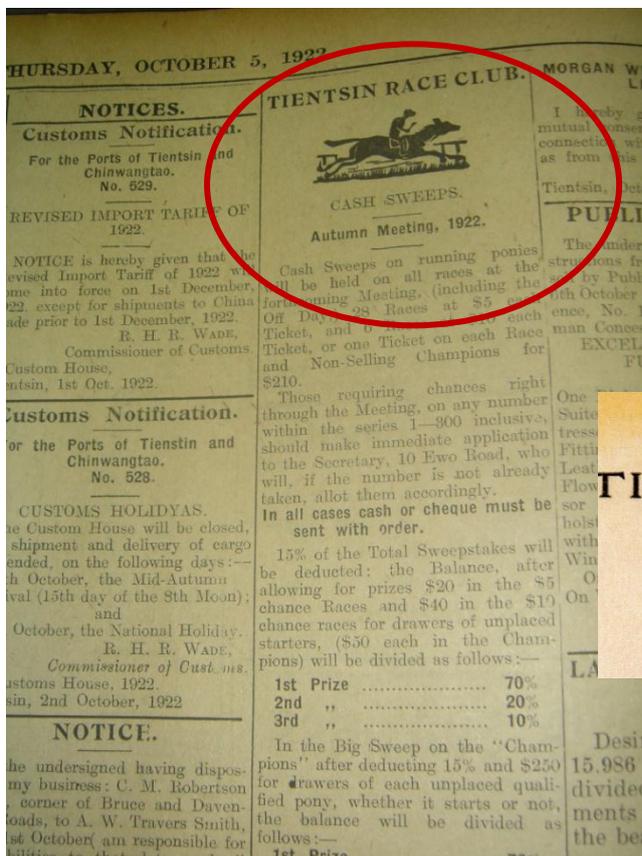


As we enter the month of May, it is appropriate to consider the excitement which this month held for previous people in Tianjin as it meant the racing season...



## Tientsin's Race Course

It was noted that an indication of a treaty port in China being firmly established was the setting up of drains, dairies, horse-racing and golf courses! In all the larger treaty ports, which included Tientsin, the races were among the most important social events of the year and many people eagerly anticipated the spring and autumn meets:



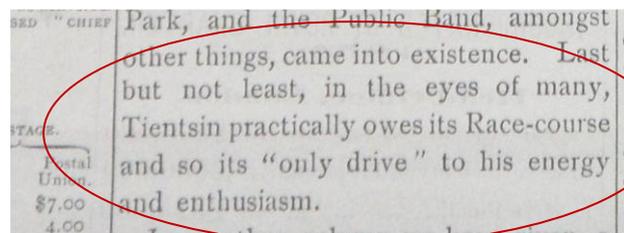
Above: 1938 Race card courtesy of Desmond Power

Above: Peking and Tientsin Times, Thursday October 5, 1922

While Tientsin's meetings were considered neither as grand nor important as those in Shanghai and Hong Kong, there was a keen racing fraternity. Initially a race course was founded by a manager of Dent's (a trading company) and was called Hanna's Course after him. Flooding around 1868 led to

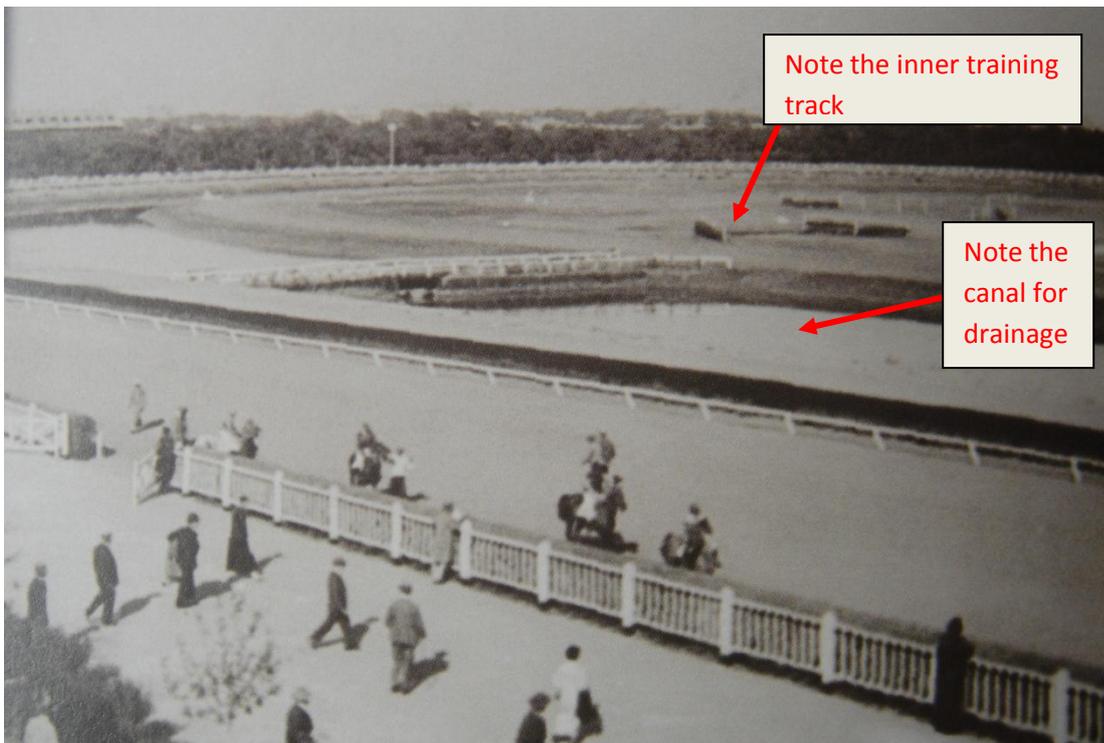
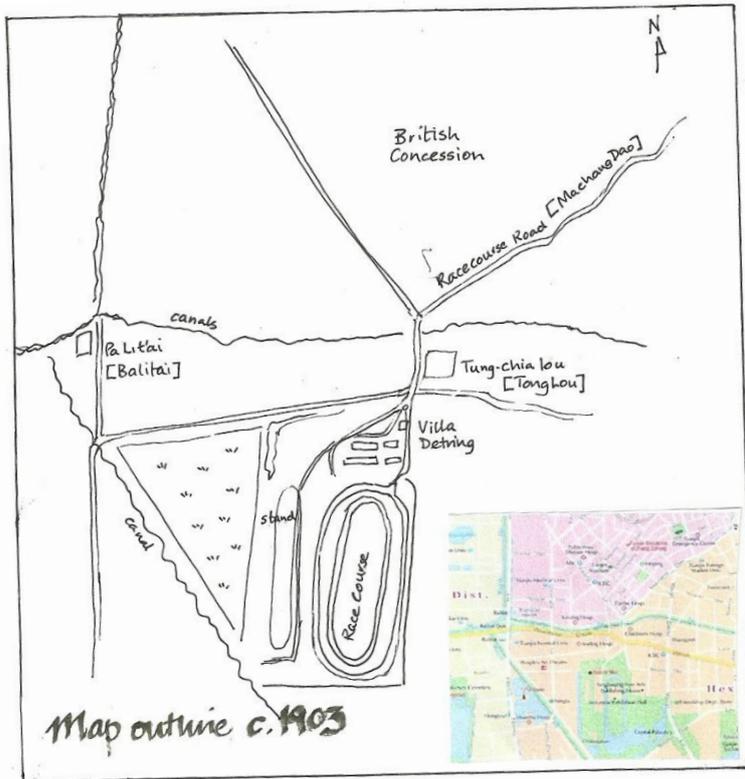
races being held on a straight of one-third of a mile beside the Taku Road in a lonely and exposed place several miles from the city. This location meant that few Chinese attended although there were often enthusiasts from Peking, Chefoo and Shanghai. In the spring of 1870, the Taotai \*His Excellency Chunghow and the head of the Imperial Arsenal both attended. The Taotai offered patronage and presented the Cup. Not long afterwards, there were anti-foreign anti-Catholic riots in which lives were lost and the Taotai replaced. This and the exposure to dust storms, led to another couple of moves. The atmosphere at the races also changed so that in 1872-3 Tientsin ponies and riders turned out in force in Shanghai. From 1873-6, the course was some nine miles out of the city beyond the village of Se-low by the Treaty Joss House where the 1858 Treaty of Tientsin had been signed. The distance was a limiting factor and when there was once more flooding in 1876, the races returned to the Taku site. In 1878, the new Taotai attended and presented the cup while the Viceroy of Chihli, in which Tientsin fell, made a donation of \$200. Finally, a more permanent course was provided in 1887. The land and much of the development finance was given to the Tientsin Race Club by the notable Austrian, Gustav Detring. He was then Commissioner of the Tientsin Customs and later Chairman of the British Municipal Council.

\*Note: Tao`tai`\, n. [Chin. tao circuit + t'ai, a title of respect.] In China, an official at the head of the civil and military affairs of a circuit, which consisted of two or more fu, or territorial departments



Gustav Detring and a credit given in the editorial of the Peking and Tientsin Times Saturday April 11, 1896.

Along with the help of his German brother-in-law, Constantin Von Hanneken, the course was developed. It was designed from the outset as a "a classically correct course" so that "in some ways it was the best of all the China racecourses" (Coates 1994: 93). It was a dirt track, with 1 ½ mile circuit, wide enough for 14-18 horses abreast. Within it was a training track of similar length and within this ran a canal which helped drain it. Another cinder track was within this. The entire area was surrounded by creeks. On modern maps, the oval track site can still be seen (see maps).



It has also been noted that Tientsin took a lead in using the Tientsin Press to print out proper cards detailing probable starters with their riders' names. Tientsin race books were also printed annually. They were of a high standard, a uniform size for ease of shelving and elegantly bound in calf leather with gold print (see picture from Coates p.155).

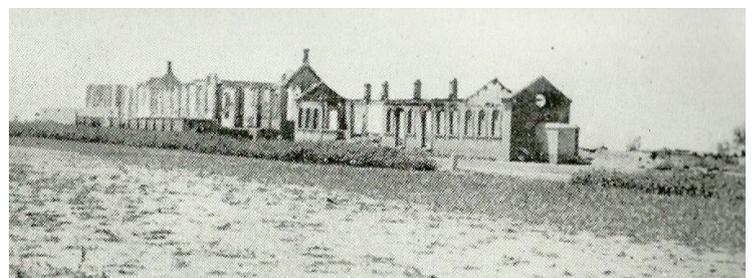


By 1896, the Race Club was doing so well financially that it was in a position to acquire the Country Club and develop the surrounding area by the race course into a park – “the finest demesne of its kind in all China” (Coates p.99). It was some 3 miles from the British concession at the end of Racecourse Road in the area now used by the Gan Bu Ju Le Bu, and bordered by the Sheraton, Marriott, Crystal Palace Hotels. Again, it was Detring and Von Hanneken who facilitated.

In March 1898, these two men who represented the continental members, made a significant proposal that - in the face of a shortage of jockeys – Chinese riders be allocated two races per meet. Until then, they had only participated in the Taotai's Cup. The British members were against the idea and suggested the weight be raised to 3 pounds. A furore was temporarily averted but at the next Race Club meeting, the British motion was carried and Chinese riders had one race only.

Tientsin came into its own. It was “for the Races of the North what Shanghai was for the South, indisputably first-rate” (Coates p.101). Wealth abounded and with the railway through to Peking, racing ponies could travel between the two racecourses, as could those attending the events. This is seen in the plans to build a new grandstand for which some 20 000 taels were earmarked. This was duly constructed but destroyed along with many other buildings in the concession areas under heavy bombardment by Imperial troops and Yihetuan forces in 1900. Some 2 400 expatriate men had defended themselves against some 10 000 Imperial troops until relieved by the Allied forces under Seymour in what is known in the West as the Boxer Uprising (Yi He Tuan movement to the Chinese). In 1901, a new stand was built, with an enlarged stand alongside it in 1925.

*Right: The first race Club building destroyed by Yihetuan/Boxers in 1900.*



*Below: The new grandstand (left) was built in 1925 alongside the previous grandstand (right) built in 1901. Photos from Rasmussen, 1925.*



By the 1920s, the racing cities of China had gone racing mad. In 1917, an extra meeting was introduced over New Year and was popular despite the freezing weather. According to Baron von Delwig writing about Tientsin (quoted in Coates p.154):

“There were usually about 25 race days in the spring, and just as many in the autumn, usually ten races a day. Thus in theory an amateur rider in China had a chance to ride in 500 races a year...

In the good old days – say from 1923 to 1930 – the official four days of the Spring and Autumn Meetings were a holiday for the whole town. All offices and banks would close in the afternoon, and all the foreign community and a great deal of the Chinese population would drive in an unending column to the Race Course [down Racecourse Road], women wearing their new spring dresses and hats, and Chinese wearing their smartest silk robes. Large lunch parties would be arranged with lots of champagne, and gold and silver trophies displayed on the lunch tables.”

The Tientsin community had a number of racing men. Among the more notable horse owners were J.M. Dickinson (the main proprietor of William Forbes and Co. which started as a shipping agent and then diversified), William Forbes himself, Colonel Johan Munthe with his cropped red hair and long handlebar moustache (a Norwegian in the Imperial Maritime Customs), O. Joerg (Swiss). Harry Bush stabled his horses here as well as in Newchang where his family were key figures. There were some well-known jockeys too. Fritz Sommer was perhaps one of the best. Riding his own horse, *Moribund* in 1897, he was within a fifth of a second of the All-China record (1896). James Watt, riding *Palo Alto*, achieved such a record. He is perhaps better known for his historic ride of 20 June 1900 on the same horse to Taku. He alerted the naval forces there of the impending peril facing the inhabitants of the besieged foreign concessions in Tientsin. C.R. Morling and Hunt, along with Sommer rode three horses for the British Minister, Sir Claude MacDonald, in the Peking races of May 1897 winning first (on *Attaché*), second (on *Messenger*) and third (on *Cypher*) places respectively! Later Major Kirkpatrick was a regular jockey. Mike Boycott, Tientsin born and raised, rode here before ending up in Hong Kong and an appointment as steward of the famous Hong Kong Race Club. There were also those who trained horses such as Rudolph Tismar who was commended by the Club.



*Middle: Major Kirkpatrick and his wife Gisela Detring at Tientsin Racecourse. c.1920s*

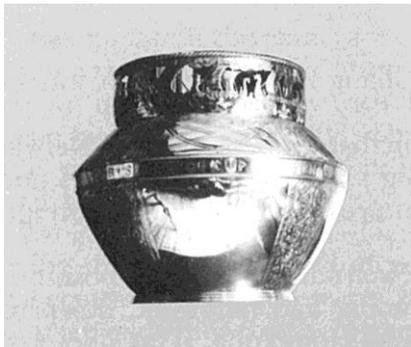
*Bottom: Mr Oberg leads a winner ridden by Mike Boycott c.1930s?*

The horses ridden in the mid-nineteenth century were China ponies more commonly called 'griffins' and coming from Mongolia. Apparently, "the first month ...was one long tussle, marked by many bruises and some bites" while "controlling their speed was far from easy" (Wood p.26). Tientsin had its own horse bazaar managed in the 1880s by a Mr Moore who went to Mongolia himself to select horses and started a subscription system whereby prospective buyers subscribed in equal shares with horses numbered and drawn by lot. Owners subsequently found taller and faster cross-bred ponies produced by Russians near Harbin from about 1915. Dickinson in Tientsin introduced some twenty of them but sparked a crisis in the racing world of China. Numerous attempts were made to determine true Mongol ponies and whether cross-breeding had been deliberate or accidental. It was eventually left to individual race clubs to decide which horses they would allow to race.

In the 1930s, there seem to have been an increase in the number of military riders. A soldier serving in the Queen's Royal Surreys stationed in Tientsin observed:

“The sport of kings was part of the life of the average Chinese citizen. They loved to gamble. It was not long before Regimental Race Meetings were organized and some of the members of the Battalion were on horse back while stationed in China. Lieutenant Monty Sydenham-Clarke\* won a race in Tientsin and was presented with an inscribed watch. In 1941, in the Western Desert, he was reported missing. He was not heard of again until some weeks later when his body was found and identified by the watch presented to him by the Tientsin Race Club all those years ago!”

[http://www.queensroyalsurreys.org.uk/hongkong\\_china/hkc08\\_1.shtml](http://www.queensroyalsurreys.org.uk/hongkong_china/hkc08_1.shtml)



*The Schleswig Cup, 1920 (Coates p.154)*

There were a variety of prizes. There was the aforementioned Taotai Cup and the Maiden Plate of the late 1800s. In the early 1900s, the Trial Plate and in 1920, the largest and heaviest cup ever presented in the China races was the Schleswig Cup given by the Danish community of Tientsin as a token of thanks for Britain’s support in restoring Schleswig-Holstein to Denmark. Fortuitously, the winner of the race was a British owner with a Danish jockey!

All this activity was presided over by the influential Tientsin Race Club, a changing group of men who held respected positions within the Concessions.

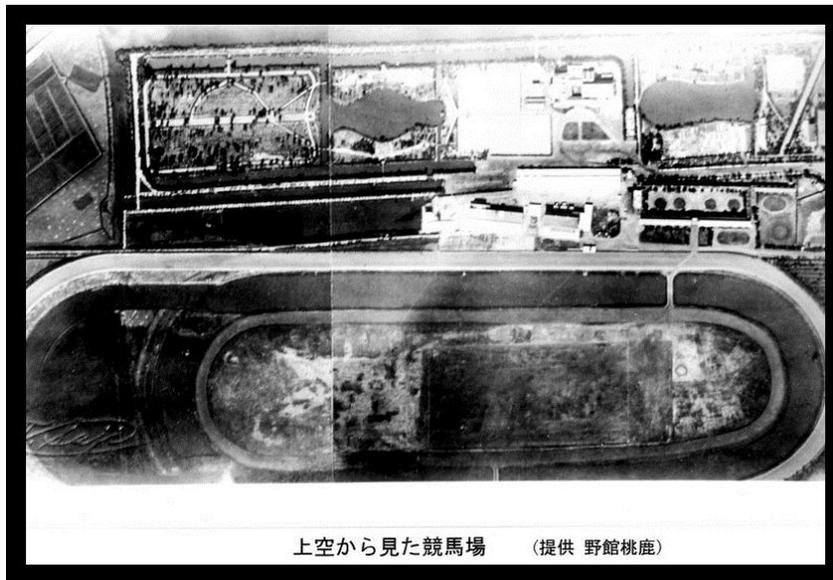


STEWARDS AND OFFICIALS OF THE T.R.C FOR 1937.  
Mr. H. A. Lucker, Hon. Treasurer; Mr. R. P. Sanderson, Secretary; Major G. A. Herbert, m.c. Course Chairman; Mr. H. J. Lord, Assistant Secretary; Mr. A. E. Tipper, Chairman of the Stewards, Course Committee; Mr. R. F. Stewart, m.c. of the Course; Mr. W. M. Howell, Judge; Mr. A. H. Mackay, Starter and Dismounting Enclosure; Mr. A. H. Watts, Starter and Dismounting Enclosure.

*Left: Members badge for the Tientsin Race Club, to be shown at the exclusive entrance gate.*

Right: Stewards and officials of the Tientsin Race Club, Peking and Tientsin SundayTimes, November 28, 1937 p.6

The Racecourse was still in evidence under the Japanese occupation as shown by the photo below, but the sport was no doubt considered bourgeoisie and gambling associated with it outlawed when the Communist Party came to power in 1949. The Country Club became the Cadres' Club and today is a shadow of its former self though much building activity has taken place on the site of the racecourse which is ringed by high quality hotels, as yet another kind of race takes place in Tianjin.



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[http://www.queensroyalsurreys.org.uk/hongkong\\_china/hkc08\\_1.shtml](http://www.queensroyalsurreys.org.uk/hongkong_china/hkc08_1.shtml)