. The ball games played in most countries today are all related to the colonial legacy, among which the influence of England was the most obvious. The colonizers used sports on the one hand to promote their codes of etiquette and behavior, and on the other hand, to demonstrate the superiority and masculinity of Western civilization in contrast to the perceived backwardness and femininity of the colonized. The power of sports is so strong that in the postcolonial era, although decolonized, many countries still embrace the games introduced by the colonizers and regard some ball games as their "national sport," and even compete with their former colonizers in the international tournaments, with baseball, soccer, and cricket being among the obvious.

Although there is no lack of studies on sports and the empire, most of them focus on the formal empire, that is, Britain and her colonies or dominions,[1] and little is known about sports in areas dominated by Western powers that retained their own governments and a measure of independence, such as the treaty ports in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in China. In order to fill this gap, this paper adopts Jürgen Osterhammel's concept of "informal empire," treating the concessions in China as part of the wider British Empire and taking Shanghai, where

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Western influence was most evident, as a case study.[2] Meanwhile, it tries to combine the themes of sports and empire and sports and gender, taking women in the concessions as the main protagonists, observing how they used sports to break through the physical, psychological and social constraints to gain some degree of empowerment.

In addition to discussing the complex relationship between the interplay of sport, empire, and gender, this paper also focuses on equestrian activities. Influenced by the hunting culture of old England, those activities with horses, hounds, and shotguns often occupied a higher position in sports. This paper therefore chooses horse racing and paper hunting (an overseas variant of fox-hunting), instead of ball games, as a starting point. It also discusses both foreign and Chinese women in Shanghai. It finds that the Chinese/Caucasian divide was not as clear-cut as one might expect, at least for middle and upper class women in Shanghai, and they often faced similar gender constraints and adopted similar strategies to try to break through them.

This paper argues that the informal empire actually provided these women with a rare social rift where the rigid class system from old England was temporarily broken and reshaped, and where the traditional Chinese hierarchy of scholars, peasants, artisans and merchants was rearranged. In this freer environment, the racecourse was a stage for these women to shine, not only as spectators, but also as leading racehorse owners and even as "hunters" jumping and galloping in the fields. Whenever they won, their photos and names were published in newspapers and magazines, without fear or favor. The social cleavage at the treaty ports provided unprecedented opportunities for women, and upper and middle-class women seized this opportunity and emerged from behind their fathers, brothers and husbands, subverting sport as a male domain and dramatically expanding their space in the public sphere.

I. Horse racing in China's treaty ports

Horse racing was perhaps the most notable cultural export of the British Empire, and the British went to great lengths to set up tracks, lay turf and hold races wherever they went. According to Austin Coates, the earliest horse racing in China took place in Macau between 1798 and 1799. At that time, both the personnel of the East India Company and private merchants were trapped in the Thirteen Factories in Canton during the trading season, not only confined to a limited space but also without the company of their families; as soon as the season was over, they hastily retired to Macau for a change of scene, while holding races for entertainment. The horses were Manila ponies obtained by the Portuguese from the Philippines and Borneo. As this was one of the few social events in what was otherwise a monotonous life, the small foreign community always dressed up for the occasion.[3]

By the middle of the nineteenth century, with the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing, foreigners were no longer confined to Canton or Macau and could go north to trade and reside. With Britain's dominance of trade and military affairs in Asia over more than a century, social life had become positively English for foreigners in China, and horse racing had become an annual event that united the community.[4] With the successive opening of the ports to foreign trade, as soon as the affairs of the concessions were basically settled, the foreign residents would go and find a suitable place to hold horse races. In the autumn of 1842, the British army in Xiamen started racing on Gulang Island, and the first race was held in Shanghai in the spring of 1848. When the Treaty of Tianjin and the Treaty of Beijing opened more ports, horse racing was soon extended to Tianjin, Niuzhuang, Beijing, Hankou, Jiujiang, Ningbo, Zhifu and Fuzhou.[5]

Most of the early race meetings at the treaty ports were basic, for example, the autumn meet in Shanghai in 1850 was a one-day event with no more than seven races. Though the horses were often uncooperative, either refusing to start or veering from the course in the middle of the race,[6] the small foreign community was still full of enthusiasm, making it more like a local picnic than a formal meet.[7] However, after the early races, the foreign residents at the ports put every

effort to make the meets regular events. With speed the main concern in English horse racing, a wide oval rather than a straight course was needed to facilitate viewing, and the small size of the pre-expansion concessions made it necessary to acquire land outside the concessions. The foreign communities at the treaty ports thus went to great lengths to purchase land and build racecourses, and then to raise funds and establish race clubs to arrange regular meetings. Sometimes the site was destroyed by flooding and dust storms, or the price of the land increased to such a degree that it proved to be wise to sell it, and a course moved again and again until the site was fixed.

This was all very time-consuming and, even more importantly, likely to conflict with the locals in terms of land acquisition, but the whole community was very supportive of horse racing, and the reasons for their enthusiasm were generally the following, in addition to leisure: first, it was an imitation of the lifestyle of the upper class at home. Horse owning and riding were expensive in Britain, and only the aristocracy and the gentry could afford them. Most Britons in China came from the lower middle class or even the working class, having little opportunity to get access to racehorses at home. After they came to China, however, their social status was raised due to the colonial setting at the treaty ports, and they naturally desired to imitate the lifestyle of the upper class. Since Mongolian horses were relatively inexpensive in China (even an office clerk could afford them), horse ownership and riding became highly popular with new arrivals.

Apart from imitating the lifestyles of the upper class, horse racing also helped to occupy the junior members of the expatriate community, thus maintaining the order of young colonial society. The early community was composed mainly of young men, with a disparity between the number of men and women, so throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, life could be described as lonely and monotonous for men in China. In Shanghai, for example, which had the largest number of foreigners in China, only 28 of the 157 foreigners had their families with them in 1850, and men accounted for 85% of the total foreign population.[8] By 1880, the population of foreigners in Shanghai had increased to a little more than 2,000, about half of whom were British, while the others were American, German, French and Dutch in that order.[9] Among those Britons, the proportion of males was as high as 72%. It declined to 62% a decade later, gradually balancing out as the total number increased in the twentieth century. However, up to 1935, Britons in Shanghai was still overrepresented by men and underrepresented by women.[10] As thousands of young men of varying nationalities crowded into the cramped space of the concessions in the late nineteenth century, to avoid fights, heavy drinking, gambling, and even the allures of local women, community leaders often encouraged them to engage in vigorous sports to distract them and maintain their physical and mental health.

Thus, the Shanghai Race Club, along with the church, the Shanghai Volunteer Corps, the Freemasons, and other athletic or social societies constituted pillars of the life in the concessions, especially in the early years. After the concessions were firmly established, the Race Club evolved into a symbol of status. When someone was selected as a member, not only could he wear a badge and move freely at the racecourse, he could sit in the members' stand and watch the final sprint from the best angle. If his horse won, he had the right to lead in the horse from the track through the stands and receive applause from the spectators, which was an honor that could not be bought. As such, membership in the Race Club, and even more stewardship, was a significant indicator of one's colonial status, and was second only to that of a Councilor of the Shanghai Municipal Council, the governing body of the International Settlement, or a member of the Shanghai Club, the leading social club of the port.

Since the Race Club had such an important role in the concessions, in the early twentieth century members of the Chinese elites began to take a keen interest in horse racing. Not only did they own and ride horses, but they also wanted to join the Shanghai Race Club and receive the same treatment as their foreign counterparts. However, the Club was exclusive and admitted no Chinese. Out of frustration, the Chinese established the International Recreation Club in 1910

with their racecourse at Jiangwan, a village in Baoshan County, with members from both Chinese and foreign communities. In 1926, the Chinese Jockey Club was established in Yinxiang, a suburb of Shanghai, with purely Chinese members, thus offering more opportunities for the Chinese to participate in English horse racing.[11]

Whether it was the Shanghai Race Club, the International Recreation Club, or the later-established Chinese Jockey Club, they all belonged to the category of gentlemen's clubs. This type of British club was characterized by its exclusiveness, through a strict admissions process that excluded not only men of the "wrong sort," but also women. No women were to be found in their clubhouses nor at the racecourse except as guests and spectators.

II. China pony

The most important component in horse racing is, of course, the horses. Good racing required a constant and stable supply of new horses. The early racehorses in Shanghai came from three sources: the cavalry horses, the Manila pony, and the Mongolian pony or the so-called China pony. The former came from British army or its colonies and were large horses, while the latter two came from the Philippines or Borneo, or from Mongolia, and were both small horses.[12]

Whether it was a cavalry horse or a Manila pony, it was a long and expensive trip for them to cross over the ocean. China was a horse producing country in the late Qing dynasty; although there was no large-scale breeding within China proper, every year tens of thousands of horses were brought in from the Mongolian grasslands along a fixed route to fixed markets for people to buy and sell. Such a trade route extended roughly from the grasslands of Southern Mongolia or Harbin to Kalgan (Zhangjiakou), through Beijing, Tianjin, and then along the Grand Canal south of Yangzhou to Zhenjiang; Shanghai was the southernmost city of this trade sphere. The British soon discovered this after the opening of Shanghai and began to consider supplementing their racehorses with these ponies.[13] The only issue was that the Mongolian ponies had been mainly used for drawing passenger carts and bearing loads, with the emphasis on weight-carrying capacity and endurance rather than speed. If Mongolian ponies were to be the primary source of racehorses, it was important to reach the horse fairs in Mongolia and have the dealer select the right type for English racing.

After years of hard work, this was finally achieved, and by the 1870s, a complete trading network for Mongolian racehorses had been established at the various racecourses in China. All the horses for racing were first selected by the dealers in Mongolia, then selected for the second time in Tianjin after entering China proper, and then shipped in small batches to the various ports. In addition to the traditional Grand Canal, the shipping route included one from Tianjin to Shanghai by steamer.[14] Once the horses arrived in Shanghai, they were put up for auction at the Shanghai Horse Bazaar; they could only be viewed before the auction, not tried out, thus buying was a considerable test of the buyer's judgment.

Most of these auctions were for small horse owners with limited financial resources; the really powerful big buyers did not participate, but sent their own people to Mongolia to directly select horses. For example, in the early twentieth century, several large foreign firms, including Jardine, Matheson & Co., Butterfield & Swire, Andersen, Meyer & Co., and the Shanghai Horse Bazaar all sent their own personnel to purchase horses, either a few dozen or more than 300 horses in one trip.[15] The sourcing area also expanded from the original areas of Kalgan, Gubeikou and Dolon Nor, all on the borders of Inner Mongolia and China proper, to include Kherlen (Choibalsan), Setsen Khan Middle Left Banner and Kulun (Ulaanbaatar) in Outer Mongolia, and Qiqihar and Manzhouli in Manchuria[16] (see Figure 1). As for horse dealers, in the 1920s, more than 20 horse dealers who went to Mongolia every year to buy horses for the European and American customers in Tianjin and Shanghai.[17] In order to meet the demands of racing clubs, the horses were

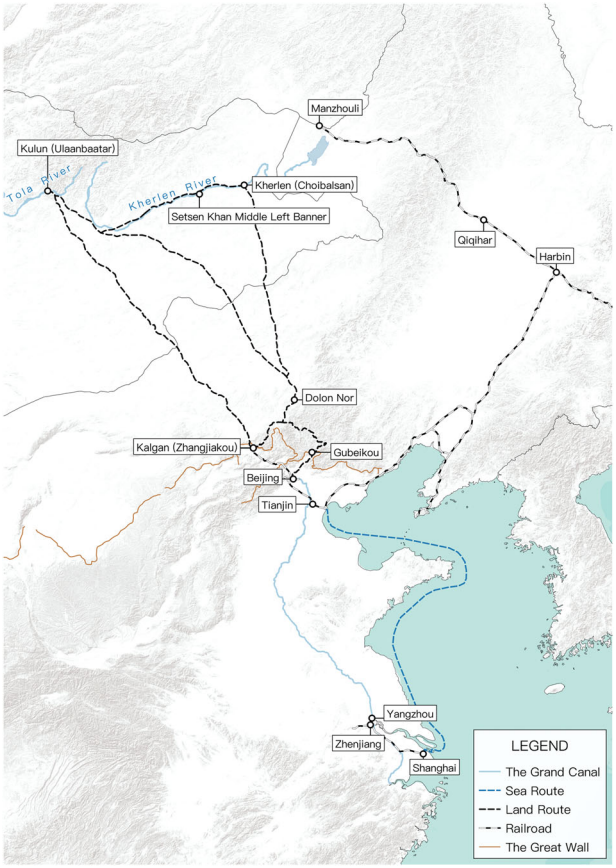

Figure 1. The trading network through which Mongolian racehorses reached Shanghai in the 1920s.

ridden and timed before they entered China proper.[18] This intertwined network ensured that the Shanghai Race Club had a continuous and stable supply of horses.

The shift from large horses to Mongolian ponies laid the foundation of British racing in China, and the treaty ports, led by Shanghai, began to tailor regulations for these ponies, thus establishing a system unique to the ports. Such a change, on the other hand, cut off the connection between English racing in China and that in Britain. Mongolian ponies were small, with a mature height of only 12 hands 3 inches to 14 hands, and they could in no way compete with the large horses in terms of grace or speed. In addition, they were imported from the Mongolian grasslands every year, and it was difficult to establish reliable proof of three or more generations of parentage, as was the case with British, Arabian or Australian breeding horses. Due to the lack of equine pedigree, horse racing in China became an outsider to the English racing world.

However, the various race clubs at the treaty ports seemed unconcerned. In the face of the doubts, they tended to emphasize that Mongolian ponies were powerful and sturdy, good at carrying weight, and had amazing endurance, and that they were the direct descendant of Przewalski's wild horse.[19] The Mongolian ponies was even described as having "all the qualities that sportsmen admire, undauntable pluck, staying power, amazing cleverness over a country, and the determination from start to finish to get home first, which is the mark of the true racehorse."[20]

According to C. Noel Davis, the author of the official history of the Shanghai Paper Hunt Club in 1930, the physical characteristics of the Mongolian pony include "large head, short ewe neck, deep chest, short legs, long body, thick hocks, sloping hind quarters, shaggy long winter coat, hairy fetlocks, heavy mane and thick, low-set tail."[21] Andreas, Baron von Delwig, who

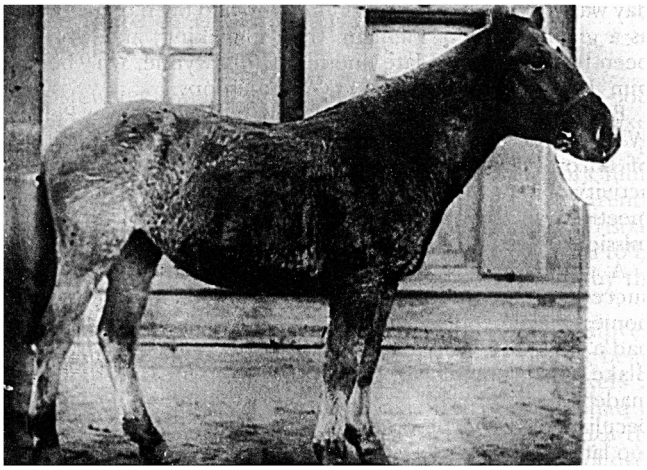

Figure 2. *Diana* when she first came down from the Mongolian plateau. Austin Coates, *China Races*, p. 103. Reproduced with permission of Oxford University Press (China) Ltd 1994.

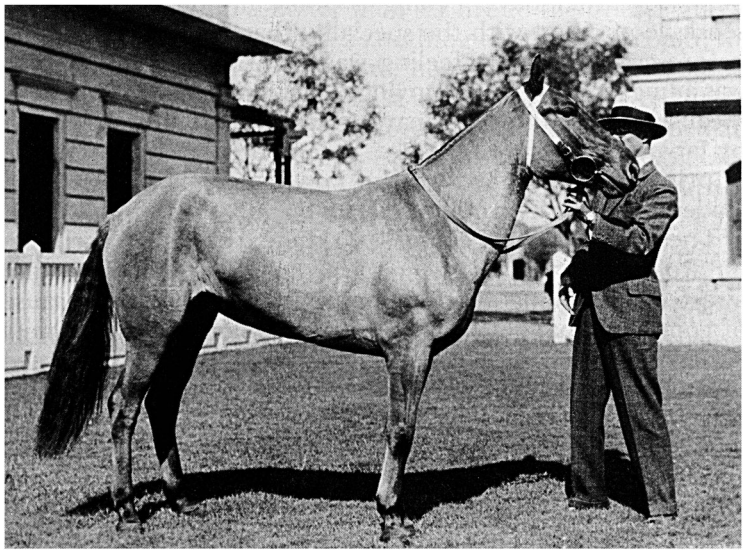

Figure 3. *Diana*, with her owner, after a full clip and groom. Austin Coates, *China Races*, p. 103. Reproduced with permission of Oxford University Press (China) Ltd 1994.

trained horses in Beijing and Tianjin for 25 years, left two rare photographs that give us a glimpse of these characteristics and how the appearance of the Mongolian ponies changed after grooming. As horses entered China proper in autumn, horse dealers and buyers often kept these animals unclipped for the winter. As one can see from Figure 2, when Diana, the champion horse of Tianjin in 1927, first came down from the Mongolian plateau, she was shaggy and looked a bit like a bear or a large dog rather than a horse, and she had mange. However, when the spring came, after a full clip and groom, with tail braided, she was just as handsome as a large horse (see Figure 3). Andreas describes the Mongolian ponies as having perfect legs, a robust body and a strong back, with the only flaw being that the neck was short, but they were good looking nonetheless.[22]

The Mongolian ponies were not only the main force in China's racecourses but a soft spot in the hearts of many horse owners in China. Edward Charles Bowra (1841–1874), who came to China in 1863 to join the Chinese Maritime Customs, described a pony of his which later won him a steeplechase in Peking as "When I first had him, he was the wildest, maddest animal I ever saw, vicious and uncontrollable; but by feeding him myself, and by kindness, he had become as docile as a dog, would eat out of my hand, follow me about the place, and do everything but talk with me."[23] This experience was probably shared by many Europeans. Just as Shanghai was a foreign land to the Westerners, it was a foreign land to the Mongolian ponies. It is not surprising sometimes that they became attached not only to their owner but to their stable companions. For example, it was said, *Hero*, the six-times-champions in Shanghai in the 1890s, would not face the starter unless he was accompanied by his stable companion, an old Derby winner named *Dolores*. This fact earned *Dolores* a nick-name "Hero's amah," that is, his nanny.[24]

The Mongolian pony was so successful in replacing the large horse in China's racing world, both on practical and psychological levels, that, even when the cross-bred pony appeared in the late 1920s and was recognized as more beautiful, more graceful and speedier than the ordinary Mongolian pony, Shanghai sportsmen still insisted that the cross-bred did not surpass the ordinary one in "courage, hardihood and bigness of heart."[25]

Equestrianism was an exclusively male sport, but this shift from big horses to small horses in China unexpectedly paved the way for women to enter this field. The reduced height of the horses also reduced the danger to female riders when riding sidesaddle. Since women were still not allowed to race at racecourses, either as jockey or horse owner, another equestrian activity, the paper hunt, became an alternative for women to invade this male zone.

III. Paper hunting

Paper hunting was an overseas variation of fox hunting. After arriving in China, the British were eager to imitate the lifestyle of the upper class at home and establish the sport of fox hunting, but China was densely populated and lacked suitable animals to hunt. They therefore invented a near substitute, in which one member of the team would ride ahead to act as the prey, marking the trail with colored paper. Different colors had different indications, for example, purple paper meant wade and the hunt had to walk through creek, and green paper meant bridge and the hunt had to pull up and go single file. After the trail was laid, a large group of riders on horseback started, following the paper trail through the fields, across creeks and even through grave mounds, with the first one to reach the endpoint being the winner. The area covered was about 5 to 10 miles outside the concessions, with the hunting season from November after the fall harvest to early March next year. Since it was more like an actual hunt than horse racing, and did not involve gambling, it was claimed by the participants as "the finest and cleanest of sports." The Shanghai Paper Hunt Club (SPHC) was established as early as 1863 to hold regular hunts on Saturday afternoons in winter (see Figure 4). It was natural for women to use it to break through gender restrictions in Shanghai.

The earliest attempts to enter the forbidden zone were made by women from racing families who had grown up seeing their fathers and brothers riding over country in the winter afternoons, and who wanted to follow suit. However, there were two problems that had to be overcome: one was that though there was no real kill in paper hunting, the dust, mud, wet clothes and the risk of falling off the horse were just the same and it was, therefore, considered an activity not suited for a lady. The other was that in order to maintain elegance as well as to conform to social norms, women at the time rode mainly sidesaddle, i.e., sitting vertically on the back of a horse, with their legs placed together on the left side of the horse's back and covered with a long, heavy skirt. In this position, with only one foot on the stirrup, it was difficult enough to maintain stability when horses were at a canter, let alone galloping or jumping.

Figure 4. Scene of a Paper Hunt in Shanghai, 1932. Peter Hack Historical Research, https://peterhack.com.au/, Shanghai 1932, Image 051-The-hunt-A.

Fortunately, the low height of the Mongolian horse significantly reduced the danger of a fall, and a new development in Europe opened up new possibilities. The invention of the "leaping head," or third pommel on the sidesaddle, in the second half of the nineteenth century, allowed a woman rider to tuck her lower leg and knee beneath a hook-shaped prong, which provided balance and stability, so that she could sit firmly in the saddle and jump over fences in a skirt, participating in vigorous equestrian activities while retaining feminine elegance. Thanks to this and other inventions such as the balance strap, the number of women in England who participated in fox hunting grew. It spread from a small number of maverick high-class courtesans to upper-class women, and by the early twentieth century, even middle-class women were trying to join in. By this time, in addition to elegant sidesaddle riding, the new style of riding astride was gradually accepted and allowed.[26] Developments at home paved the way for women in Shanghai to participate in hunting, and paper hunting became the first equestrian activity for them to prove their strength, ability and riding skills.

Since paper hunting was not a year-round activity, SPHC did not have its own clubhouse, nor was it exclusive in its membership. There was no entry fee for members, and the annual subscription was quite low, so basically anyone who loved hunting could join. In 1895, after repeated requests from their female relatives, SPHC finally organized a hunt for ladies, with the disapproval of many of its male members.[27] Irregular hunts gradually became regular. By the late 1910s, and especially after 1918, one or two ladies' hunts each season became the norm, with not only the Master of SPHC arranging the trails, but also its stewards providing an escort all the way to avoid wives, sisters and daughters being in an accident.[28]

Under such an arrangement, by the early 1920s, Shanghai had produced more than a dozen women who were good at galloping and jumping. They were not afraid of dust and mud or the coldness of the creeks, nor did they flinch from falling off their mounts during riding practice. In

Figure 5. Mrs. N.W. Hickling on *Wiltshire*. Davis, *A History of the Shanghai Paper Hunt Club, 1863–1930*, between pp. 8 and 9.

1924, after repeated refusal from SPHC to allow them to join in and compete with its male members, the women finally established the Shanghai Ladies' Paper Hunt Club.[29] Its first two masters, Mrs. N.W. Hickling and Miss Coutts, were dedicated sportswomen.

Coming from racing families, they were the first women to enter the equestrian world in Shanghai. Mrs. Hickling, *née* Nina Mckie Johnstone, was the sister of John Johnstone (1881–1935), the taipan of the Jardine, Matheson & Co., and a great-grandchild of the sister of William Jardine, the founder of the company.[30] John Johnstone was a keen rider, and Mrs. Hickling's husband, Mr. N.W. Hickling, was also very competitive in sports. Surprisingly, Mrs. Hickling was not inferior to her brother or husband, and she enjoyed golf, lawn tennis, and drama performance.[31] Riding was her favorite. She was a famous lady rider in Shanghai, riding sidesaddle gracefully (see Figure 5). Although falling off her horse and being injured several times, she still enjoyed the pleasure of galloping and jumping.[32] Under her impetus, the Ladies' Paper Hunt Club was formally established in 1924, with her as its first master, for six years in all (1924, 1925–1928, 1930).[33]

Mrs. Hickling was not only active in sports, but also a prominent figure in the social circles of Shanghai. She served as honorary secretary of The Ministering Children's League, honorary treasurer of the Ladies' Benevolent Society,[34] and executive member of the British Women's Association, formed by a group of elite women in Shanghai. She and her husband spent their summers in Weihaiwei fishing for bass[35] and their winters galloping together in the suburbs of Shanghai, and were a carefree couple. But the happy time came to an abrupt end in 1936. At the end of that year, Mr. Hickling, who was then the chairman of the Shanghai Stock Exchange, suddenly fell ill and died in January 1937.[36] Less than two months after the funeral, Mrs. Hickling returned to England in grief.[37]

In a colonial society such as foreign Shanghai, once a woman was widowed, if she had no children and was not in the marriageable age, she usually had to leave and return to her home

country within a year, as in the case of Mrs. Hickling. But if they had young children, remarriage became the only option. This was the case with Elizabeth, the grandmother of Miss Coutts, the second master of the Ladies' Paper Hunt Club, and Florence, her mother.

Elizabeth, *née* Elizabeth Grimes, came all the way from Manchester to Shanghai in February 1877 to marry J.M Rogerson, another native of Manchester who worked for the Shanghai Gas Company. Marriage life went smoothly. They had two daughters and Mr. Rogerson was promoted to assistant engineer while being active in the Shanghai Volunteer Crops and Freemasons. However, smooth life lasted less than eight years, and Mr. Rogerson died suddenly at the end of 1885 at the age of forty-six.[38] Mrs. Rogerson, with two young daughters, remarried R. R. Endicott (1855–1917) shortly at the end of 1889.[39]

Mr. Endicott was an American who had spent his early years working on ships. In 1887, he went to Shanghai and joined David Sassoon & Co., and married Mrs. Rogerson two years later. Endicott was thirty-four years old, his bride was two years older than him, and had two children from her previous marriage, but in a colonial society where there were many men and few women, it was the best way for both of them. They had a daughter in this marriage. Later, Endicott left David Sassoon & Co. to become a stockbroker, and was one of the founding members of the Shanghai Stock Exchange. He died in 1917 at the age of sixty-two.[40]

Mrs. Endicott lived longer, dying in 1922 at the age of seventy. When the three daughters grew up, they were married off to prominent figures in Shanghai. The eldest daughter Florence married P.W. Irvine, a stockbroker, and then G.D. Coutts, an established bill and bullion broker. The second daughter married R.G. Macdonald of Dodwell & Co.; the third one married C.L.L. Williams, a U.S. consul. By marriage, Mrs. Endicott succeeded in establishing a prosperous family and rose from the lower middle class to the top of colonial society. She lived in Shanghai for forty-five years and was well loved and had many friends. When she passed away in 1922, the *North China Herald* described her as "a very old and esteemed resident of Shanghai."[41]

Miss Coutts was the daughter of Mrs. Endicott's eldest daughter, Florence, from her first marriage. She married into the Coutts family with her mother when she was only nine years old, and because of her tomboyishness, she was given a boy's nickname—Billy, though her real first and second names were quaint and feminine–Grace Mary. Growing up, she was known in the foreign community as Miss "Billy" Coutts or Miss Billie Coutts. The Couttses were a celebrated family in racing, and both Miss Coutts' step-father and step-grandfather were proud stable owners.[42] She was around racehorses from childhood, and became a top-notch rider in ladies paper hunting when she was eighteen years old.[43] In order to improve her equestrian skills, she and Miss Vera McBain, another hunting enthusiast, often traveled all the way to the International Recreation Club's racecourse at Jiangwan to school their mounts. She was considered to be one of the few women whose riding skill was comparable to a man's.[44]

The affirmation of her ability by her male peers could be found on two occasions: in the early days of the Ladies' Paper Hunt Club, whenever a hunt was held, the trail was usually laid by a male member of SPHC to avoid possible danger. In the third race in the spring of 1926, Miss Coutts was allowed to be in charge. This is the first time in the history of the club that a woman had full authority to decide the route, thus showing the confidence of the male members.[45] The other was in 1922, when visiting Shanghai, Danish artist Juel Madsen was invited by the Shanghai Race Club to sketch leading horsemen of the port together with Edmund Toeg, son of the famous horse owner H.E. Toeg.[46] The result was *Celebrities of the Shanghai Turf*, a collection of sketches and cartoons. Among the male stable owners and jockeys, there were three rare female faces: the aforementioned Mrs. Hickling, Mrs. W.R. McBain, who will be introduced below, and Miss Coutts. Most of the images in the book were static and relaxed, but Miss Coutts' was a dynamic cartoon, and she was depicted in a slightly jocular manner, focusing on her determination and concentration when steeple chasing (see Figure 6).

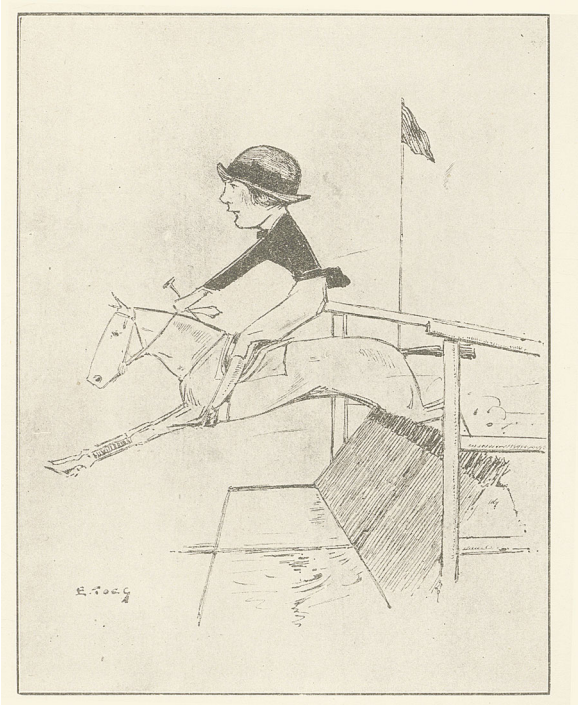

Figure 6. Miss Billy Coutts steeplechasing, around 1923. *Celebrities of the Shanghai Turf: Sketches and Caricatures by Juel Madsen & Edmund Toeg* [s.l.: s.n., 1924?], n.p.

Shanghai in the colonial setting produced a convenient short cut for foreign women to climb up the social ladder. As semi-colonizers, their status moved upward automatically once they arrived at the port. The working class rose to lower middle class, the middle class rose to the upper class, and then through marriage and remarriage of their own and their children, some built up a distinguished family in the upper echelons of society in just one to two generations. Their third generation, like Miss Coutts, enjoyed a life that her grandma would never have imagined back in Manchester, not only owning and riding horses, but even challenging men's position in equestrian activities.

By the early twentieth century, women in colonial Shanghai had successfully stepped into paper hunting, a field originally preserved for men, albeit in limited numbers and with trepidation, but at a determined pace. Their next goal was to join the Race Club and become stable owners.

IV. Female stable-owners

As more and more ladies in England, mostly aristocrats, earned membership of Race Clubs and became owners of racehorses in the early twentieth century, the Shanghai racing community, initially hesitant to allow women to join, finally gave in in 1920. At the suggestion of its Chinese members, the more open-minded International Recreation Club (IRC) took the lead in inviting ladies to become members on January 19, 1920.[47] Ten days later, the Shanghai Race Club, as the senior racing club, had no choice but to follow suit and passed a resolution to confer the privileges of club membership upon wives, daughters and sisters of members.[48] Although affiliate membership only, this gave women the chance to compete at race meetings with ponies carrying the colors of their stables.

IRC's initiation resulted in the emergence of a rare Chinese female horse owner. It was no other than the wife of Mr. Ye Ziheng 葉子衡, the founder of the Club. The reason that Mrs. Ye was able to set up a stable and race under her own name was closely related to the Ye family's wealth and power in Shanghai.

Mrs. Ye's father-in-law, Ye Chengzhong 葉澄衷 (1840–1899), was one of the first Ningpo merchants to take advantage of the opening of Shanghai, starting from scrap metal from ships then moving into the hardware industry. Later, he was awarded the exclusive distributorship of Standard Oil & Co. in China, further expanding his business from Shanghai to other treaty ports. Mrs. Ye's husband, Ye Ziheng, was the fourth son of Mr. Ye Chengzhong and also his successor.[49] Having had Western-style education, Ye Ziheng loved foreign things. He not only owned many racehorses but was a keen rider himself. He was regarded as a true sportsman and respected by the foreign racing community. When IRC invited ladies to become members in January 1920, it was natural that his wife was among the first to be elected.

Mrs. Ye was probably in her early thirties when she became a horse owner. Her stable name was straightforward, just "Mrs. Yih" (an old spelling of Ye). She named her horses with a personal touch, often ending in "Diamond", preceded by a color; for example, in a selling race of IRC in 1923, she had five horses in the sale, including *Blue Diamond*, *Green Diamond*, *Noble Diamond*, *Brown Diamond* and *White Stone*, which showed her naming preference as well as the scale of her stable.[50] Her heyday was probably the China Gold Vase race in 1927. As a late comer, the Chinese Jockey Club created this race at the end of 1926, with a beautiful trophy and unprecedented prize money. The race required the horses entered to be a griffin, that is, a new horse unraced when imported, and had won at least one race of that year. In addition, the owner had to win two years in a row to win the trophy. It soon became the biggest turf classic in China. Every stable sent in the best new horses to compete. In December 1927, Mrs. Ye won the second Gold Vase with *White Diamond II*, ridden by V. M. Haimovitch, a Jewish-American veteran rider, in record time.[51] In December 1928, Mrs. Ye sent in *Indian Corn*, with Li Daxing, a Chinese veteran equestrian, on, but unfortunately, it placed third and she was unable to win the trophy outright.[52]

While Mrs. Ye was no doubt the first Chinese female horse owner in Shanghai, Mrs. William McBain was probably the first Caucasian lady to own racehorses. She was a member of the McBains, a well-known Shanghailander family. Her father-in-law, George McBain (1847?–1904), came to China in the 1870s and started a steamer company business on the Yangtze River. After he passed away in 1904, his wife took over the business and further expanded into the real estate industry in Shanghai and coal mining in Northern China. By the time she passed away in 1924, she had built a business empire for her five sons and four daughters that spanned in shipping, mining, finance, and real estate development.

The McBains was well-known in the racing world. Not only was George McBain a successful horse owner, his sons and daughters were active in racing and paper hunting; for example, the aforementioned Miss Vera McBain who went with Miss Billy Coutts all the way to Jiangwan to school their mounts, was his second daughter, while Daisy, his third daughter, was a paper hunter riding sidesaddle.[53] Last but not least, his youngest son, E.B. McBain, was an amateur jockey who was reckoned as one of the best in Shanghai in his time.[54]

Mrs. McBain, née Vera Winifred Kathleen Davis,[55] was the wife of William R.B. McBain, old George's second son, and a daughter of a late Major Davis of London. We know little about her early life in London except she seems to have played some minor roles at the Gaiety Theater near Covent Garden under the name Vera Davis[56] and her maiden address was 289 St James Court, which revealed the status of her family.[57] She met William McBain in London during World War I when he was fighting in Europe. They got married in 1918 and returned to Shanghai together after the war. She soon became one of the first female horse owners when the IRC and the Shanghai Race Club opened their doors to women. Under the stable name "Mrs. William

Figure 7. Mrs. W. R. McBain, around 1923. *Celebrities of the Shanghai Turf*, n.p.

McBain," she made her successful debut in February 1920 by winning the Jiangwan Derby.[58] In 1923, Mrs. McBain and the aforementioned Miss Coutts became bosom friends.[59] Not only did they travel and spend holidays together, they formed a joined stable, with a suggestive and meaningful name, We Two.[60] It soon proved to be a stable which could win with ease. By May 1933, it had won the Shanghai Champions once and secured third place on two occasions. It had also had a second in the Champions at the Chinese Jockey Club.[61]

Mrs. William McBain was not only a successful horse owner, but an outstanding hostess and a fashion leader in Shanghai. The Danish artist Madsen sketched her as a young woman in 1923 dressed fashionably, slightly shy, a rare feminine beauty in a masculine world (see Figure 7). In the 1930s, she often played the role of hostess and helped D.E. Sassoon (1866–1938), the famous senior horse owner in Shanghai, unmarried for life, to arrange race tiffins, or to lead his horse through the grandstand when he won. On these occasions, she was so well-dressed and acted so appropriately, that she was praised in the women's column "Over the Tea Cup" of the *North China Herald* as the best example of a woman who could combine knowledge of racing with fashion sense along with Miss Coutts, now Mrs. Liddell.[62]

V. "Grand old lady"

When the door of the race clubs opened in 1920, Miss Coutts, a virtuoso in paper hunting, did not hesitate to join. She first partnered Mrs. William McBain and formed the "We Two" Stable in May 1923 and then established her own stable "Miss Billy Coutts" in 1926 which was later changed to "Mrs. Jack Liddell" after she married J. H. Liddell, the director of Liddell Bros. & Co., Ltd. in 1927.[63] In the 1930s, Mrs. Jack Liddell became an accomplished horsewoman. Both her husband's and her stepfather's families were notable in racing, and she herself had succeeded

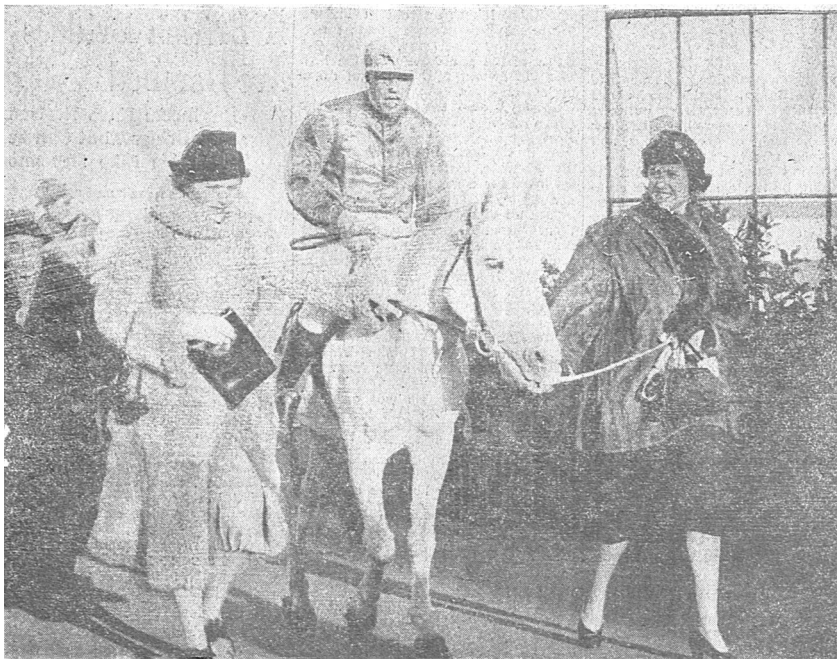

Figure 8. *Carnival* being led in by his proud owners Mrs. William McBain (right) and Mrs. Liddell (left). *North China Daily News*, 26 Nov. 1939, p. 5.

Mrs. Hickling as the master of the Ladies' Paper Hunt Club (1928–29). Even more importantly, Mrs. Liddell was not only a horse owner, but she also took part in training herself, reportedly riding at least five horses every morning, and was considered a veteran in the Shanghai racing world despite her young age.[64] On the third day of the Shanghai Autumn Race on November 7, 1935, three heavyweights stood together in the members' stand to watch and comment on the races: A. W. Burkill, the Chairman of the Shanghai Race Club, W. R. Lemarchand, the Steward and Official of the Club, and a young woman in fur, who was none other than Mrs. Jack Liddell. *The North China Herald* called them "three of the best-known racing personalities."[65]

Horse racing had a special meaning for Mrs. Jack Liddell. It was not only a hobby, but also a purpose in life, and its importance seemed greater than that of marriage. A heavy blow came in February 1937 when her only brother George Rogerson Coutts, who had been very close to her, died young in Shanghai at the age of 27, leaving her without emotional support.[66] In 1939, her long neglect of her husband finally led to the breakup of her marriage. In April, Mr. Liddell filed for divorce in H.M. Supreme Court for China and Japan on the grounds of desertion, which was granted in December of that year.[67] However, she seemed to be unshakable in face of this series of blows and setbacks, and devoted herself entirely to horse racing and paper hunting as usual.[68] In fact, the years 1937 to 1940 were the peak of her racing career. In the Christmas Race meeting in December 1937, she enjoyed an unusual distinction when two horses of hers, *French Leave* and *Early School,* won first and the second in the same race, which was a rare record.[69] In the spring race meeting of the Shanghai Race Club in May 1939, she went on to win the Champions with *Rain*.[70] In November of the same year, the We Two Stable won The Irwell Handicap at the Shanghai Racecourse with *Carnival*. When Mrs. William McBain and Mrs. Liddell led in *Carnival* after winning the race, the spectators detected nothing but joy and excitement on their faces (see Figure 8).

Mrs. Jack Liddell was just as successful in paper hunting as in horse racing, first winning the mixed hunt in December 1939 with *Going Slow*, beating all the male competitors.[71] In February

Figure 9. Mrs. 'Billie' Liddell exercising *Tudor Conquest* in the morning. *South China Morning Post*, 16 Feb. 1967, p. 3. State Library Victoria.

of the following year, she won the Challenge Cup, the highest honor, with the same horse, proving once again her ability on a track.[72] These events were arranged and hosted by the master of the Shanghai Paper Hunt Club, who was none other than Mr. Liddell who had just divorced her. Though the process of divorce must have been a painful ordeal, both parties were seen together in the hunt as well as at the racecourse as if nothing had happened. What was even more surprising was that the racing community remained quiet, making no comment on Mrs. Liddell's lack of love for marriage or too much of love for horses, demonstrating the amazing tolerance of the upper echelons of colonial society for the members of its inner circle.

Mrs. Liddell's passion for horses exceeded everything else, with not only bereavement and pain of divorce unable to stop it, neither could war and the change of government. During her time in Shanghai, Mrs. Liddell was already a major figure in the racing world. After World War II, she moved to Hong Kong and became a racing legend in the colony. It was said that she went to the Happy Valley every morning at 8:00 a.m. sharp to train her horses, rain or shine, and everyone, from the mafoos, i.e., Chinese grooms, to the riding boys, knew her. At the age of fifty-five, she broke three ribs when she fell from a galloping horse during her morning exercise. By this time, the Hong Kong racing

industry had switched from Mongolian ponies to Australian Walers, and Mrs. Liddell had to change her training objects from small horses to large horses, but it did not seem to make any difference to her (Figure 9). Although the number of horses in her stable during her time in Hong Kong was limited, usually only one to two, she still won owing to her long experience in this industry and her ability in judging and training horses. When she was sixty-seven years old, the *South China Morning Post* praised her as synonymous with the Happy Valley and declared that "the racing scene would be incomplete without her."[73]

Mrs. Liddell's passion for horses lasted until the last moment. After enjoying a day at the races and leading in her horse *Master Robert* after winning, she died in the night at the age of seventy-three.[74] After her death, the Royal Hongkong Jockey Club held a grand funeral service for her at St. John's Cathedral. The stewards of the Club acted as the pall bearers. The riding boys and mafoos along with leading jockeys and horse owners filled the chapel. Mr. P. G. Williams, the Chairman of the Club, gave a speech in which he called Mrs. Liddell the "Grand Old Lady" of Happy Valley, and he added a valediction at the end of the speech which Billie would surely have appreciated, "Billie Liddell was a thoroughbred."[75]

VI. Conclusion

Horse racing and fox hunting enjoyed a higher position than ball games among English sports due to their association with traditional hunting culture. Influenced by such values, overseas colonial institutions tended to pursue them, and if circumstances did not permit, they would do it in an adaptive way. In China, since they could not easily import large horses, they used Mongolian ponies instead; when there were no foxes to hunt, they hunted papers. Informal empire used these sports to rearrange the order of their newly-invented society, while individuals climbed the social ladder by participating in them. This British concept affected not only foreigners in China, but also Chinese at the treaty ports, and the gender involved was not only male, women also saw the value of horses in improving their status.

From the life stories of the protagonists in this article, it is clear that for Western women in Shanghai, being on the edge of the empire and surrounded by many nationalities, class mobility was much greater than at home. Through marriage and remarriage, they rose from the lower to the upper echelons of society in just a few generations. It was on the basis of such predecessors that Mrs. Hickling, Miss Coutts, and Mrs. William McBain, who were the second or third generation, had the opportunity to break out of the male-only realm of equestrianism and gain a certain degree of empowerment. The most striking was the case of Miss Coutts, who, after proving her equine knowledge and ability, was allowed to leave the household and even her husband to do activities that were previously considered unsuitable for women. The tacit approval of colonial society for Miss Coutts' devotion to horses demonstrated its remarkable tolerance of members of its inner circle.

The establishment of the Concessions at China's treaty ports no doubt increased social mobility for both foreigners and Chinese. It caused rifts in traditional Chinese society which was made up of scholar, farmer, artisan and merchant. Those with the ability could take advantage of these rifts and rise. The success of the Ye family was a good example. Without the opening of Shanghai to trade and the introduction of the new hardware and kerosene industries, it would have been very difficult for Ye Chengzhong to rise from being a peasant boy to a business tycoon in Shanghai within one single generation. It was in the midst of such a social rift that his second generation was able to form a Chinese race club, and his daughter-in-law became the first lady racehorse owner in Shanghai.

The Mongolian pony was undoubtedly a great aid for women in gaining more power. By means of these strong and durable animals, a handful women managed to prove their ability and empower themselves in equestrianism. It is also important to note that these women belonged to

the top echelon of colonial society and they were wives, sisters or daughters of the male elite. They might have represented the upper class in a colonial setting, but once removed from this environment, for example, by going back to old England or to pure Chinese surroundings, this representation was quickly diluted and replaced by other social norms. In other words, women's empowerment in equestrian activities was a special phenomenon that existed only in a colonial setting. This empowerment did help women move up the social ladder, but this cultural capital was only recognized at the treaty ports and would soon lose its meaning once the treaty port system collapsed due to war or a change of government. However, if the empowered women didn't go back to old England but to another British colony such as Hong Kong, things might remain the same. It is clear there existed a continuity in life in these two expatriate societies. The success of Mrs. Billie Liddell in post-1949 Hong Kong showed the close connection between the Royal Hongkong Jockey Club and the Shanghai Race Club in terms of personnel and regulations on the one hand, and the shared values and inheritance of cultural capital between Shanghai and Hong Kong on the other.

Notes

1. For example, J.A. Mangan analyzes how Britain used the games ethic in public schools to cultivate a uniform leadership and cadre in her colonies; Patrick F. McDevitt investigates the sporting events between Britain and her colonies at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to show how they provided models of masculinity and nationhood to the members of the empire. See J. A. Mangan, *The Games Ethic and Imperialism: Aspects of the Diffusion of an Ideal* (London: F. Cass, 1998); Patrick F. McDevitt, *May the Best Man Win: Sport, Masculinity, and Nationalism in Great Britain and the Empire, 1880–1935* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
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4. Coates, *China Races*, 13.
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6. "Shanghae Races," *North-China Herald* (hereafter *NCH*), 30 Nov. 1850, 70.
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9. The Second Historical Archives of China, etc., eds., *Zhongguo jiuhaiguan shiliao* (The Historical Materials of the Old Maritime Customs of China), vol. 8 (Beijing: Jinghua chubanshe, 2001), 669.
10. Table 2 in Robert A. Bickers, "Shanghailanders: The Formation and Identity of the British Settler Community in Shanghai, 1843–1937," *Past and Present* 159 (May 1998), 177.
11. For more details on the development of horse racing in Shanghai, see: Ning Jennifer Chang, *Yiguo shiwu de zhuanyi: Jindai Shanghai de paoma, paogou he huiliqiu sai* (Cultural Translation: Horse Racing, Greyhound Racing, and Jai Alai in Modern Shanghai) (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 2019), 1–289.
12. Jian Erqing, *Xianggang saima huajiu* (Reminiscences of Horse Racing in Hong Kong) (Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian, 1992), 15.
13. Coates, *China Races*, 22.
14. Coates, *China Races*, 44, 47.
15. Archives of the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica [hereafter IMH] 03-18-077-02-041, Telegram, Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Commanding Officer Zhang Zhijiang of Chahar, 23 Nov. 1925.
16. IMH 03-18-013-10, Governor of Zhili Province Cao Rui to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 8 June 1922 and 5 Aug. 1922.
17. IMH 03-32-470-02, Horse dealer Lai Xianjiao and others to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, 14 Sept. 1922.
18. Brig.-General C. D. Bruce, "Pony Racing in China," *NCH*, 26 June 1926, 612.
19. C. Noel Davis, *A History of the Shanghai Paper Hunt Club, 1863–1930* (Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, 1930), 55. Przewalski's horse died out in the wild in Mongolia in 1968 but thanks to the efforts of Jan and Inge Bouman in the Netherlands, they were recently reintroduced to their native habitat. For details, see: Piet Wit & Inge Bouman, *Tale of the Przewalski's Horse: Coming Home to Mongolia* (Utrecht: KNNV Publishing, 2006).
20. Davis, *A History of the Shanghai Paper Hunt Club*, 56.

21. *Ibid*.
22. Coates, *China Races*, 23, 24.
23. Coates, *China Races*, 47.
24. *The Jubilee of Shanghai 1843–1893, Shanghai: Past and Present and a Full Account of the Proceedings on the 17th and 18th November, 1893* (Shanghai: Revised and reprinted from the "North-China Daily News," 1893), 20.
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27. "Sporting Notes," *NCH*, 11 Jan. 1895, 56–7.
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43. "The Ladies' Paperhunt," *NCH*, 23 Feb. 1918, 463–4; "The Ladies' Paperhunt," *NCH*, 9 March 1918, 597.
44. "Photo: In Fine Fettle," *The China Press*, 15 March 1925, C1.
45. "Ladies' Paper Hunt Club," *NCH*, 23 Jan. 1926, 152.
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47. "Ladies on the Race Course," *NCH*, 24 Jan. 1920, 239.
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53. "Photo: Miss D. McBain," *NCH*, 6 March 1926, 457.
54. "Racing on Decline," *NCH*, 7 Oct. 1936, 27.
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61. "Lady Race Pony Owners," *NCH*, 10 May 1933, 239.
62. "Over the Tea Cup," *NCH*, 10 May 1932, 239; "Photo: Still King of Local Turf," *NCH*, 11 May 1938, 245.
63. "Coutts-Liddell", *NCH*, 26 Nov. 1927, 365.
64. "Lady Race Pony Owners," *NCH*, 10 May 1933, 239.
65. "Photos: Champions Day Scenes at the Race Course," *NCH*, 15 Nov. 1933, 268.
66. "Coutts," *NCH*, 17 Feb. 1937, 308; "Mr. George R. Coutts," *NCH*, 17 Feb. 1937, 285.
67. "J.H. Liddell v. Mrs. G.M. Liddell," *NCH*, 5 April 1939, 31; "Decrees Absolute," *NCH*, 13 Dec. 1939, 461.

68. After the divorce, Coutts retained the surname of Liddell and called herself Mrs. Grace Mary Liddell or Mrs. Billie Liddell. See "Christmas Hunt," *NCH*, 3 Jan. 1940, 16.
69. "Photo: First and Second to Same Owner," *NCH*, 29 Dec. 1937, 504.
70. "Rain Wins Champions," *NCH*, 17 May 1939, 294–5; "Photo: Worthy Winner of the Champions," *NCH*, 17 May 1939, 294.
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72. "Going Slow Wins Challenge Cup," *NCH*, 21 Feb. 1940. 301.
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