

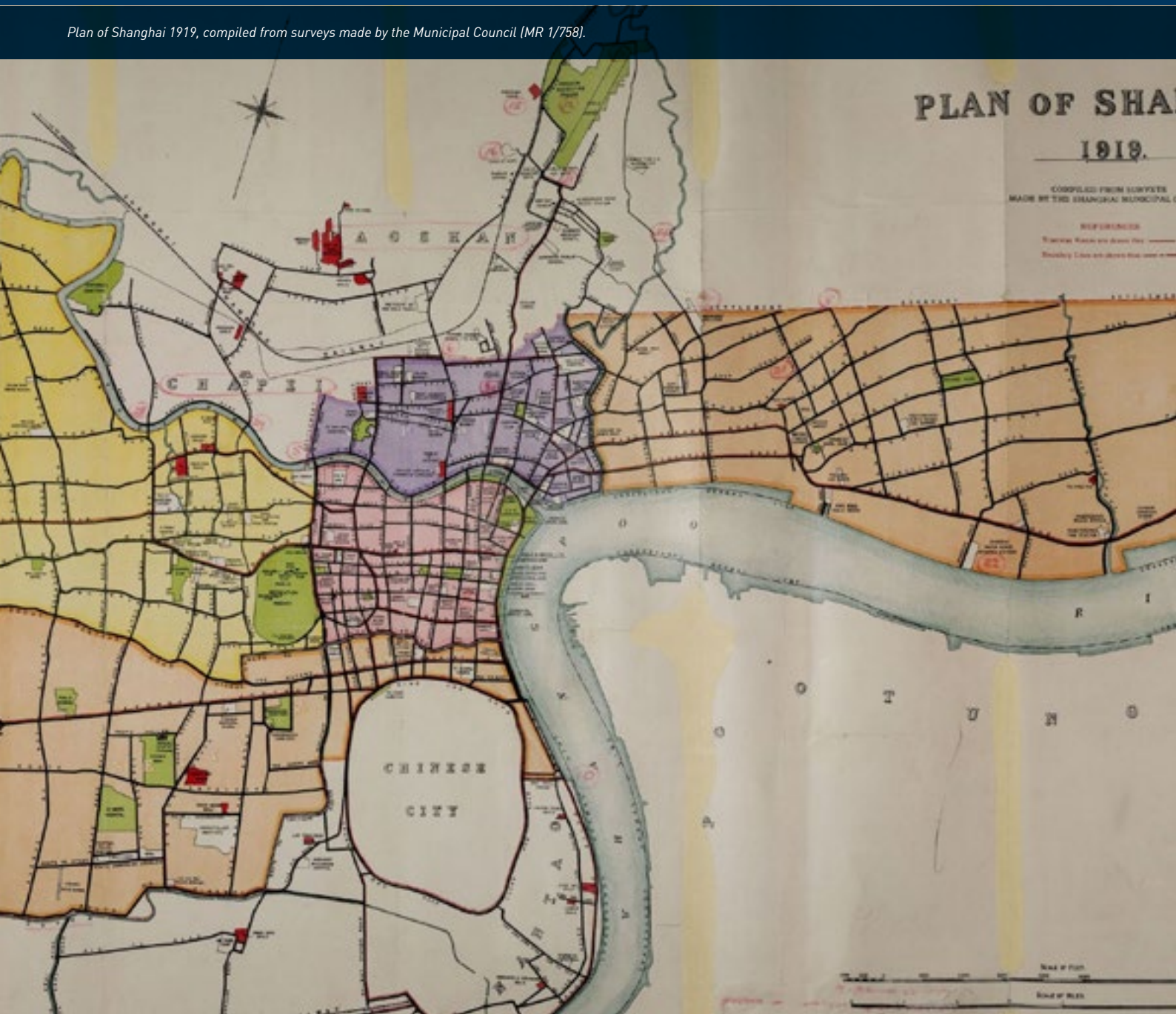
International Politics and Everyday Life: British Records of Shanghai's International Settlement, 1843-1950s

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Plan of Shanghai 1919, compiled from surveys made by the Municipal Council (MR 1/758).



On 19 November 1843 a motley group disembarked from a British steamer moored in the Huangpu river by the walled city of Shanghai. Two days earlier the newly appointed British consul, George Balfour, a Royal Artillery officer who had served in the China campaign, had formally opened the port for British trade and residence. Thus ended an era in which European and American trade had been restricted by the Qing to the southern port of Guangzhou, and within that to a small enclave of “factories,” in which they were only permitted to reside in the trading season, and without any family. The arrival of the passengers on a second steamer a few days later ushered in a new era, and across the century that followed the initially modest “English ground” at Shanghai became the heart of the bustling, cosmopolitan city that marked the front line of Chinese modernity.

Balfour’s efforts to locate accommodation for his new official establishment inside the walled city were thwarted. The British were not wanted. They had, after all, occupied the city in the spring of 1842 as their forces had prepared for the final stage of the China campaign, known to history as the Opium War. Instead, Balfour, aiming to combine “utility with ornament,” had laid out a small grid of seven streets at right-angles to the river, and fashioned a riverside road and one west and parallel to it on which, in agreement with the local Qing official, the Daotai, “the mass of the Chinese people are to move,” so keeping them off the river road, and so “effectually guarding against crowds.”¹ This tract reaching 1,200 yards northeast along the Huangpu river banks from the walled city was then bought up by British merchants as they began to arrive and establish themselves, and the lots were registered with the British Consulate.

Although segregation and exclusion were enmeshed within the fabric of the new settlement from the start, profit and pragmatism overrode it. In particular, during the Taiping Civil War of 1850–64, especially after the walled city fell to rebels in 1853, the British settlement became a safe haven for refugees. Providing a refuge in troubled times, and then in peaceful ones, provided huge and steady returns. Although a substantial community of Britons came to live in the settlement, which had increased in size several times by the end of

the nineteenth century, they were far outnumbered by its Chinese inhabitants. In 1864, the British settlement, administered since 1854 by a self-styled Municipal Council, was joined with an under-developed American concession north of the Wusong river (known to foreign residents as the Soochow Creek) to form an “International Settlement.” The French remained in splendid isolation in their concession to the south of the new combined settlement. The municipal councilors, British and American businessmen in the main, oversaw a small administration that undertook public works, a health department, and a police force. It acquired all the trappings of an English local government administration (which served as its model), and grew substantially in size and immeasurably in sophistication across the next nine decades until it was merged with the Greater Shanghai City government in 1943.



Plan of Shanghai 1919, compiled from surveys made by the Municipal Council (MR 1/758)

For modern historians, the internationalized city, which became a major centre of Chinese cultural production and education, finance and commerce, is possibly China’s best documented. Archives in Shanghai, and across the world, hold a vast corpus of documents in all media. This substantial collection of British official material from its agencies in the city exemplifies the richness of what can be found. There is, of course, much in these files about politics. Controversies over its very existence, its residents, its borders, and its jurisdiction fill the consulate files. These grew in intensity with the onset of the twentieth century. The 1905 Anti-American Boycott and the Mixed Court Dispute and riot in December that year

1 Robert Bickers, *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1832-1914* (2011), pp. 93-96.

heralded a new era of mass nationalist activism. They also showcased two of that movement's different faces – the organized and effective boycott of foreign goods and interests, and spontaneous violent protest against the actions by the International Settlement authorities.² In this new era, attempts by the Shanghai Municipal Council to “extend” its jurisdiction – as it coyly termed acquiring territory from its Chinese neighbour – through working with diplomats, proved impossible, and while it was tempted simply to occupy the areas it wanted, this proved no longer feasible.³ It was left with a network of council-built roads in Chinese administered territory, which it policed, and properties adjoining those roads, which it taxed. This

was a potent recipe for incessant jurisdictional conflict with the Chinese authorities.

The Nationalist Revolution in 1926-27 brought the Guomindang to power, and the party fashioned a regime that aimed to overthrow the treaties that had degraded China's sovereignty, and to secure the retrocession of all the foreign concessions and settlements. The Japanese assault on Shanghai in 1932, and the all-out war that surrounded the city in 1937 inaugurated a state of crisis and of stasis. The National Government's drive to secure the retrocession of the International Settlement was put in abeyance as it aimed to avoid alienating the British and Americans in the hope of engaging them to support it in its struggle with the invader. But if Chinese contestation of the settlement's jurisdiction was frozen, the Japanese and their collaborators took up the baton. And the business of managing a settlement into which hundreds of thousands of refugees had sought shelter with the financial, administrative, and security challenges involved, was challenging.

But this archive is not simply a record of crisis and international politics. People and property generated paper in the consulate general's compound at the northern end of Shanghai's riverfront Bund. Rules and regulations, registers, disputes, crimes, and the other stuff of life and business in any community, were amplified in this internationalized setting. Commercial disputes easily became diplomatic ones. Issues of nationality, colonialism, and imperialism threaded through so many strands of correspondence, for British and other subjects of foreign powers that had signed treaties with China enjoyed extraterritorial status. They lived and worked in China under the jurisdiction of their own consular authorities, enjoying the right to be tried in their own national courts on Chinese soil, and, if necessary, jailed or even executed by those authorities. *Records of Shanghai and the International Settlement, 1836-1955* contains a rich trove of such materials, as well as British consular correspondence from Shanghai.

At the heart of the British legal system in China, at its most developed, was the “British Supreme Court for China and Japan.” British judges, fully wigged,



Dispatch from Sir E. Satow to Sir Edward Grey on the former's correspondence with Prince Ch'ing discussing the removal of Mr Twyman and punishment of the Municipal Police in connection with the Mixed Court riot (FO 371/178/25)

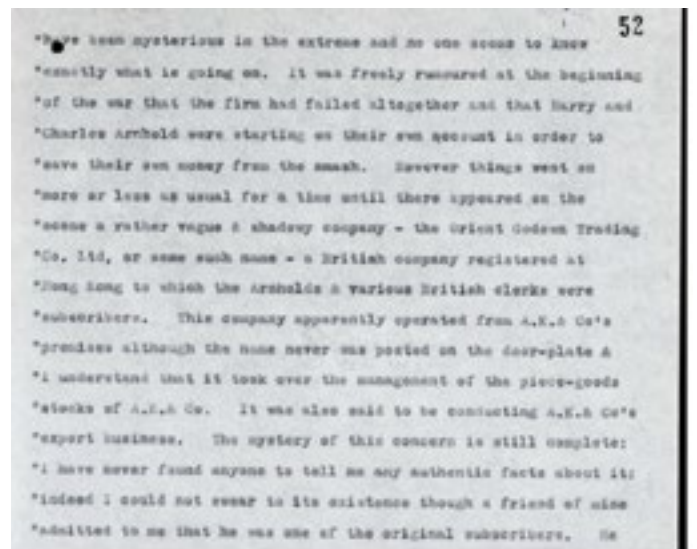
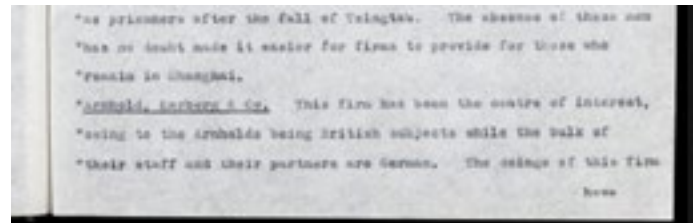
2 See for example the extensive range of files labelled “Shanghai Riots”: FO 371/178, folios 1-74; FO 371/383/385.

3 “Occupation of Chapei and extension of Shanghai settlement” (1913), FO 371/1628.

sat in a courtroom in the consular compound in Shanghai. They heard civil, commercial, and criminal cases, and with consuls, oversaw the business of Britons as they were born, married, divorced or died. The officials in Shanghai advised consuls across the network of British establishments in China and ruled on questions of nationality and jurisdiction. Shanghai's International Settlement stood apart in many ways from those other concessions and settlements, by virtue of its size and complexities, but it was tightly intertwined with them. It was in all but name a capital city for the foreign presence in China, and the shipping routes along which goods, people, and ideas flowed – and later the railway lines – were all connected into it.

The world of Harry Arnhold (1879-1950) provides one entry point into this archive. Born in Hong Kong in 1879 (and therefore, under English law, a British subject), his nationality was formalized when his father, Philip Arnhold, was naturalized in London in 1882. Harry Arnhold's father and uncle were the senior partners in the German commission agency, Arnhold, Karberg and Co, routinely known as Arnholds. Established in 1866 in Hong Kong, by the 1890s the firm had branches in Canton, Shanghai, and Tianjin. They were pillars of Shanghai's German community, but the German and British worlds in Shanghai were intertwined. The story of Arnholds, already a story of a German company that took advantage of Britain's wars in China and its colonial bridgehead in Hong Kong and its concessions and settlements in other Chinese cities, was made more complicated by naturalization and then in 1914 by the onset of the First World War. Harry and his brother, by then the leading partners in the firm, and both British subjects, had to navigate regulations that underpinned Britain's economic warfare against German interests. Extensive records documenting the business and personal trajectories of Harry Arnhold, can, like those of many thousands of other Shanghai Britons, be traced through these digitized files. Arnhold, having survived the war, his company now legally British, became a leading figure in the British establishment in Shanghai.⁴ He was a long-serving councilor, and chairman of the Shanghai Municipal Council (SMC); equally powerfully, in a sense, he was sometime chairman of the Shanghai Race Club,

whose course dominated the heart of the International Settlement. In 1923 the company had been taken over by E. D. Sassoon & Co., and it would become the main vehicle through which Sir Victor Sassoon would invest heavily in Shanghai real estate and enterprises in the 1930s, relocating his firm's base of operations from Bombay.⁵ This British world was at the same time, an Anglo-German, and Anglo-Indian one.



Extract from an anonymous letter on relations between British and German firms at Shanghai, where Arnhold, Karberg and Co was suspected of engaging in "mysterious" businesses (FO 371/2334/F 97428/10/15/8-9)

This digital archive brings out material from the Crown Advocate files that can throw new light on business, as well as biography. An example comes from a slim file on the liquidation of the China interests of the Singapore businessman, Tan Kah Kee (1874-1961). Tan had been born in Fujian, migrated to Singapore to work at his father's firm there, and then built his own very successful company, and made a fortune during the rubber boom of the early twentieth century. As a firm based in Singapore, it had the right to operate in China under British protection, so when, in 1933, it got into difficulty because of the great depression, its liquidator in China applied to the British authorities

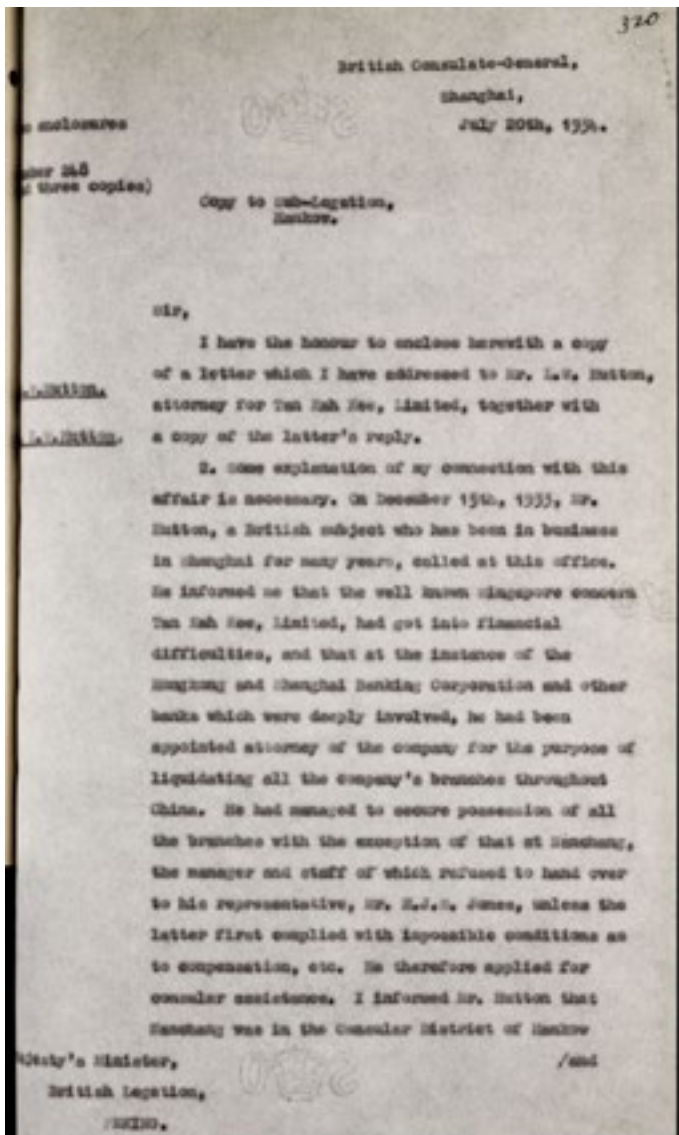
4 See Sara Shipway, "The Limits of Informal Empire: Britain's economic war in Shanghai 1914-1919," (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Bristol, 2019), pp. 88-90.

5 Joseph Sassoon, *The Global Merchants: The Enterprise and Extravagance of the Sassoon Dynasty* (London: Allen Lane, 2022).

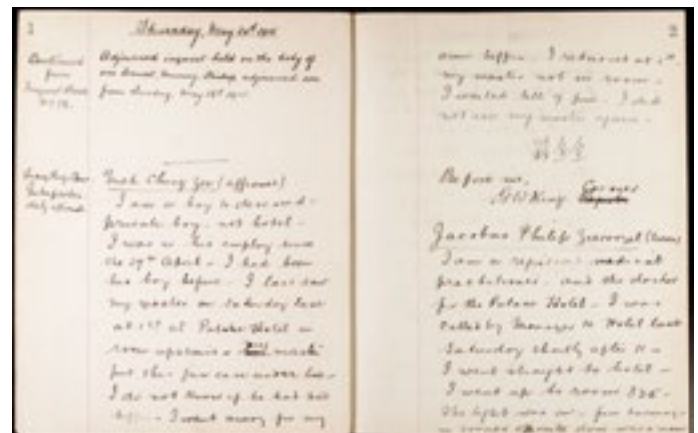
for support when facing difficulties with shutting down its branch in the central China city of Nanchang. In fact, the company had never registered any of its branches with British officials, and they would have been perfectly within their rights to refuse to provide support. Such questions of nationality, recognition, and non-recognition, and the position of British Chinese subjects and their interests thread through the business of British officials in China. The case was made more complex yet as the lead creditor was

the Hongkong & Shanghai Bank, the liquidator was a British businessman in Shanghai, and the agent sent to Nanchang to close the firm was a former International Settlement policeman, Briton Maurice Tinkler. Tinkler's behavior provoked controversy with the local police and a frantic exchange of letters and telegrams. As a British subject, Tinkler was quite clearly subject to British protection, which complicated the situation. Having been detained by the authorities, he was eventually forcibly removed from the city on a British gunboat.⁶

Tinkler surfaces as a policeman giving evidence in court, and as the subject of the inquest conducted in June 1939 after he died of wounds inflicted by Japanese marines during an industrial dispute engineered as part of the Japanese challenge to the British position in Shanghai. The incident was exceptional, although any fracas had the potential to become an international dispute, as this one did. The files record this facet of the settlement's history, but also the more everyday lives, and deaths, of British subjects.⁷ This was not a community of rich expatriate



Dispatch from British Consulate-General in Shanghai to the British Legation in Peking on the case of the liquidation of the Tan Kah Kee Ltd. [FO 656/268/326]



Extract from an inquest on the suicide of a Briton named Ernest Murray Bishop [FO 1092/281/16]

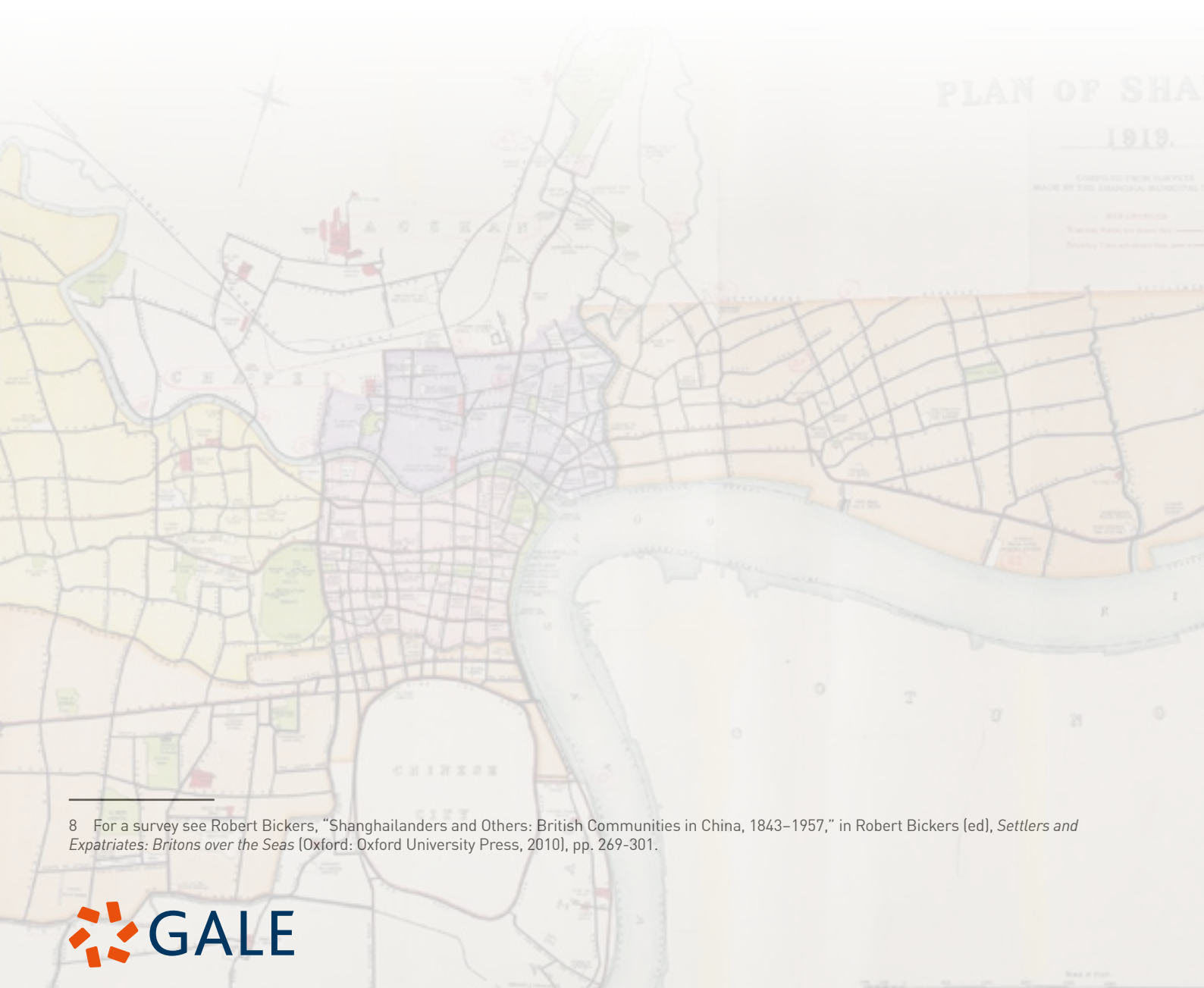
Britons, but a diverse and fluid set of communities of those living under the British flag in China who came from the British Isles, India, the Straits Settlements, the settler colonies, and also from Shanghai itself. It had its wealthy and powerful elite, Sir Victor Sassoon and the Arnholds – and it had its servants of empire,

6 FO 656/268, Crown Advocate's papers. General correspondence. Note: Vol. No. 1947, "Re: Tan Kah Kee, Ltd in Liquidation"; Robert Bickers, *Empire Made Me: An Englishman Adrift in Shanghai* (London: Allen Lane, 2003), pp. 225-32.

7 For example: inquests: FO 1092/270-298; intestate estates: FO 1092/260-269; probate administration: files FO 1092/299-313; individual probates are not included here, but can be found in series FO 917. The online platform China Families www.chinafamilies.net indexes much of this material. Consular birth, marriage, and death registers can be found in the online genealogical platform, Ancestry.com.

such as Tinkler, and it provided a home or staging post for thousands more as well.⁸

The Pacific War heralded the end of this multinational colonial enterprise. The International Settlement and the French Concession were absorbed into the collaborationist municipality; although their agencies and institutions were so much stronger, it could in reality be seen as a reverse takeover. British and other allied nationals who staffed the administration lost their posts. With the end of the conflict, and as the British and Americans had signed new treaties in February 1943 that saw the end of extraterritoriality and the return of all remaining concessions to the National Government, a new chapter opened. There was a great deal to disentangle, and ultimately a great many claims for pensions, salaries, compensation and property had to lapse. But as the British presence in Shanghai was wound up in the years after Communist Party forces seized the city in May 1949, such records provide a detailed snapshot of the composition of that presence, almost frozen in time as it lost its foothold in Shanghai.



⁸ For a survey see Robert Bickers, "Shanghaianders and Others: British Communities in China, 1843–1957," in Robert Bickers (ed), *Settlers and Expatriates: Britons over the Seas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 269–301.