

LIVING HISTORY By Simon Drakeford

# The Shanghai Rugby Club

*From the 1860s to the final kick of the International Settlement era*



Shanghai Rugby Union Football Club game circa 1935

**O**n November 25, 1867, just over 24 years after the founding of the International Settlement in Shanghai, a notice appeared in the *North China Daily News*: "A Meeting of persons anxious to join a Foot Ball Game, now in the course of formation will be held at Mr. J.A. Maitland's Yuen Long Hong on Monday, 25th instant at 3.30pm when the Rule's drawn up will be laid before those present." Shanghai's first "Foot Ball" club had been founded.

## One football club

Both association football (soccer) and rugby football teams in the city can look on that date as the start of their respective sports in Shanghai. The first written association rules had been in existence for just four years (yet widely disregarded by the clubs of the time) while rugby football rules would not be written for another four, and in the early years of the Club there was much debate in the *North China Daily News* about which rules should be used.

The first set were based on the Charterhouse School version, and more closely aligned with the dribbling (soccer) game. It was agreed in December 1867 that carrying of the ball would be allowed, but that the carrier could be tripped up; however, in December 1868 carrying of the ball was once again disallowed. Over the years the Shanghai Football Club played both codes, and the first games in Shanghai in 1867 can be considered a hybrid of rugby and soccer.

The early action took place on the baseball ground, located in the center of the racecourse that circled what is present day People's Square, with the first game that can be identified as more the handling (rugby) game taking place in November 1875 – a 15-a-side contest in which the final score was "no goals, but two touch downs, to The Shore." From 1881, recorded matches became more frequent.

## Split from association football

Players of the day were comfortable playing both forms of football, and a report from 1882 stated that, "If sufficient members muster, Rugby Union rules will be played, if not, then the Association game can be played." In the 1880s, as was the case in England, rugby rules prevailed, while later on association dominated. Having both codes within one sporting club increasingly became a source of friction, however, and on November 22, 1904 the rugby contingent broke away, forming the Shanghai Rugby Union Football Club.

In the 19th century, football games in Shanghai were played against navy teams or between the club's members and this remained the case for the Rugby Club. Quality fixtures were difficult to organize, but on February 22, 1907 an important tradition began: the "Interport" fixture. A team from Tianjin sailed to Shanghai and was beaten by three tries and one goal to nil. The following year, Shanghai played in Tianjin, winning by four tries, one goal and one dropped goal to nil. Before the outbreak of WWI a further four games were

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played, each side winning two apiece.

In 1914, the world faced the Great War, and in common with many men across the British Empire, the players of the Shanghai Rugby Club enthusiastically volunteered to fight for King and Country. The departure of several ships from the Bund back to Blighty was accompanied by marching bands and cheering crowds. Over 40 members of the club were on board, at least seven of whom we know were killed in action. Following the lead of the Rugby Football Union, during the war no rugby was played in Shanghai.

## Post-WWI

In the early post war years, the Shanghai Rugby Club struggled to reestablish itself, and it wasn't until December 1920 – over six years since the last game – that the sport was again played in Shanghai. The match was the club's first against a French-based team, the French Cruiser D'Estrees. (Somewhat surprisingly, given the size of the French population in Shanghai, it was not until February 1932 that a Shanghai-based French team was formed – The Association Sportive Francaise's first game in that year was against the Shanghai Municipal Police.)

Games against navy opposition and



The first ever Shanghai Interport XV who beat Tianjin in Shanghai in 1907

intra-club games formed the majority of fixtures in the 1920s, and the annual Burkhill Cup, between players of English and Scottish descent, which was first played in 1886, became a regular fixture, continuing up to 1940. The Interport games resumed in 1921, the first against Hankow, present-day Wuhan. Shanghai traveled up the Yangtze River to Hankow on eight occasions up to 1935, winning four, losing three and drawing one, but Hankow never visited Shanghai. Meanwhile, two more games were played against Tianjin in 1923 and 1924 – over the eight games played between the two clubs between 1907 and 1924, Shanghai won six and lost just two.

As with the pre-WWI era, the Interport fixtures were the highlights of the season. The standard of rugby would have been close to first-class rugby in England. Over the years Shanghai fielded a number of ex-international players (at least five that we know of) while many more had experience in other representative rugby and with top teams in England and Scotland. Matches were played before a paying crowd of several thousand, often at the racecourse, and later at the Canidrome, a dog racing stadium built in 1928 that could seat 50,000 spectators and took up a large portion of the block formed by what are today Jianguo Lu, Shaanxi Lu, Fuxing Lu and Maoming Lu in the former French Concession. What was to become the most important Interport fixture, and the most enthusiastically attended, was inaugurated in January 1924 when Shanghai traveled to Hong Kong. The two teams met 15 times from 1924 to 1949, with Hong Kong edging it with eight wins to Shanghai's seven.

As the 1920s progressed, the members of the Shanghai Rugby Club formed clubs within the club, organizing games between themselves, which had become possible due to the increasing foreign population in the city. Immediately before WWI the club had 68 members, and by the mid '20s this had grown to 125 playing members, peaking at 158 in 1932. (The highest roll including non-playing members was 444 in 1939.) Teams playing under the umbrella of the Shanghai Rugby Union Football Club included the Armoured Car Company, the Shanghai Municipal Police, Shanghai Scottish, the Shanghai Football Club Etceteras and the Area Details.

The US 4th Marines became a regular fixture, developing into formidable opposition for the best that both Shanghai and the British Service teams could throw at them, while in 1926, Shanghai hosted a team from Japan for the first time. Keio University were the top team in Japan, where rugby had become very

popular (the Emperor enjoyed the game and supported it, no doubt contributing to its following). In subsequent years, several other teams visited from Japan, including Meiji University in 1928, Waseda University in 1933 and Imperial Japanese Railways in 1935. Meanwhile, in December 1932, a Shanghai-based Japanese college team called Tung Wen made their first appearance, losing to the Shanghai 3rd team, and another Japanese team, Shanghai Nipponjin, was formed in 1938.



### The 1930s to outbreak of WWII

By the early '30s, a good deal of rugby was being played in the city; in the 1934-35 season alone 58 games were played, mostly at the two rugby pitches within the grounds of the racecourse. Along with an influx of foreigners living in the city swelling the size of the club, as tensions grew in the Far East the number of navy and army teams increased. Service teams such as the Seaforth Highlanders, the Durham Light Infantry, the Lancashire Fusiliers and the Royal Welch Fusiliers all provided tough opposition, and in 1938-39 some 89 games were played in Shanghai.

By December 1941, however, things had changed. The US Marines had withdrawn from the city, as had the British Army. At the Annual General Meeting of the Club in November 1941 it was reported that "the standard of rugby in Shanghai has gradually waned." The club was looking towards the French Forces team and the Japanese teams to do battle with. The last appearance of a Shanghai Rugby Club team for nearly five years was against Japanese team Tung Wen on December 6, 1941 – less than 48 hours before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Tung Wen was victorious.

Two days later, on the morning of December 8, the Japanese entered the International Settlement, completing their occupation of Shanghai (which had previously stopped at the International Settlement and French Concession boundaries in 1937). By then many of the playing members had left Shanghai to fight in the European and Far Eastern theaters of war, some of whom were killed in action. Those that remained found themselves and their families interned by the Japanese.

### Post WWII

It took a year for the Club to play again after the conclusion of WWII – a 6-6 draw with a British Navy team on November 6, 1946. Initially things looked bright – there were a lot of service teams to play against, including some from the Australian Navy, and in 1948, after a break of eight years, an Interport fixture was played in the city against Hong Kong, with Shanghai traveling to Hong Kong to play a return fixture the following year.

Then, in May 1949, Communist troops took Shanghai. At the annual general meeting of November 1949 it was noted that "the club is facing one of its most difficult post war seasons." Many players had already left Shanghai and the opposition, in the form of the Service teams, had also gone.

The club struggled on, playing between themselves until 2.45pm on March 18, 1950. That last recorded game of rugby was between the Shanghai Rugby Union Football Club and the club's "Retired Gentlemen," and limited to two 20-minute halves at the request of the retirees. While the result was not recorded, we do know that "hot water was provided, but players [had] to bring their own towel and soap."

In 1952 the club was finally disbanded. In the minutes of the Rugby Football Union at Twickenham in June 1952 it was reported that the Treasurer of Shanghai RFC had offered to donate its surplus of GBP409 – about GBP20,000 (or RMB200,000) in today's money – to the Union to provide a trophy for "some purpose of the game." A decision was deferred until October 1952, when it was agreed that the funds should be used to furnish the President's Room at Twickenham.

A plaque was placed over the fireplace that read: "This Room is furnished from the funds presented to the Rugby Football Union by the Shanghai Rugby Union Football Club to commemorate the many games in Shanghai between the club and visiting Service teams." Sadly, the commemoration did not last; subsequent renovations to the stadium mean the room no longer exists, the plaque and sentiments behind it forgotten. Rugby was not played again by the reformed Shanghai Rugby Football Club until the mid-1990s.

Simon Drakeford is in the process of writing a book-length history of rugby in Shanghai and would be delighted to hear from anybody who has memories or mementoes from the days of the original Shanghai Rugby Club at [drakeford64@yahoo.com](mailto:drakeford64@yahoo.com). The modern incarnation of the club, the Shanghai Hairy Crabs, have also started training for the season ahead and have an icebreaker game on March 5. See p120 for details on how to get involved or, [www.rugby-shanghai.com](http://www.rugby-shanghai.com) for information on joining the club.