

29 households. A more systematic survey conducted in the early 1950s estimated that in the late 1940s there were about 180,000 to 200,000 households living in 130,000 straw shacks of various types in Shanghai's shantytowns;⁵² the total population of the slums was close to one million,⁵³ or about one-sixth to one-fifth of the city's total population.⁵⁴

Who were these shantytown squatters? As we have indicated, most slum residents were from the countryside where, in the face of natural disasters and/or wars, it was virtually impossible to continue life. They had to seek a place for survival. The growth of Shanghai and the success stories it generated spread illusions about life in the city, and, even for those who were not driven to be successful, Shanghai nevertheless seemed the best place for survival. Also, for many of the émigrés, relatives, neighbors, or friends had gone to the city earlier and settled there; thus there was the hope or expectation that a friendly and helpful reception awaited. They came to Shanghai, cherishing the hope of a fresh start; it must have been a rude shock to find that life in Shanghai was much harder than they had thought. To get a factory job was the usual goal for these former peasants. But once they arrived in Shanghai, they found that factory work was not easy to find. To obtain 30 even an entry level factory job, one first needed strong recommendations and, second, one needed to offer some gift to the factory foreman; in some cases, there were educational requirements or skill tests to be passed.⁵⁵ One can imagine how difficult it was for many poor newcomers to find any kind of personal connection in this strange land. In addition, newcomers often found that their relatives, friends, and acquaintances from whom they expected to get help actually could not help much, since they themselves were usually desperately poor too. In Shanghai it was often said that "a mud Buddha can hardly protect himself when he crosses a river" (*ni Pusa guojiang, zishen nanbao*).⁵⁶ Thus countless newcomers, without skills in demand in modern factories, without personal connections, and without money, drifted to squatter areas. As the Shanghai municipal government's Bureau of Social Affairs reported in 1934:

31 Out in the suburbs of Shanghai or along the western bank of the Soochow [Suzhou] Creek, there assembles in clusters here and there or in endless rows, a great number of huts built of straw and matting or small old boats propped up on stilts or lying beside the Creek, the

hulks of such make many a home. This type of dwelling forms the living quarters of the very poor, a genuine picture of wretchedness. Most of the dwellers are people from the north of the Yangtze [Yangzi] River, a country of scanty produce. During the recent decades, these people have drifted, in greater number than ever, to this city to seek opportunities for a living. They are absolutely destitute of means and they cannot afford to rent even the worst dwelling places available in this city. So they rent or perhaps just squat on a tiny piece of land in certain solitary districts to erect huts as their homes.⁵⁷ 31

What drove these newcomers into the slums was simply that they failed to obtain stable jobs that paid enough to permit escaping the slums. The story of Zhang Kouzi, a fifty-year resident in Yaoshuilong, illustrates how difficult it was for those who came to Shanghai from a poor rural area to get a steady job. Very often, the only migrants who could get factory jobs were children. Zhang was a son in a poor peasant family in Subei (northern Jiangsu). In about 1924, a natural disaster led the family to lose their only property, their house, and they became homeless. Zhang's parents managed to obtain a small boat, on which the whole family came to Shanghai along the Grand Canal. They anchored the boat along the bank of Suzhou Creek near Yaoshuilong where the family (Kouzi, his parents, one younger brother, and one younger sister) commenced to live. Seeking a factory job, the Zhangs sought help from a relative who had come to Shanghai several years earlier and was working in a Japanese cotton mill. Being a poor worker himself, the relative was virtually unable to help them get into the mill. In any case, the mill did not need adult male labor, so Kouzi's father became a rickshaw puller. Kouzi's mother, who then was in her 30s, was considered too old to be a mill worker. After sending a gift to the foreman, only Kouzi, who at that time was thirteen, was hired as a laborer in the mill.⁵⁸ However, the combined income of a rickshaw puller and a child laborer was not sufficient to support the whole family. Therefore, the mother sent the two younger children to roam the streets scavenging trash to sell. Needless to say, the family lived in dire poverty. After many years, the Zhang family moved from the boat, which was now too decrepit to live in, to a gundilong. Kouzi's younger brother and sister did not survive the hardship, both dying in their childhood.⁵⁹ 32