



Journal
OF THE
Royal Asiatic
Society
China

VOL 79

2019

No 1

Price 100 RMB

SUPPLIED *gratis* TO ALL MEMBERS OF THE SOCIETY
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The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society China is published by
Earnshaw Books on behalf of the Royal Asiatic Society China.

Journal OF THE Royal Asiatic Society China

Vol. 79 No. 1, 2019

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CONTRIBUTIONS

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Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society China
Vol. 79 No. 1, 2019

978-988-8552-71-9

EB 136

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Designed and produced for RAS China by Earnshaw Books Ltd.
17/E, Siu Ying Commercial Building, 151-155 Queen's Road Central, Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT:

The Miss Shanghai beauty pageants were held almost every year between 1929 and 1947, and they usually precipitated a scandal. The competition of 1929 led to a court case and the recasting of votes. In 1931, Chinese activists protested against bathing suits on the catwalk. The pageant in 1933 advertised Hollywood connections that were fabricated. In 1947, the crown was tossed around on stage, taken from one girl and given to another. Gleefully outraged public debates erupted in the press after the competitions: the fairness of the voting was dubious, the organisers were criminal, and often the charitable fundraising was a sham. Different organisations fought for the privilege to elect Miss Shanghai – or disavowed any connection to the pageant. The proceedings ranged from international press events in stadium-size venues, to dodgy nocturnal business in cheap cabarets. Conditioned by the changing political, economic and racial makeup of the city and channelling ideas and fashions of the day, these shows were a rude, but fertile social almanac for pre-liberation Shanghai.

INTRODUCTION

Each year, hundreds of beauty competitions take place in China; some are local events, while others are stages in global contests. Discussions of the roots of these pageants tend to link them to early twentieth-century “flower elections” in urban centres like Shanghai, in which courtesans were ranked according to their appearance, manners and performing skills.¹ Then histories tend to leap to the 1946 contest Miss Shanghai, widely publicised at the time. It is sometimes designated as China’s first beauty pageant, when in fact it was the last of its kind. From the middle of the 1920s to the late 1940s, citywide beauty competitions were held almost every year, and they drew their inspiration from international trends as well as from the local urban culture.

In June 1926, after three years of construction, the new amusement centre Palais Oriental opened on Avenue Joffre, owned by the entrepreneur Michael Ting, son of Ding Ziqian (one of the earliest

compradors in Shanghai, allied with the British firm Westphal, King & Ramsay, Ltd). French architects Alexandre Leonard and Paul Veysseyre designed the Palais Oriental in the “French style,”² with three oversized arches on a beaux-arts façade. Equipped with a movie theatre, a roof garden and an open-air dancing hall, it promised to become ‘the most luxurious and up-to-date cinema and dancing palace in the Orient.’³

At the end of the first month of operation, Michael Ting announced his intention to organise the Oriental Beauty pageant, in which ‘a committee composed of both local prominent Chinese and foreigners’⁴ would choose a beauty queen. Ting promised to commission a stone statue of the winner and to persuade the Municipal Council of the French Concession to install it on a public square, ‘in a custom usually observed in beauty competitions on France.’⁵ His ambitions quickly outstripped his resources, and by the end of the year the Palais Oriental cinema was taken over by the Peacock Motion Picture Corporation and renamed the Paris Theatre, while Michael Ting concentrated his theatrical energies on creating floral arrangements for the yearly Autumn Flower Show.⁶

In January 1928, an announcement of a beauty contest appeared on the pages of the local daily Shanghai Zaria. Founded in 1925, this was the largest Russian-language newspaper in the city, selling almost 3,000 copies a day to the Russian expatriate community. The Shanghai Zaria editors judged the candidates – all Russian girls – *in absentia*, using the photographs sent in by the readers. The three finalists were recent arrivals from Harbin; two of them were married. The beauty queen, Claudia Semenoff, received her prize during *thé dansant* at the Carlton Café, in the International Settlement.⁷

In February of the next year, a Harbin-based Russian daily attempted to repeat the success of the Shanghai competition, but the contest quickly devolved into a press battle, when a competing daily disparaged the appearance of the most popular candidate and accused the organisers of using “a cheap way” to boost subscription rates. This prompted an uncle of the slandered candidate to storm the office of the organisers and throw stationery around the room. In the end, Harbin newspapers proclaimed it was ‘a disgrace for any self-respecting Russian woman to let herself be advertised in this manner.’⁸ Most of the candidates withdrew from the pageant.

1929: LEPER MISSION CARNIVAL ON CONEY ISLAND

In March 1929, the Shanghai bi-weekly *Eastern Times Photo Supplement* (*Tuhua Shibao*) published a photograph of a seated girl in a bulky patterned cotton dress; her name was Zhou Shuping. The Chinese caption announced her wedding to Li Zongkan, while the English caption added that Zhou was ‘known as the most beautiful lady of Shanghai.’⁹ The *North-China Daily News*, Shanghai’s largest English-language daily, reprinted the image and explained that Zhou was deemed beautiful because her features complied with the following standard: ‘She had to be pretty without resorting to paint and powder, have a smiling and dimpled countenance, a face like the seed of the watermelon, eyebrows like the quarter of a moon, good teeth, a handsome nose and pretty ears. Her forehead had to be high, but not too high to disfigure her face; she had to be of medium height. No mention was made of her hands, ankles, etc.’¹⁰

Zhou Shuping was the daughter of the prominent local industrialist Zhou Jingjue (now remembered as the founder of Chinese philately). She had graduated from the elite *McTyeire School* – the alma mater of the famed *Song sisters* – where she had won prizes in sports and music competitions. She also spoke fluent English and was an ardent socialite – just the right kind of young woman to embody a modern ideal.

Chinese-language periodicals had been reporting on beauty pageants abroad since the late nineteenth-century. The contests gained momentum in Europe in the early 1920s, and the Shanghai public could read detailed reports of these events in local tabloids. In 1926, portraits of foreign beauty queens in gowns and tiaras began to appear on Shanghai’s front pages. A 1929 issue of the *Eastern Times Photo Supplement* published a composite of portraits of contestants for the title of *Miss World* in Paris, where a candidate from Hungary took the crown. Shanghai was ready for a beauty pageant of its own.

Shanghai’s first full-scale beauty pageant took place in September 1929, in the *New World* amusement centre, comprised of two buildings at the western end of *Nanking Road*, overlooking the *Racecourse*. Guidebooks described the *New World* as ‘an amazing agglomeration of halls, theatres, menageries, distorting glasses, refreshment rooms, Chinese and foreign, [...] roof gardens on different levels where hundreds of people drink tea and eat, and there is always something new.’¹¹ Westerners had been comparing it to London’s *Crystal*

Palace and New York's Coney Island, so in 1929 the management refurbished the northern building, renamed it Coney Island and organised the Charity Exposition and Carnival – a combination of a fair, a convention and a charity fundraiser, with the proceeds from all rides and shows going to the Chinese Mission to Lepers to build a new hospital for 200 patients. The impresario of the fair was E. K. Fernandez, nicknamed the Barnum of Hawaii, who 'held carnivals and exhibitions in almost every clime, entertaining thousands of persons of almost every nationality.'¹² Among the many rides and attractions, Fernandez ordered a delivery of a sixty-foot high Ferris wheel, capable of carrying twenty-four passengers.

The central event of the Leper Mission Carnival, as the press called it, was the beauty contest. It was organised by William Lee (Li Yuanxin), who was one of the directors of the New World and simultaneously president of the Chinese Mission to Lepers. Having previously lived in Australia, Lee had experience organising fundraisers coupled with beauty contests for the Chinese community there.¹³ To successfully transplant this event to Shanghai, Lee needed to break the association of beauty contests with "flower elections" among prostitutes. He would class the contest up by only inviting the daughters and the wives of the city's commercial and political elite to participate.¹⁴ In September, candidates' portraits started to circulate in local foreign and Chinese press. Some of these women had previously taken part in fashion shows and exhibitions for Lee's charities – among them Yu Danhan, the daughter of the ex-chairman of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce Yu Xiaqing, and Elsie Kwok, the daughter of the director of Shanghai Mint and the managing director of the Wing On Department Store George Kwok Bew (Guo Biao).

The public was supposed to vote by writing the name of the preferred candidate and mailing it to the management of the New World. Multiple votes could be purchased for additional money. The voting went on for three weeks, with updated rankings published weekly. To encourage the purchase of votes, The China Press published a fake letter, signed Red Lips, which reminded the reader that over '200 Shanghai international beauties' were enrolled in the contest, and Red Lips intended to win it: 'I will go to my comprador friend and tell him to buy all the votes.'¹⁵ Red Lips tried to pique the curiosity about the prizes: 'What kind of car he will get in return for his check, I certainly don't know. Perhaps it's an asthmatic Ford or a rickety third

hand six-cylinder tummy shaker, or the alternative, a free round trip on a tram steamer, steerage.¹⁶ The winner of the title Miss Shanghai was actually promised a choice between ‘a free trip to the United States with an opportunity to visit Hollywood, the home of cinema, or a high powered six-cylinder automobile.’¹⁷ Controversy quickly arose, and the Leper Mission was accused of ‘making money out of a charitable scheme.’¹⁸ There were questions whether any money would actually go to the lepers; criticism was widespread enough to force William Lee to defend his philanthropy in the press.

For most of the voting period, Elsie Kwok was leading the race, with Phoebe Wong, the chief accountant of the Asia Realty Co., the runner-up. As the end of the contest approached, supporters of other candidates took the suggestion of Red Lips and began to buy vast amounts of votes. By the end of September, Yu Danhan rose to the second position. The charms of the accountant Phoebe Wong and Helen Yun, who was an employee of the North-China Daily News, could not compete with the financial infusions buoying more subsidised girls, and Wong and Yun fell to fourth and fifth places. Another finalist, Amy Chun, the wife of the former shipping manager of the China Merchant Steam Shipping Company, had powerful backing, but only sufficient for third place. There were no western candidates in the top five, and only one Western name – Lilian Jacobs – among the top fifteen.

On midnight of September 30, the three-week contest, like a horse race in syndication, finally came to a close. In the final hours of the voting, it was a battle between the Chamber of Commerce (Yu Danhan) and the Shanghai Mint (Elsie Kwok). By midnight, Yu Danhan had an advantage of 5,000 votes over Elsie Kwok. But as the commission set about the final calculations, the Kwok team drew a wild card: one of the lower-ranking contestants, Helen Yun, after some negotiation with representative of George Kwok Bew, expressed a desire to donate all of her 89,000 votes to Elsie Kwok, which brought Kwok’s total count to over 208,710, surpassing Yu Danhan’s 145,090.¹⁹ The jury, consisting of Chinese and Western business elite, paused to review the legitimacy of this last-minute vote transfer – and then approved it.

Elsie Kwok, the daughter of the man who printed the money, was Miss Shanghai 1929. When given the choice of her prize – a trip to Hollywood or the six-door Essex Coach – she chose the car.

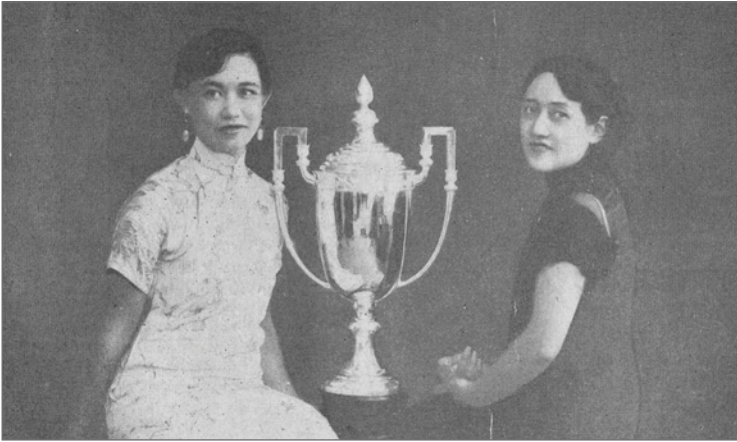


Figure 1: 1929: Elsie Kwok and Mrs Ma. *Le journal de Shanghai*, July 19, 1931.

1931: THE CURSE OF THE BATHING SUIT

The Leper Mission Carnival was touted as a brilliant success, but Shanghai's Coney Island struggled to stay afloat; in February 1931 it closed, leaving 45,000 dollars of debt in rent.²⁰ There were, however, other "Coney Islands" all around Shanghai; the name was assigned to amusement centres and dancehalls, riverside beach resorts and fish markets.

One of these Coney Islands opened in July 1931 in the remote Yangshupu area, on the grounds of a popular greyhound-racing track owned by the local magnate W. R. McBain. The new resort, called Luna Park, cost more than a million taels to build. It offered 'typically western forms of recreations,' a 'Japanese tea house, a German beer garden, a Chinese restaurant and a European one.'²¹ A 'kaleidoscope of amusements,' like in New York's Coney Island, included the merry go-round, the scenic railway 'with breath-taking dips and scream-inducing loops,' 'towering' Ferris wheels and 'innumerable games of chance,'²² as well as a spacious dance floor under a wooden canopy.

Luna Park's main attraction was its open-air swimming pool – supposedly the third largest in the world – equipped with diving boards and slides, 'sandy beaches and a shady waterfall.'²³ The wholesome environment happily justified the wearing of bathing suits in public. Since the prophetic 'It had to come'²⁴ caption under the photo of Peggy Jones in the one-piece bathing suit at Chicago's Clarendon Beach in 1920, bathing suits had been diminishing in size and clinging closer to the figure.²⁵ Shanghai's foreign community

was conscious of the trend, and in 1930 a light-hearted pageant took place in the swimming pool at the Foreign YMCA. Members of the women's sports section paraded in "old fashioned" bathing suits, to demonstrate 'the many ways in which pleasure may be derived from the swimming pool during the summer months.'²⁶ Ogling women in beachwear seemed stylish and legitimate.

In June 1931, the management of the Luna Park announced 'the first pageant of the international kind'²⁷ in Shanghai. The candidates had to fill out application forms in downtown movie theatres and mail them to the organising committee. Chinese and foreign applicants were supposed to be assessed separately on different dates; those not wishing to appear in a bathing suit could compete in an evening gown in yet another sub-group. The top eight candidates in each of the four groups would all meet and compete in the final round, to elect Miss Shanghai and her "lady of honor." The top prize was an inscribed silver goblet. Emphasising the continuity with the 1929 contest, local papers published the photograph of Elsie Kwok demonstrating this trophy.²⁸

Remembering that the beauty queen of 1929 chose a car over a trip to Hollywood, the Luna Park spent 7,000 taels on a Buick with an eight-cylinder engine from the Andersen & Ferroggiaro salon and exhibited it in their showroom on Bubbling Well Road. The popular English-language daily, *The China Press*, printed a provocative cartoon: a string of skimpily-clad young women sashaying on a catwalk in beach hats and tiaras, with wide ribbons dangling between their breasts identifying them as "Miss America," "Miss Italy," "Miss Russia," "Miss China" and "Miss France." The contestants were led by the curvaceous "Miss Shanghai" in a revealing bathing suit, whose face was concealed beneath her blond bobbed hair, with a bold question mark hanging above it.²⁹ The paper reported that Luna Park's offices were flooded with hundreds of applications, from 'girls of all nations, ageing between 15 and 23.'³⁰

While public interest was at a fever pitch and applications were pouring in, the Shanghai Chinese Women's Association publicly petitioned the Greater Shanghai Bureau of Social Affairs to prevent Chinese women from taking part: 'The contest is in reality just a cloak to incite wantonness,' and 'an insult to the feminine sex,' which will 'display women's nakedness in public'³¹ and affect public morals. The Bureau of Social Affairs took no action, but the Luna Park was compelled to clarify via the press that 'the pageant is in no way a



Figure 2: 'Problems of a beauty contest,' by Sapajou. *The North-China Daily News*, August 13, 1931.

bathing beauty contest,' and that all entries were subject to scrutiny to maintain 'high moral standard' and to 'insure contestants against undesirable associates.'³²

As the preparations for the September gala continued, another venue snuck in a one-off bathing suit pageant. The Lido nightclub, on Medhurst Road, organised a 'bathing beauty contest of an international nature.' It was a small event centred on a swimming pool; candidates did not have to sign up in advance and could join spontaneously on the night of the contest, which commenced at midnight.

In August, the progressive and competitive Japanese residents of Shanghai elected their own beauty queen. Over the course of two

months, the judges based in the office of the daily newspaper Shanghai Nippo assessed 120 photographs and biographic details of girls mailed in by the readers. A booklet with all the candidates' portraits was distributed free of charge to the subscribers; the voting coupons were printed in the paper. Having received almost 11,000 votes, the twenty-year-old Takeko Inouye, 20, was proclaimed Miss Shanghai. Inouye had arrived in Shanghai at the age of 17, lived with her chaperones in the French Concession and attended the SMC Public School for girls. Inouye's height of 5 feet and 6 inches, described as 'exceptionally tall,'³³ might have played a role in her election, or in her subsequent victory of the national title Miss Japan, held in Tokyo a few weeks later. Inouye managed to win both titles *in absentia*, on the sheer appeal of her photographs, which may be a testament to the exceptional skill of the Shanghai's portrait photographers.

On August 23, 1931, The China Press published six photographs of the leading contestants for the Luna Park contest. Lilian Jacobs, the veteran of the 1929 pageant, posed in a bathing suit, stooping over a mandolin. The five other finalists, also in bathing suits, were Russian girls. Considering the relative poverty and uncertain political status of Shanghai Russians, it was hardly surprising that they took every opportunity for publicity and material prizes. Society pages of local newspapers suggested some happy scenarios for entrepreneurial and good-looking women. A marriage to a European was a ticket out of statelessness: newly minted wives would walk out of the consulates with freshly stamped European passports in their hands. But not every Russian in the Luna Park competition was destitute: one of the finalists, Helen Sloutsky, was the daughter of a prominent Shanghai conductor Alexander Sloutsky, in charge of the symphony orchestra at the Lyceum Theatre.

'Save for the defection of the Chinese and the Japanese, the first Miss Shanghai contest was a great success,' announced the French daily *Le journal de Shanghai*.³⁴ On the night of the final round, on September 7, 1931, the Luna Park swimming pool was crowded. The organisers had scrapped the plan to hold four separate rounds and assessed all the candidates at once. Other than Helen Sloutsky, the list of finalists included Rene Stibbe (UK), Lucy Cherakova (Russia), Kathlyn Wilder (Ireland) and Selina Gesu (a Russian from Harbin who claimed to be Turkish). The finalists had to walk around the pool first in evening gowns and then in bathing suits. The China

Press speculated this catwalk must have been an ordeal, because ‘as amateurs they were unaccustomed to the eyes of 1,500 persons being fastened on their limbs, torsos and faces.’³⁵ The loudest applause went to Lucy Cherakova, a ‘petite and buxom’³⁶ brunette who danced at the Majestic Cabaret, but the sensible judges chose Helen Sloutsky to be Miss Shanghai. Prizes for the beauty queen included a vanity case filled with Colgate-Palmolive products, a leather jewellery box with a silver cigarette case planted inside, ‘a gold and enamel compact and lip stick from Richard Hudnut, gowns from Flora and bathing suits from Fidelity Mills.’³⁷

‘Tall and well-rounded for her age,’³⁸ the seventeen-year-old Sloutsky dutifully expressed her surprise at her victory. A blitz interview on the spot extracted her home address (111 Route Vallon), established her proficiency with the piano and her affinity for riding horses. Sloutsky surprised the journalists by stating she had not coveted the Buick because she already had a car. After the interview Sloutsky consoled her friend Lucy Cherakova, who in spite of her popularity with the crowd did not receive any prizes for the second place.

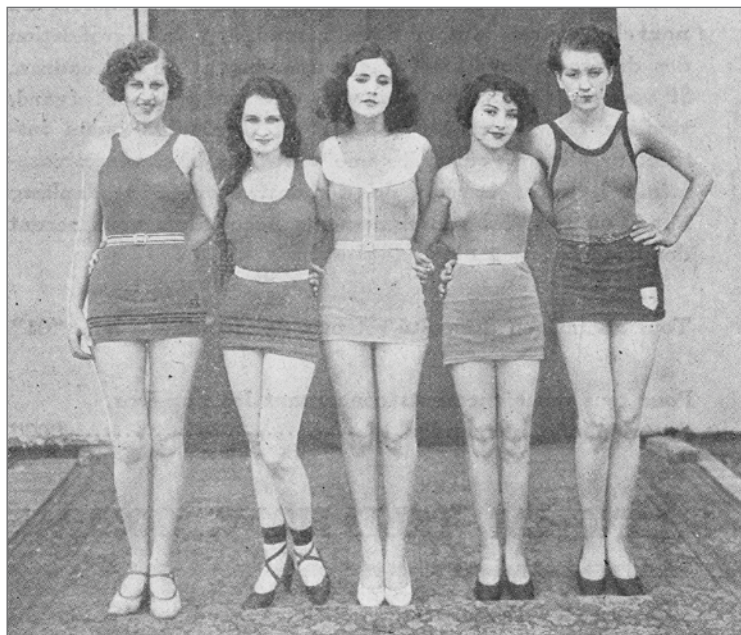


Figure 3: 1931: Finalists, left to right: Rene Stibbe, Kathlyn Wilder, Helen Sloutsky, Lucy Cherakova, Selina Gesu. *Le journal de Shanghai*, September 13, 1931.

Helen Sloutsky married the French A. Crosnier in 1933 and directed plays at the Lyceum Theatre, but the press kept on calling her Miss Shanghai 1931 until the end of the decade. In 1933, Lucy Cherakova enrolled in the Shanghai beauty pageant again. The “Turkish” Selina Gesu went on to win the crown of Miss Qingdao in 1934, in a heated race dubbed ‘the battle of two blondes,’³⁹ competing against Julia Strijevsky, the beauty queen of Beidaihe. The odds changed in favour of Gesu at the last minute, most likely with the help of a jury member, baron Reginald d’Auxion de Ruffe, a Shanghai-based French lawyer. The 21-year-old Gesu began an affair with the 56-year-old; she married him in Shanghai shortly before his mysterious assassination in 1941.⁴⁰

1933: THE YEAR OF THE CINEMA

1932 was marked by the Japanese armed incursions in Shanghai and the incineration of the district of Zhabei, north of the International Settlement. The atmosphere was grim; no beauty pageants were held that year. The attack on the city uprooted many Russians who had been living in Zhabei. As they resettled in the French Concession, they put a strain on the existing infrastructure and public services; in February 1933, the Rotary Club proposed a beauty pageant to raise funds for the completion of the new Russian School for Poor Children. Shanghai’s prime amusement palace, the Canidrome, offered space and put the resident orchestra at the services of the event, while R. Stanley Dollar, of the Dollar steamship empire, promised to finance the winner’s trip to Hollywood.⁴¹

Movie glamour infused every aspect of the contest that year. Information about the pageant appeared under the rubric ‘Footlights and Films’ in the North-China Daily News, interspersed with screening schedules at leading Shanghai theatres. To promote the movie-themed contest, Shanghai newspapers reminded the readers about the Chinese origins of two Hollywood actresses whose films were seen in Shanghai. One of these stars – ‘our own Lyda Roberti’⁴² – had been a vaudeville performer, whose entire family had travelled from Warsaw (then part of the Russian Empire) across Siberia to China to escape the Bolshevik revolution. After her family circus went bankrupt in Shanghai, Roberti became a dancer in the Carlton Café and eventually saved enough money to sail to the USA, where the Paramount Studios classified her a ‘vamp and a man-killer’ type.⁴³ Roberti’s film *Kid from Spain* opened

in Shanghai at the same time as the public started to vote in the Movie Queen competition.

Another China prodigy was the Tianjin-born Sari Maritza (a pseudonym of Dora Patricia Detering-Nathan). Her Paramount production *Forgotten Commandments* played in Shanghai in July 1932. Born to a wealthy British-Austrian family, Detering-Nathan learned English from her parents, Chinese from household servants and French and German from private teachers. When she was twelve, her family left China and moved to London.⁴⁴ The actress's exotic Chinese provenance was broadcast by her Hollywood promoters and then by the Shanghai press. The contest of 1933 was going to launch another movie star from China, so in March, a photograph of Sari Maritza standing next to Sir Victor Sassoon, one of the major sponsors of the contest, circulated in Shanghai papers.⁴⁵ The Shanghai tycoon purchased a large number of votes to aid the charity cause, and promised to distribute his votes evenly between the eventual finalists.⁴⁶

A hundred fifty-seven contestants were said to be made up of over forty nationalities; however, more than half the names in the contest were Russian. Among them there were Mrs. Sapajou (the wife of the North-China Daily News resident cartoonist Sapajou), Lucy Cherakova (the runner-up in the 1931 competition), Julia Strijevsky (who later won the title *Miss Beidaihe* and competed for the crown of Qingdao), Natalya von Heyking (baroness by birth) and Zenia Girrard De Soucanton (baroness by marriage). There were also a number of Western socialites – Dallas Lee Franklin, Nanette Barraud, Jennifer Stenhouse, Isabelle Farquharson, Margaret Sinclair and the wife of the Italian Consul Count Giorgio del Bono. All three Chieri sisters competed: Mathilda, Itala (the budding drama actress) and Laura who had won the Weihaiwei beauty contest the year before ('dark Italian olive complexion and hair; gray eyes'⁴⁷). Frequently tagged 'popular members of the younger set',⁴⁸ these women were the mainstay of the local society pages, and at least one was a radio personality: Ann Bachara, the star of the amateur hour on Hong Kong radio, performed 'an entirely new series of songs'⁴⁹ in Shanghai, to inspire the purchase of votes in her favour.

A number of photography studios offered free sittings to the contestants, to present them in a Hollywood screen-appropriate manner. The portraits were then displayed in the lobbies of thirteen participating theatres – Broadway, Capitol, Carlton, Cathay, Embassy,

Isis, Lyceum, Nanking, Paris, Peking, Ritz, Strand and Willies – and also projected on the movie screen, giving the public a chance to appraise how these new stars would align in the Hollywood constellation. Movie tickets were bundled with voting coupons, which could be dropped into ballot boxes over the thirteen days of the voting period; extra votes could be purchased at 1 dollar per 100 votes.

There were only fifteen Chinese names on the candidates' list, but knowing that the Chinese comprised the overwhelming majority of moviegoers, one reader of the North-China Daily News, who signed as "Australian," feared that the Chinese contestants would extract all the votes from their local fan base and come to dominate the finals.⁵⁰ In reality, only one Chinese girl made it to the finals, because the Chinese public largely ignored this contest. Aspiring actresses had more direct auditions for the silver screen than signing up for a protracted and confusing pageant organised by the Westerners. China's film industry was booming, and Shanghai was its capital. In 1933, over a hundred feature-length films were made in the city.⁵¹ Stars were born by the dozen, and actresses – such as Hu Die (Butterfly Wu), Xu Lai and Chen Yumei, among scores of others – enjoyed unprecedented celebrity and public following. For a brief moment, being cast in a movie was a real possibility in Shanghai. There were insanely popular dance competitions in major amusement centres and dance halls, where a skilled and charming entrant could earn the title of the "dance empress,"⁵² and a studio audition. Simultaneously with the Rotary-organised Movie Queen contest, Chinese movie magazines and commercial brands held a number of pageants and elected "movie queens," "tobacco queens" and "standard beauties" among entertainment personalities as well as among amateurs.⁵³

By the end of the voting period, a total of over 250,000 votes were recorded. All the candidates were invited to the Canidrome Movie Ball, where 26 finalists were invited on stage, after being made over with "Max Factor's Hollywood Makeup," one of the sponsoring brands. The final round was captured on film. The jury, consisting largely of fathers and husbands of participants as well as major sponsors of the contest, had elected the Russian Nina Barsamova to be the Movie Queen of Shanghai. The petite Muscovite – 157 cm, 49 kilos, 'brown eyes and crinkly, wavy hair'⁵⁴ – had been living in Harbin until two years prior, when her father died and she had to move to Shanghai, together with her mother and sister Maria. Both girls worked as manicurists at the

Cathay Hotel salon; Maria competed in the pageant, too, under the name Mooser Barsamover. Sir Victor Sassoon himself crowned Nina on the Canidrome stage. She continued to work in the Cathay salon for the next few weeks, waiting for her trip to Hollywood.

All the finalists received prizes. The runner-up – the Italian Laura Chieri – was awarded a round trip to Japan, a number of outfits and a portable gramophone. The third prize winner – the American Charlotte Kingsbury – received a Philco Radio and some furs, dresses and bags; other finalists received makeup travel kits from Max Factor – most of which were forgotten and left in the backrooms in the commotion of the celebrations.⁵⁵ The gross take of the ball in Canidrome surpassed the expectations and amounted to 33,000 dollars. The construction of the new Russian School continued, and soon the two-story building at 737 Avenue Petain, designed by the prominent local engineer Hans Berents, was inaugurated. A year later, Laura Chieri married Count Francois de Courseilles de Barbeville of Normandy in a luxurious ceremony in the Catholic St Joseph's Church.⁵⁶ The fourth finalist, the British Margaret Sinclair, acted in the Amateur Dramatics Society's plays in the Lyceum Theatre and later became a star of a local radio show for children.

Nina Barsamova sailed from Shanghai on the liner President Hoover on May 27, 1933, and three weeks later arrived in San Francisco, “into the lap of Rotarians and ritzy hotels.’ Soon photographs began to appear of her operating a movie camera in a studio together with the actor Warren Baxter, then side by side with the actress Boots Mallory. Barsamova's China background, already exotic, received an extra layer of glamour when the San Francisco Chronicle tacked on her fictitious affiliation with the Russian royal family; another paper called her a ‘pretty little red.’⁵⁷ Barsamova appeared as an extra in two films – *Penthouse* (1933) with Warren Baxter and Myrna Loy, which opened in Shanghai's Grand Theatre in December – and *Bolero* (1934), with Carole Lombard and George Raft.⁵⁸

There was a press announcement, that the filmmaker and producer Buddy De Sylva heard Barsamova's hard Russian accent and exclaimed, ‘Exactly what I want!’⁵⁹ but he had to make his musicals without her: in early November 1934, Nina reluctantly boarded the same President Hoover liner and sailed back to Shanghai. She had stayed in the USA as long as her US visa permitted, and according to her, the absence of work permit prevented her from getting more roles, so she scaled down her expectations, and studied makeup at the Paramount Beauty



Figure 4: 1933: Nina Barsamova arrives in Los Angeles, June 6, 1933. *Acme News*, courtesy of Rotary Club Shanghai.

School. She announced a plan to open a beauty salon in Shanghai,⁶⁰ but soon after her return she met a hai-alai referee Paulino Ituarte and married him in a well-attended ceremony in the Catholic Church of Christ the King, on Rue Bourgeat, in July 1936; the reception in the Hai-Alai Auditorium, where Ituarte worked, was said to be splendid. The couple had two daughters and settled in California around 1949.

1935–1947: THE RUSSIANS REIGN

In 1935, Shanghai was hit by an economic recession. In the absence of other organisers, the non-commercial association of Russian artists,

actors and musicians, self-titled HLAM, took over the organisation of the pageant. To avoid 'commercialisation of the contest',⁶¹ HLAM forbade the purchasing of votes. Instead, the public would cast their votes after seeing the entrants paraded in front of them, so that 'unlike past contests, the power of money would be nil.'⁶² The main prize amounted to a diamond ring and earrings from the Ural Jewellery Store. Two former beauty queens of Shanghai – Helen Sloutsky and Nina Barsamova – would be present to award the winner at the Canidrome on August 2.

Owing to the contest's poor publicity and less-than-lavish prizes, it attracted only a small number of entries. A journalist of the North-China Daily News claimed that only seven girls signed up for the competition. Whether or not there was a first round, the seven finalists were Tamara Labutina, Miss Sergeievskaya, Miss Amador, Miss Pals, Miss Temer, Tania Sokol and Miss Kotliarova. The nineteen-year-old winner, Tamara Labutina – a brunette, born in Omsk, Siberia – was a stenographer whose father had been implicated in theft, gambling and drug trafficking in Shanghai.⁶³ Soon after her victory, Labutina married a British army officer surnamed Hodgman and eventually travelled to the US, where she intended to take up 'aviation, modelling and/or Hollywood.'⁶⁴ Labutina claimed that she had acted in 40 Chinese movies over the course of six years, sometimes appearing alongside Hu Die (Butterfly Wu): 'I was often the only white girl in the cast, and the pictures often had me marrying an Oriental and then tracing down the psychological development.'⁶⁵ While her husband was serving in India, Labutina was in Canada, posing for tabloids and waiting for "an actress visa" to return to Hollywood.⁶⁶ She never mentioned her winning the title of Miss Shanghai 1935, perhaps because she considered it a confused and inconsequential experience.

In 1937, the Russian and the western-organised Miss Shanghai pageants went separate ways. The Russian pageant became a nocturnal annual event in the recently opened Arcadia Cabaret, on Route Courbet. That year the contest had only a handful of contestants, all Russian. Under the pressure from the cabaret administration, the HLAM Association removed the limit on the purchasing of the votes and they were offered in the cabaret's box office at a dollar per hundred. The fiancé of a contestant named Nina Voronenko, 20, deposited his monthly paycheque and pawned his coat, yet his 265 dollars' investment failed to guarantee Voronenko's victory, so Marina

Homiakoff, 19, became the favourite. Her sponsor, the eighteen-year-old George Hardoon, nicknamed “Playboy” and “Millionaire,” was from a famous merchant family; his stepmother, Liza Hardoon, had just publicly disassociated herself from George’s debts and threatened to disown him. Hardoon was known to court multiple Russian girlfriends.⁶⁷ Immediately after her victory, Homiakoff left the cabaret in the company of another man, a land broker.⁶⁸

Two weeks later, a Western-run “bathing beauty” pageant took place in the Lido Beach Resort, on Medhurst Road. The jury was multinational and so were the finalists: the crown went to Lily Goodwin, 21, ‘clad in a white knitwear bathing costume;’⁶⁹ Daisy Bulldeath was second, and Woo Wen-ching was third.

In the following years, the Russian HLAM continued to organise yearly contests at the Arcadia, always on the 14th of July – possibly choosing this date to improve the mood among the Russian police and fire fighters in the service in the French Concession who were routinely excluded from the Bastille Day celebrations in the French Club. There is a depiction of the 1940 pageant in Arcadia, penned by the singer Alexander Vertinsky:

At ten sharp the orchestra played a march. The contest has begun. The sleazy-looking emcee cavalierly dragged the girls one by one onto the stage, like kittens from a sack: “Number one – Miss Asphyxia! Number two – Miss Amphibia!” (Girls had to use pseudonyms.) The public muttered: “Wow, this one is ugly.” “Number three – Miss Libido!” The public whispered: “What a horse.”

“Number four. Miss Insurance.” A girl in black silk dress with silver patches stood on the stage in the limelight. She was pathetically thin and resembled a merchant’s glazed coffin. The public wondered: “Is she in mourning?” Someone explained: “She’s the widow of the Unknown Soldier.”

“Number five. Miss Hypotenuse.” A skinny girl with frizzy hair and spaghetti-thin legs was about to faint. The anxiety, the bright stage lights and prolonged waiting in the chicken coop brought her on the verge of collapse. The audience refused to vote. All the interesting girls were sitting at the restaurant tables.⁷⁰



Figure 5: 1940: The jury at the table including Aleksandr Vertinsky (extreme left) and Sir Victor Sassoon (third from left, seated). *LIFE*.

Vertinsky's memoir is replete with declarations of longing for "mother Russia" overpowering the singer in every "hostile" foreign place he had lived since his emigration in 1920 – Constantinople, Warsaw, Paris, Berlin, San Francisco, New York, Shanghai. Writing about the pageant, Vertinsky made sure to criticise Shanghai's Russians for amusing themselves with pageants at the time when the USSR was under the attack from Nazi Germany. He fails to mention that he was the head of the jury of the contest and later stayed after the show to dance a few rounds with his 19-year-old girlfriend Lidia Tsirgvava.

The American photographer A. T. Hull, Jr. was in Arcadia during the 1940 contest and left a detailed visual record of the event.⁷¹ Hull's photographs show the enthusiastic public at the tables in the garden, the crowded dance floor, contestants marching on the catwalk and a dignified-looking jury station, with Sir Victor Sassoon presiding over the jury. Vertinsky continued:

[...]the evening was about to turn sour when a corpulent Chinese man approached the jury table. He was a famous businessman: he owned several currency exchange shops on the Bund. The public whispered: "The pheasant is here." He spoke in universally understood pidgin: "Our lady wanchee be missee. How much?" He produced a thick wallet from the pocket of his robe and started to count the banknotes. The owner of the restaurant emerged behind

his back: “This way, please.” Two waiters appeared on both sides of the benefactor and pushed him toward the cashier. Ten minutes later the majority of the votes “elected” his lady. She was Russian and a professional prostitute.⁷²

The “shy and demure” Galina Soldatenko, 18, who won the crown, hid from the press after the show. A week later she married a certain Nicolay Pavloff, who turned out to be a criminal, and divorced him the following year.⁷³ Vertinsky’s off-handed comment about a prostitute might refer to the winner of the 1941 contest – an event that prompted a satirical report in the Russian newspaper Slovo:

Last night there was the Miss Shanghai pageant; the ladies chattered about it non-stop. One girl in our alley fought with her mother: “I want to be elected.” Her mother, a smart damsel, says: “Look at yourself, Glasha. You’re not exactly a goblin, but your face is far from a beauty queen material.” But that girl is stubborn: “Mother, who should be talking? Makeup makes any mug beautiful, and I am rather pretty to start with.” But the mother insists: “Glasha, makeup sticks to the face in winter, but in this heat your mascara and your rouge will be dripping from your chin. In this weather they will probably choose a natural beauty.” But who can stop the girl? She painted her face, threw on a gown with a fur train and rode off to the contest.⁷⁴

The 1941 winner, Faina Hablieff, 19, had been the runner-up the year before. She came to Shanghai with her younger brother in 1932, together with their parents, who died soon after their arrival. Hablieff’s brother grew up in the Russian Orthodox orphanage, while Faina ended up in Japanese-occupied Dairen; when she returned to Shanghai in 1939, a note on her registration card suggested she could have been a prostitute.⁷⁵

Also in 1941, the Argentina Night Club held its first ever Miss China competition – a nightclub event justified by a professed fundraising drive for the Shanghai Refugee Relief Association. The first prize was 1500 dollars and ‘a screen test for Hollywood,’⁷⁶ conducted at the local branch of the Universal Pictures Corporation. The announcement of the contest caused confusion among the public: can a foreigner be

Miss China? (The organiser, the publisher Hal P. Mills, said yes.)⁷⁷ In the finals, Western girls outnumbered the Chinese, but Wang Meimei, a local cabaret performer, won the crown. Wang donated most of her cash prize to charity.

As the Japanese military occupation progressed, the foreign settlements were occupied and pageants became too difficult to organise. While the allied nationals were herded to internment camps, the Russians remained free, but struggled with unemployment, inflation and food scarcity. A nightlife of sorts continued at the city's periphery, but no notable pageants took place until the end of the Pacific War.

In July 1946, the first post-war beauty pageant received a great deal of press coverage, locally and abroad; it was interpreted as a sign of recovering China and of Shanghai's business returning to normalcy. The organiser of the competition was the notorious Du Yuesheng, an opium Mafioso turned financier and politician. Having lost the grip of his opium empire during his wartime absence from Shanghai, Du was seeking to rebuild his networks of influence. He chose a worthy cause – the aid to the refugees displaced by the floods in Jiangsu province – and announced that the election of Miss Shanghai would be a major fundraising event. No one dared refuse the invitation to Du's charity enterprise; every Chinese with money, status or celebrity became involved. If previous pageants had often excluded professional entertainers from being contestants, Du cordially invited everyone – showgirls, opera actresses, taxi dancers and “family girls” – which included teachers, office clerks, ‘artistes and girls in the independent professions.’⁷⁸ He also secured the participation of a number of local opera stars and movie starlets.

The issue of bathing suits in public was back in the news; that summer the Hollywood movie *Bathing Beauty* (1944) was a huge Shanghai's box office hit, and Du Yuesheng made his finalists compete in swimming and acrobatics. The pageant was a success as a fundraiser. Among the highlights of the event was Du modestly declining an offer to give him the presidency of the Shanghai Municipal Council. He would continue to exercise his influence on the local politics and economy through informal networks.⁷⁹

The final round of Miss Shanghai 1946 took place on August 20 in the New Zealand Ballroom, on Kiangning Road. The ten finalists, out of 3,000 entries, were mostly entertainers. During the final round they



Figure 6: 1946: Runner-up Xie Jiahua in New Zealand Ballroom. *Getty Images.*

assumed the role of taxi dancers, selling dances to the audience of men for 10, 50 and 100 thousand Chinese yuan (one of the objectionable slogans was 'dance one more dance, save another life').⁸⁰ The girl who amassed the most value in dance tickets was pronounced Miss Shanghai. This was Wang Yunmei, who had been something of an underdog, outperformed by better-known actresses and showgirls with higher vote count. Rumours ascribed Wang's stash of expensive dance tickets to the patronage of the orchestrator of the event, Du Yuesheng.⁸¹ Wang Yunmei disappeared from the public eye soon after her victory. The second runner-up Xie Jiahua, 19, first starred in a movie, then plunged into an unhappy marriage, then killed herself, all within two years from the contest. This 1946 pageant etched itself in the public memory, becoming the backdrop of Wang Anyi's *Song of Everlasting Sorrow* (1996).

Unnoticed by the press, in early September 1946, a Russian beauty pageant was resurrected in the Arcadia Cabaret, where Zina Koretskaya was proclaimed Miss Shanghai. The only known photograph shows her sitting in her swimsuit, bare legs crossed in the air, next to a grinning American G.I.⁸²

In August 1947, in an 'attempt to bring pulchritude of all nations together on one stage,' a citywide beauty pageant returned to the prestigious Canidrome. However, public interest was so low, that on the night of the finals the emcee started to pick young women from the dining tables and drag them on stage by the hand. As the audience was prodded to vote, the names of Chinese contestants were repeated, but foreign ones were omitted, witnesses later claimed.⁸³ When the calculation of votes revealed that the winner was the Russian Olga Guy – one of the last-minute entrants from the audience – the Chinese spectators protested and 'scrambled to buy more tickets.'⁸⁴ After a quick recount, the emcee removed the crown from Olga's head and put it on the runner-up, Zhang Yuqing. Local press was inundated with letters, demanding an investigation of the procedure and questioning the legality of the accompanying money transactions – 'the entire thing smells fishy'⁸⁵ – but it was never clear what city agency adjudicated beauty pageants.

In 1948, in the Jewish area in Hongkou, Ruth Wachsmann won the beauty contest at the Mascot Roof Garden, the open-air venue on the roof of the Broadway Theatre; the finalists were Vera Hirschberg and Jenny Ungemuth.

The following year, Communist rule was established, and there were no more beauty pageants for half a century. Yet the glamour of Miss Shanghai lived on for many years after the demise of the contests. Rumours have it that Zhou Shuping, the ‘first beauty of Shanghai’ – unelected, yet undisputed – let her stardom go to her head. Having relocated to Hong Kong before the Communist Liberation of China, she became a mainstay in the streets of Tsim Sha Tsui, hobbling on high heels and dressed like a starlet; locals knew her as the “Old Beauty.”⁸⁶

Olga Guy, the four-minute Miss Shanghai of 1947, still finds the theft of her crown amusing. Now 95 and living in Connecticut, she recalls: “I won, and I never even entered.”⁸⁷



Figures 7: Shanghai beauty pageant winners. Left to right, top row: Zhou Shuping (1929), Elsie Kwok (1929), Takeko Inouye (1931), Helen Sloutsky (1931), Nina Barsamova (1933); middle row: Tamara Labutina (1935), Marina Homiakoff (1937), Margaret Venevsky (1938), Galina Soldatenko (1940), Faina Hablieff (1941); bottom row: Wang Meimei (1941), Wang Yunmei (1946), Zhang Yuqing (1947), Olga Guy (1947), Ruth Wachsmann (1948).



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