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Administering Regime Change

A Swiss Merchant in the Political Transitions of the Shanghai International Settlement, 1941–1949

Julian Wettengel

In April 1941, Richard von der Crone, head of the Shanghai branch of Volkart Brothers, the leading Swiss trading company in Asia, found himself in an astonishingly powerful position. He had become the “first and last Swiss councillor”¹ in the Shanghai Municipal Council (SMC). The SMC was the governing body, or colonial administration, of the Shanghai International Settlement, an area within Shanghai under foreign control and by far the most important colonial territory in China. The International Settlement was exceptional in that it was neither a national colonial project nor administered by state representatives. Isabella Jackson uses the term “transnational colonialism” to describe the governance system of the International Settlement, because the SMC was comprised of private business actors – mainly merchants – of different nationalities, who conducted a form of colonial self-governance.²

Richard von der Crone became councillor at a time when Anglo-American actors dominated the SMC. He continued in this role after the International Settlement was taken over by the Japanese occupation forces in December 1941 and even when the Chinese Nationalists returned to power, colonial rule was abolished, and the settlement was dissolved. From 1941 to 1949, he served under several political regimes and was a key actor in organising five different changes to the political system. The inclusion of Richard von der Crone in the municipal administration of Shanghai is surprising for three reasons: Firstly, one would not expect a Swiss merchant to act as a colonial administrator, a position often associated with governmental representatives of colonizing states and not a neutral one like Switzerland. Secondly, until 1941, the SMC was usually staffed exclusively by ‘great power’ representatives, i.e. British, American, Japanese and Chinese. Thirdly, it is remarkable that a Swiss merchant was able to conduct municipal administration within such heterogeneous political systems – colonial as well as Nationalist Chinese – and to help pave the way for several political transitions. It was generally extremely difficult for a Swiss to get into even one single municipal administration, yet von der Crone managed to take part in several.

Therefore, this article seeks to answer two main questions: How and why was Richard von der Crone able to become a councillor in the SMC and to maintain this position in several political settings until 1949? Moreover, what roles did merchants play historically in processes of political transition? By addressing the latter question, this article aims at using the case study of von der Crone for making more general statements on the political functions of merchants on an international level.

Research on the Swiss presence in China often mentions Richard von der Crone, but has not systematically reflected on his political role and actions.³ Moreover, recent debates on Swiss involvement in colonialism have addressed fields such as identity, culture, science or business for potential colonial entanglements.⁴ At a political level, these studies have tended to look at indirect and passive forms of colonial participation, e. g. the obtainment of privileges like extraterritoriality.⁵ However, they have not investigated how Swiss functioned as active political players, namely as colonial administrators, despite having no colonies of their own. Meanwhile, scholars of the history of trading companies have put merchants at centre of their investigations, but have not specifically focused on political aspects, but rather on economic factors,⁶ or they have written cultural and social histories of specific firms, as in Christof Dejung's pioneering work on Volkart Brothers.⁷ Existing accounts on the SMC have addressed the political functions of (mostly British) business actors – but somewhat indirectly, as they constitute an essential part of the transnational history of the Council. However, Swiss players like Richard von der Crone are only partly and rudimentarily accounted for.⁸ With my article, I aim to introduce a political approach to mercantile actors – a significant desideratum that is often mentioned, for instance, in the field of global governance⁹ or among advocates of a new diplomatic history.¹⁰ To answer my research questions, I mainly use Richard von der Crone's ego-documents, a written report and a tape recording about his time in Shanghai, as well as files from the British and Swiss foreign ministries and British and Swiss company archives. I also include selected material from the archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), as von der Crone's political functions had significant parallels to the various Swiss humanitarian relief activities in wartime Shanghai.

This article argues that Richard von der Crone was a key player in political transition processes on two levels: Firstly, he was important for the different political regimes on a level of discourse and representation. The newly instituted political systems needed international legitimation. By presenting their cooperation with a leading private merchant and a citizen of a neutral nation, the new governments could claim that influential international actors supported them. This aspect is reflected in the analysis of three photographs showing Richard von der Crone at different points in time. For a public audience, they visually invoked a particu-

lar image of legitimization of each political system respectively. Secondly, due to his administrative expertise, Richard von der Crone played an important part in maintaining the municipal system in spite of regime changes. As a merchant, he offered political and administrative continuity in times of crisis and change.

How a Swiss Merchant Became a SMC Member: The Provisional Council of April 1941

Officially, the International Settlement was an international and cosmopolitan zone, but ‘great power’ representatives, particularly British subjects, dominated the settlement’s institutions, including the SMC. In contrast, Swiss merchants and other Swiss citizens were not able to take part in the Council. They profited from the SMC’s municipal administration but were not allowed to influence or shape it. In the interwar period, a pattern of seat distribution developed, consisting of five British, two American, two Japanese and five Chinese councillors.¹¹ In the 1930s, Japanese military circles increasingly demanded a greater Japanese representation on the SMC or at least an “internationalisation”¹² of the Council, i.e. the inclusion of more nationalities in the SMC, to weaken the dominant British position.¹³ In January 1941, these growing tensions between Japanese and British (and later American) players led to the decision to establish a “Provisional Council”¹⁴ with a new composition. For the duration of World War II it was intended to prevent a violent escalation of the latent conflict and consequently a breakdown of the whole governance system.¹⁵ The Japanese, British (and, to a lesser degree, American) consuls-general and councillors who conducted the negotiations on the new Council finally agreed to a Provisional SMC in April 1941, whose most important feature was parity between Axis and non-Axis representatives, so that neither side was able to monopolise the body.¹⁶ It had four Chinese, three Japanese, three British and three American councillors. In addition, it was ‘internationalised’ to meet Japanese demands. Now it included not only the German Alfred Glathe, leader of the German community in Shanghai and partner of the trading company Glathe & Witt, and the Dutch businessman J. D. Carriere, manager of the Shanghai branch of the steamship company Java-China-Japan Lijn, but also the Swiss merchant Richard von der Crone.¹⁷

The British and American consuls-general, and the leading mercantile representatives of the British community in particular, selected the Dutch and Swiss councillors because they were considered to belong to their political camp. However, why did they choose Carriere and von der Crone – and not, for instance, a Danish or Portuguese candidate for the non-Axis side? For the Anglo-American decision-makers, potential candidates did not need to be “necessarily of intellectual

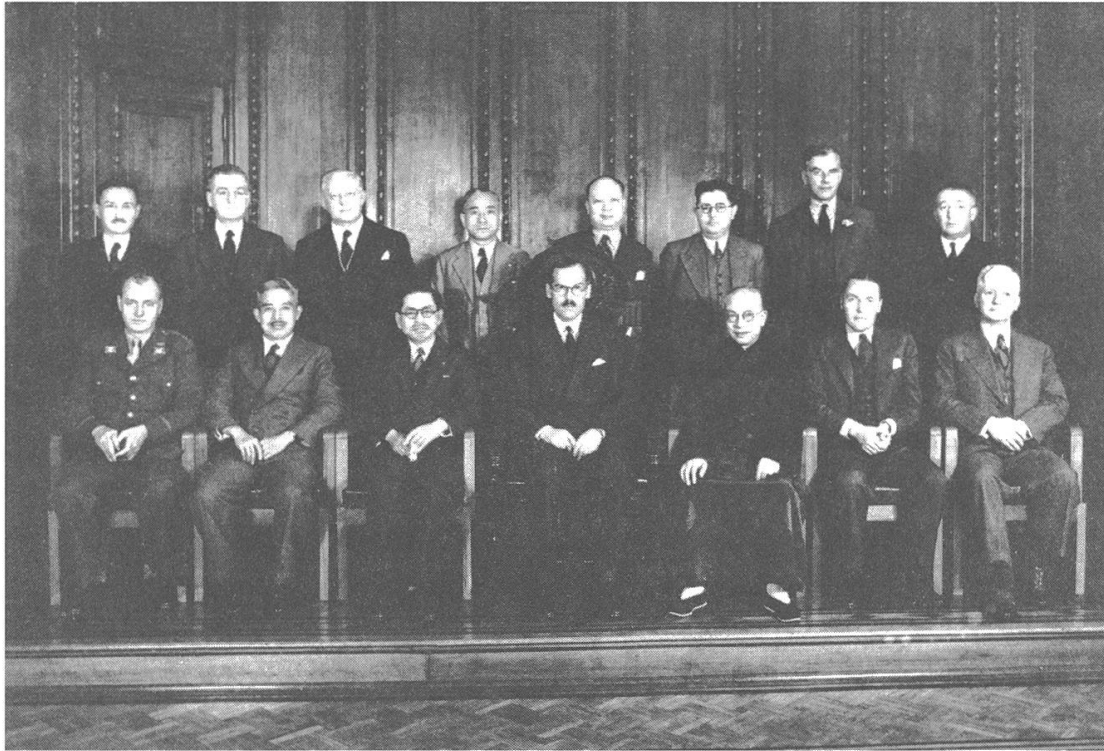


Illustration 1: *Shanghai Municipal Council (Provisional Council) 1941. First row from left to right: N. F. Allman (US), Y. Hanawa (JP), Isaku Okamoto (JP), John Hellyer Liddell (GB), Yuan Lidun (CN), T. S. Powell (GB), Dr. R. J. McMullen (US). Second row from left to right: Zhang Deqin (CN), R. T. McDonnell (US), Alfred Glathe (DE), Y. Yazima (JP), Xu Jianping (CN), Richard von der Crone (CH), G. A. Haley (GB), J. D. Carriere (NL). Image courtesy of Historical Photographs of China, University of Bristol (www.hpcbristol.net), reference number: Bi-s087. (Source of personal names: see note 23)*

brilliance”.¹⁸ Instead, the only goal of including the two councillors was to ensure that they would act against the Axis representatives in the SMC. They were to guarantee parity in the Council and prevent the Axis powers from gaining control of the municipal administration. Two criteria were decisive for measuring the anti-Axis stance of the candidates: The most important criterion was the extent to which the candidates, and the companies they represented, were integrated into the economic and social networks of the British and American communities. The more British and American they were, the more likely it was that they would be chosen to stand for the Provisional SMC. Richard von der Crone was an ideal candidate in this regard, as Volkart Brothers enjoyed close economic relations with the British Empire and American business networks, especially concerning the cotton trade.¹⁹ Additionally, von der Crone was well-connected with many foreign – mainly British – businessmen, both privately and socially, as he was a member of the most important clubs in Shanghai’s foreign community.²⁰ A second but less crucial criterion for choosing the two candidates was their na-

tionality, although only insofar as it made sure that the potential councillor would act on the non-Axis side. A representative of an allied country, like Carriere, had clear advantages in this respect since the Dutch in Asia were still regarded as allied and loyal to the Dutch government in exile. However, nationals of properly neutral states in Europe were also preferable to the British and American side because they would have been less exposed to political pressure from the Axis powers.²¹ After the nomination of Richard von der Crone was final, the Swiss Consul-General Emile Fontanel gladly consented to his SMC membership, because it enhanced the reputation of the whole Swiss community in Shanghai.²²

However, the newly instituted Provisional SMC of April 1941 was still the domain of 'great powers' and far from being a truly internationalised body. It was an attempt by the British and American side to secure their position in the SMC by meeting Japanese demands for a higher share in the Council. The German, Dutch and Swiss representatives served as something of a fig leaf of more pluralistic internationalism and as a means of calming down the confrontation between the major powers. The Provisional SMC's 'two-tier system' is visualised perfectly by Illustration 1. The first row of councillors consisted of the major 'great power' representatives, whereas the second row of the picture was mainly reserved for apparently less important figures. Moreover, among those of secondary importance, Alfred Glathe, J. D. Carriere and Richard von der Crone were placed at the edge of the photo indicating their minor importance to the SMC. The three pictures in this article were all taken inside (Illustration 1 and 2) or in front of (Illustration 3) the Shanghai Municipal Council building at different official events.²³ Illustration 1 was presumably the annual official photograph of the councillors, Illustration 2 is a group picture at an official reception for guests and Illustration 3 is the settlement's retrocession ceremony, which was an important 'act of state'. The producers of the pictures are unknown but must have been official photographers or members of private photo studios (as other photographs of the SMC suggest) who worked on behalf of the administration. The photographs must have been made for official use and distribution and were most likely utilised for publications.

Advancing to a Key Political Player: The Japanese Occupation of the International Settlement, 1942–1943

After the attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, the political system of the municipal administration and the political role of Richard von der Crone changed considerably for the second time. Japanese military units entered the International Settlement to control the area, but a fully-fledged military occupation did

not occur.²⁴ The Japanese occupation regime interfered to a much lesser degree than it did in other locations around China, leaving the SMC largely unimpaired. One of the most important reasons for this ‘mild’ stance against the Council was that the military authorities were anxious to maintain the appearance of the settlement’s continued internationalism.²⁵ Although they requested that the allied councillors – British, American and Dutch – resign from their positions, they strongly emphasised that they regarded the international constitution of the Council to be intact. They claimed to have had no intention of usurping the SMC, as they were not restaffing the vacant seats with Axis candidates. Therefore, from January 1942 until August 1943, when the settlement was handed over to the pro-Japanese Wang Jingwei authorities, the SMC was reduced from 15 to 8 members, consisting of three Japanese, three Chinese, one German and one Swiss councillor. Von der Crone was able to remain in the Council because he was still regarded as a neutral actor.²⁶ In fact, for the Japanese authorities, he became the most important figure in maintaining the impression of international cooperation, as he was the only non-Axis representative remaining in the SMC.

These changes in the SMC are clearly visible when we compare Illustration 1 and Illustration 2, which were taken before and during the Japanese occupation of the International Settlement. The photographs reflect the reduction of the SMC from 15 to 8 councillors. Moreover, they also show that the position of Richard von der Crone within the SMC changed considerably. Before January 1942, he was confined to the second row of councillors. By contrast, in summer 1942, he is depicted prominently and on an equal footing with the other SMC members, as all councillors stand lined up in a single row without significant hierarchical differences. Richard von der Crone as a neutral actor functions in both pictures mainly as a figurehead for an ‘international’ SMC. In Illustration 1 it is an ‘internationalism’ propagated by British and American actors in order to secure their position in the Council, whereas in Illustration 2 it is a Japanese form of ‘internationalism’ to mask the occupation of the International Settlement.

The depiction of ‘internationalism’ was not the only reason why Richard von der Crone was able to remain in the SMC. He was also an indispensable actor in terms of practical municipal work. In July 1941, von der Crone became the chairman of the so-called SMC Food Supplies Committee. By controlling commodity prices and establishing a rationing system, the Swiss merchant and his committee were responsible for securing sufficient amounts of food, especially rice, for about 3.3 million people in the greater Shanghai area –²⁷ addressing the most urgent political issue during the war. He was able to maintain this position until August 1943, as the Japanese occupying forces needed the elaborate food supply administration infrastructure that von der Crone had already established by December 1941.²⁸

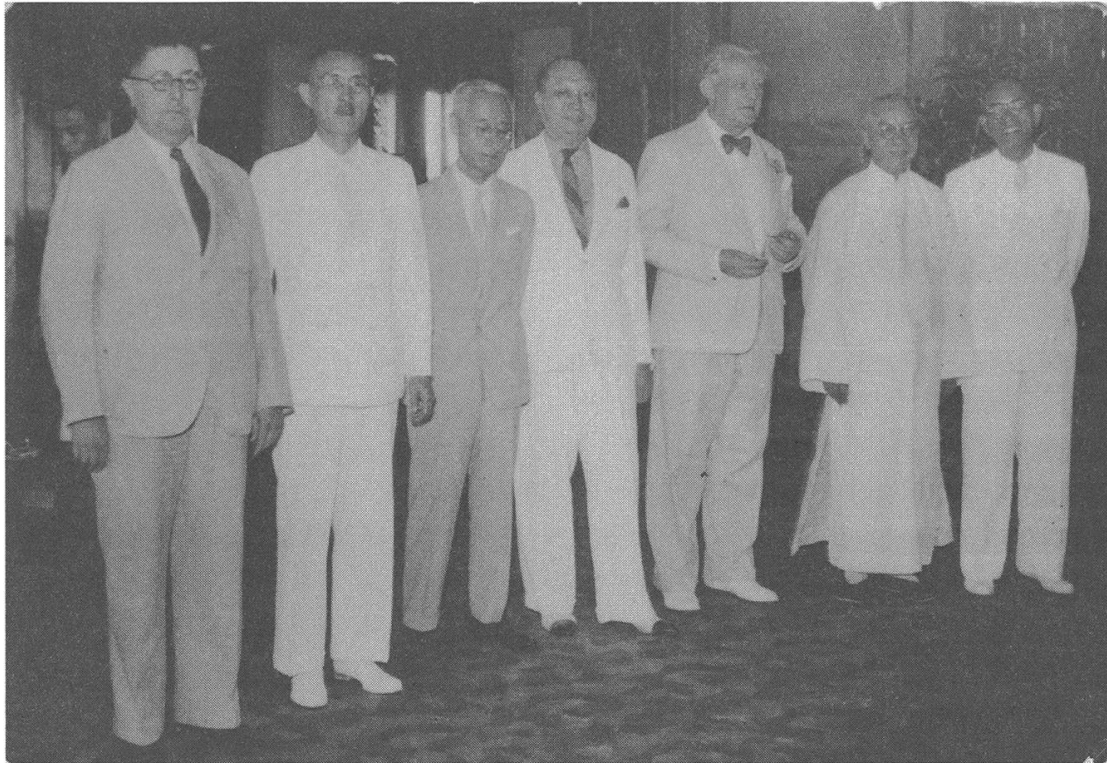


Illustration 2: “7 out of 8 members of the Council of the International Settlement in summer 1942 (one Japanese is missing)”. From left to right: Richard von der Crone (CH), Zhang Deqin (CN), G. Kambe (JP), Xu Jianping (CN), Alfred Glathe (DE), Yuan Lidun (CN), Katsuo Okazaki (JP). Image courtesy of Christoph von der Crone, Stäfa. (Source of personal names: see note 23)

These activities had significant parallels to various other attempts by Swiss actors to engage in humanitarian relief measures during the Pacific War. For example, Swiss ICRC delegates and representatives of the protecting power section of the Swiss Consulate General were concerned with organizing supplies to prisoners of war and civilian internees in and around Shanghai.²⁹ Therefore, the Council work of Richard von der Crone could be seen as more in line with the well-known and respected Swiss intermediary functions like the ‘good offices’ than with classical municipal administration.

Postwar Continuity – Municipal Administration and the Business Benefits for Volkart Brothers, 1943–1949

Having described von der Crone’s activities in the municipal administration before and during the war, it still needs to be clarified why he was eager to take over these responsibilities. What were his motives in becoming a councillor? In general, for-

eign merchants – no matter what nationality – did municipal work to shape their business environment without the interference of the Chinese authorities.³⁰ Von der Crone was no exception in this regard. However, although he was aware that he profited from colonial privileges,³¹ his self-perception was clearly that of a liberal-minded individual as he had many friends among the Chinese community and claimed to have interacted and cooperated with Chinese on the basis of equality and mutuality.³² This outlook was similar to the more progressive colonial views of British expatriates, i.e. von der Crone's peers from leading British trading companies like Butterfield & Swire. This social environment and his self-conception as a neutral, non-imperial Swiss citizen distinguished him mentally, for instance, from the colonial hardliners of the British settler community in Shanghai.³³

Besides this general long-term motive, there were also more specific war-related reasons why Richard von der Crone was interested in standing for the SMC. Firstly, on a personal level, he certainly felt committed – as British and American councillors also did – to helping the foreign and Chinese population in Shanghai and to maintaining the International Settlement.³⁴ He spent a considerable part of his life in Shanghai and called the city his “second home” (*zweite Heimat*).³⁵ As well as having many friends among the foreign and Chinese community, he was closely connected to the Swiss community, holding leading executive positions in virtually all Swiss Shanghai clubs, i.e. the “*Helvetia*” Swiss Benevolent Society, the Swiss Association and the Swiss Club.³⁶ In 1951, he even married a Swiss woman who had worked as a secretary for Henry de Torrenté, the Swiss Minister in China.³⁷ Thus, Council work during the war also served to preserve the social space in which he lived. Secondly, Volkart Brothers' business came to a standstill after the Japanese takeover of the city, and Richard von der Crone had plenty of time to deal with SMC work.³⁸ A third motive for von der Crone's participation in the SMC was the post-war business situation. Other leading Swiss merchants engaged in humanitarian relief in wartime Shanghai, e. g. working for the ICRC or conducting ‘good offices’ as representatives of the Swiss Consulate General.³⁹ This was a very effective means of enhancing the reputation of a company, which in turn would eventually lead to better networking. Swiss trading companies wanted to use these newly formed wartime networks to gain a competitive advantage when starting the business up again after the war.⁴⁰ From a business perspective, von der Crone seemed to have shared this motive with his fellow merchants. Before the war, his most important social assets were networks with the leading (British) merchants. By becoming a councillor, he developed new connections to the most important political actors in Shanghai.⁴¹ These wartime networking activities were one of the main reasons why Volkart Brothers – and other Swiss trading houses involved in humanitarian aid – were, in fact, able to (re)start their business more easily and more quickly than competitors from other nations after the war.⁴²

Due to the war, Richard von der Crone had become an integral part of colonial municipal governance. However, even in the post-war era, he was able to maintain these new functions because he had secured himself a leading position in Shanghai politics. In August 1943, the International Settlement was dissolved and handed over to the pro-Japanese Wang Jingwei government. Richard von der Crone helped to realise this transition and eventually resigned as a councillor. In 1945, after the end of the war, the control of the former settlement area was transferred again, this time from the defeated pro-Japanese authorities to the representatives of the Chinese Nationalist government in Chongqing. The governance of Shanghai by a Chinese Mayor in 1945 marked the end of colonial rule in the city. However, the old structures of foreign municipal administration did not disappear entirely as the new authorities lacked sufficient staff for urgent municipal administration tasks.⁴³

To organise the transition from the former SMC administration to the Chinese authorities a Liquidation Commission for the International Settlement was founded. This commission consisted of Chinese and foreign members, including Richard von der Crone and J. D. Carriere. These two former councillors obviously profited from their reputation as respected wartime SMC members when chosen for the new body by their respective home governments. However, the Swiss foreign ministry (Federal Political Department) emphasised that Richard von Crone should serve as a private person in the commission to ensure that the Swiss government could not be held accountable for his political actions. The commission was mainly responsible for the transfer of liabilities and assets of the International Settlement to the new municipality and for settling the pension claims of former SMC employees. Therefore, Richard von der Crone was one of the key players in paving the way for a smooth transition from colonial to Chinese rule.⁴⁴ In post-war Shanghai, von der Crone had an additional municipal function. He was a member of the so-called Advisory Committee which consisted of 20 Chinese and 20 foreign members and was set up to assist the Chinese Mayor of Shanghai in matters of municipal administration as a sort of municipal council. Von der Crone's specific function was to be the liaison officer between the Advisory Committee and the municipal police.

Finally, after his involvement in four different regime changes, Richard von der Crone also helped to provide for a peaceful transition from the Nationalist to the Communist government in 1949. He was the secretary of a foreign committee responsible for maintaining public safety and order during the armed fights in the city and for maintaining the services of the police forces.⁴⁵

The fact that von der Crone was an important player in the processes of political transition after 1943 is clearly visible in Illustration 3. It shows the retrocession ceremony of the International Settlement and Richard von der Crone (first row,



Illustration 3: “Guests at the farewell of the intern. Zone”. Image courtesy of Christoph von der Crone, Stäfa. (See also note 23)

fourth from the left) as a prominent participant in the event. He is visually instrumentalised as evidence of international acceptance of a new Chinese nationalism in Shanghai, thereby bestowing legitimacy on the new political system.

Conclusions

Richard von der Crone advanced from a simple – though influential – merchant for Volkart Brothers to a councillor in the SMC and one of the most important political actors during and after the Pacific War in Shanghai. As the “first and last Swiss”⁴⁶ in the SMC, he is an outstanding example of how a Swiss national was able to gain an active leading position in a colonial administration.

Von der Crone was able to become a councillor in 1941 as he enjoyed excellent social and business networks with leading British merchants. Furthermore, he was elected because he was a citizen of a neutral nation during the war – a fact which would also become of paramount importance for the Japanese occupation authorities. After taking up municipal office, he gained new contacts to the most important political personalities in Shanghai and even became one of them himself. His newly acquired political reputation and networks were key factors in enabling him to maintain municipal functions even in the post-war era under the

new Chinese authorities. Furthermore, these factors not only supported his political career, they also helped Volkart Brothers gain competitive advantages and restart business more quickly than their competitors after the war. Nevertheless, the furthering of his business interests was not the only reason why Richard von der Crone conducted municipal work. He also had strong social ties in Shanghai (his “second home”), and one of his main aims during the war was to help the community he lived in, i.e. his Swiss, foreign and Chinese friends from the city’s business circles. Anglo-American, Japanese and Chinese actors decided on von der Crone’s nomination to his political offices, more so than did the Swiss foreign ministry and its diplomatic representatives in China, who were not significantly involved in the processes. They did, however, strongly support his political functions, which enhanced Switzerland’s reputation in China. Nevertheless, because the Foreign Ministry was not willing to assume responsibility for his political actions, von der Crone had to conduct municipal administration as a private person and not as a Swiss state representative. For this reason, he was not bound by instructions from Swiss diplomats and acted quite independently of his home government.

The activities of Richard von der Crone provide a fruitful case study for elaborating on the question of how transitions from one political system to another took place historically and which actors were involved in these processes. Von der Crone helped to effect five different smooth and peaceful political transitions between 1941 and 1949: from the pre-war SMC to the Provisional SMC, to the Japanese dominated SMC, to the Chinese Wang Jingwei government, to the Chinese Nationalist authorities and finally to the Communist government in 1949. As influential private actors, merchants were perfectly suited for mediating and creating a nexus between opposing political systems. They were key players in political transitions in two regards: Firstly, on the level of representation and discourse, they were crucial for bestowing external legitimation on the new political regimes – as demonstrated in the analysis of the three different photographs. In Illustration 1 and 2, he served as a guarantor and a cover for an Anglo-American and a Japanese internationalism respectively. In Illustration 3, he is visually instrumentalised as evidence of the international acceptance of a new Chinese political nationalism. Admittedly, the way of arranging the councillors on the photographs may not necessarily have been a deliberate political decision. However, the photographs would have had a legitimising effect for the public audience. Secondly, merchants also played an important role during transition periods in terms of practical political work. Richard von der Crone helped maintain a basic level of municipal administration and prevent public systems from collapsing during the different regime changes by offering his administrative expertise to the new authorities who often lacked sufficient personnel. Yet, his actual munic-

ipal activities took on specific ‘Swiss forms’ as they were highly related to other fields of Swiss intermediary engagement, like the ‘good offices’. They were situated between the poles of colonial administration and humanitarian aid.

This case study shows that merchants were especially suited to transitional political work as they could be considered ‘apolitical’ private business actors who were much more compatible with a new regime than ‘politicized’ state officers of a former system. They generated continuity in times of crisis when (inter)governmental mechanisms of governance ceased to function.

Notes

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- 11 Jackson (see note 2), 5–8, 65–68, 96.
- 12 The National Archives of the UK (hereafter TNA), FO 371/27634, despatch no. 73, A. H. George to British Ambassador, 13. 2. 1941.

- 13 TNA, FO 371/27634, enclosure no. 1 in despatch no. 65, "Record of Conversation with Okamoto", 4. 2. 1941.
- 14 TNA, FO 371/27633, despatch no. 150, A. H. George to British Ambassador, 2. 4. 1941.
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- 16 Swire Archive, JSS/1/2/30/1, Butterfield & Swire to John Swire & Sons, 7. 2. 1941; Swire Archive, JSS/1/2/30/1, Butterfield & Swire to John Swire & Sons, 28. 3. 1941.
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- 21 TNA, FO 371/27633 (see note 18); TNA, FO 371/27634 (see note 17).
- 22 Swiss Federal Archives, Berne (hereafter SFA), E2300#1000/716#981*, Emile Fontanel to Division des Affaires étrangères du Département politique fédéral, 17. 5. 1941.
- 23 All three photographs in this article have no indications of the persons shown. I have identified the persons to the best of my knowledge, however, I cannot categorically rule out name errors which might have occurred.
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Zusammenfassung

Verwaltung von Regimewechseln. Ein Schweizer Kaufmann während der politischen Übergangsprozesse der Internationalen Niederlassung in Shanghai, 1941–1949

Der Schweizer Händler Richard von der Crone, Leiter der Shanghai-Filiale der Handelsfirma Gebrüder Volkart, wurde 1941 Stadtrat in der kolonialen Verwaltung der Internationalen Niederlassung Shanghais und übte diese Funktion in verschiedenen aufeinanderfolgenden politischen Systemen bis 1949 aus. Während dieser acht Jahre war er als Stadtrat massgeblich daran beteiligt, den Boden für fünf unterschiedliche Regimewechsel in Shanghai zu bereiten. Der Artikel untersucht, wie es dem Schweizer Händler möglich war, in diese verschiedenen (kolonialen und chinesisch-nationalen) Stadtverwaltungen zu gelangen, und insbesondere, welche Rolle er in Prozessen des politischen Übergangs spielte. Damit trägt die Untersuchung zu einem besseren Verständnis der politischen Funktionen von privaten Wirtschaftsakteuren sowie von deren Rolle bei der Organisation und Umsetzung von Regimewechseln bei. Von der Crone war ein Schlüsselakteur in politischen Transitionsprozessen auf zwei Ebenen: Erstens konnten die neu etablierten Regime Legitimation erlangen, indem sie ihre politische Kooperation mit einem Händler einer neutralen Nation öffentlichkeitswirksam zur Schau stellten. Zweitens war die Expertise von der Crones im Bereich der städtischen Verwaltung für die neuen Regierungen von zentraler Bedeutung, um administrative Kontinuität in Zeiten politischen Wandels herzustellen.