

# Unlikely Assistance: How the Chinese and the Japanese Saved 20,000 Jews in Shanghai during World War II

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## *A Jewish Community in Shanghai?*

The history of European Jewry has been precarious to say the least. The Jewish communities of Europe have lived under centuries of anti-Semitism; however, the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany during the 1930s marked a major turning point as anti-Semitism seemed to be reaching a climax. After the Nuremberg Laws were passed in 1933, Kristallnacht in 1938, and the creation of the concentration camps, many Jews viewed escape from Europe as their only chance for survival. Tragically, just as the situation of European Jewry became dire, many Western countries closed their borders to Jewish refugees by enforcing strict immigration restrictions. While much of the Western world turned its back on the Jews in World War II, European Jewry found an unlikely haven halfway around the world: Shanghai, China.

As an internationally controlled city, Shanghai occupied a unique position, requiring neither a visa, passport, affidavit, or certificate of guarantee for entry.<sup>i</sup> In fact, Shanghai was the only city in the world between 1937 and 1939 that required neither an entry visa nor a financial guarantee to enter.<sup>ii</sup> Consequently, approximately 20,000 Jewish refugees fled Europe for Shanghai during the late 1930s and early 1940s.<sup>iii</sup>

While Shanghai's unique political situation allowed the European Jews to settle in Shanghai, what was unique about Shanghai, a city with seemingly no connection to or involvement in the crisis in Europe, that allowed the Jews to find refuge? Furthermore, as much of the world turned its back on the Jewish plight and anti-Semitism seemed to be spreading globally, why did anti-Jewish violence never emerge among the Chinese and Japanese in Shanghai?

Ironically, it was the very same malicious Jewish stereotypes imported into Asia from European anti-Semitic beliefs that saved the Jewish community in Shanghai. Both the Chinese and Japanese believed many of the European anti-Semitic ideas that spawned anti-Jewish violence in Europe, yet the Chinese and Japanese interpreted the anti-Semitic ideas differently. The Chinese both admired the anti-Semitic image of the wealthy, business focused, politically influential Jew, while also identifying with Jewish persecution. The Japanese

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<sup>i</sup> Marcia Reynders Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort: The Diaspora Communities of Shanghai* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001) 100.

<sup>ii</sup> Jonathan Goldstein ed., *The Jews of China: Volume One, Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999) 217.

<sup>iii</sup> Sigmund Tobias, *Strange Haven: A Jewish Childhood in Wartime Shanghai*, (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1999) 4.

believed the anti-Semitic idea that Jews control the world's economy and politics and believed they could use this "Jewish power" towards the creation of a Japanese empire. The difference in interpretation of European anti-Semitic portrayals of the Jews among the Chinese and Japanese allowed over 20,000 Jewish Refugees to survive the Holocaust in Shanghai.<sup>iv</sup>

In the following pages, I will explain how the Chinese's and Japanese's acceptance of European anti-Semitic ideology contributed to the survival of Shanghai's Jewish Diaspora during World War II. I begin by providing a background on the unique situation of Shanghai during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the city's various Jewish communities. I then examine the rise of anti-Semitic ideology in Europe and, from this foundation, proceed with an analysis of Chinese and Japanese perceptions of the Jews and how these perceptions affected Shanghai's Jewish community. During this process, I will demonstrate how the unique interpretations by the Chinese and Japanese of European anti-Semitic beliefs protected Shanghai's Jewish community during World War II.

### *Limited Literature on Shanghai's Jewish Community*

. While much has been written about the Jewish situation in Europe, the Middle East, and America during World War II, the unique situation of Asia's Jewish Diasporas are only now receiving attention. The limited existing literature on Shanghai's Jewish Diaspora fails to provide both a description of Shanghai's Jewish community and an explanation of why it was able to survive World War II. Much of the existing literature focuses on either the Jewish Refugees' daily experiences in the Hongkou district, the Chinese perception of the Jews and Judaism, or the Japanese perception of the Jews and Judaism. Though occasionally overlapping, the three topics have largely remained isolated in literature.

Much of the literature on the lifestyles of Shanghai's Jewish refugees is emotionally charged, from the Jewish perspective, and never attempts to delve into the deeper implications of the community's existence. James Ross' *Escape to Shanghai* is an engaging account of the lives of several of Shanghai's refugees; however, Ross approaches the situation as an American Jew and focuses primarily on bringing Shanghai's Jewish community to life, failing to fully address the community's larger social and political implications. Similarly, Sigmund Tobias' *Strange Haven: A Jewish Childhood in Wartime Shanghai* offers a riveting personal account of Tobias' escape to Shanghai from Nazi Germany and his subsequent life in Shanghai's Hongkou district. However, Tobias' work is a memoir of his personal experience and merely describes the Jewish situation in Shanghai, rather than analyze it. Marcia Reynders Ristaino's *Port of Last Resort: The Diaspora Communities of Shanghai* stands in contrast to most other literature regarding Shanghai's Jewish community, as Ristaino focuses much more on the politics of the refugee's situation. Ristaino's work is thorough in regards to the relations of Shanghai's Diaspora communities and, furthermore, addresses the Japanese mindset towards the Jews, but fails to adequately address the Chinese conception of the Jews. In fact, none of the literature on the refugee experience in Shanghai

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<sup>iv</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 15.

adequately considers the Japanese and Chinese perceptions of the Jews and Judaism.

Similarly, most literature examining Chinese and Japanese perceptions of the Jews does not focus specifically on Shanghai. Zhou Xun's *Chinese Perceptions of the 'Jews' and Judaism* provides a comprehensive analysis of how the Chinese view the Jews and how European anti-Semitism was received by the Chinese; however, Xun does not particularly focus her research on Shanghai, but rather deals with all of China and approximately 400 years of history. Similar to Zhou's work, Dr. Shalom Salomom Wald's *China and the Jewish People: Old Civilizations in a New Era* provides a better understanding of the Chinese perception of the Jews and Judaism, but does not isolate the situation to Shanghai. Furthermore, Dr. Wald's work was sponsored by the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute and, consequently, is overly optimistic on Sino-Jewish relations. Finally, Marvin Tokayer and Mary Swartz's *The Fugu Plan* provides an excellent analysis of how European Anti-Semitic ideas caused the Japanese to attempt to manipulate perceived Jewish power towards the creation of their empire, but focuses primarily on Manchukuo, rather than Shanghai. Throughout all of the literature regarding the Jewish experience in Shanghai, the Japanese conception of the Jews is more adequately engaged than that of the Chinese simply because of the influence the Japanese had over the Diaspora's daily activities.

In the following pages, I will supplement the existing discourse on the Jewish experience in Shanghai by fusing the Jewish experience with Chinese and Japanese perceptions of Jews and Judaism. During the process, I will demonstrate how the reinterpretation of European anti-Semitic ideology by the Japanese and the Chinese allowed 20,000 Jews to survive the Holocaust in Shanghai.

### *The Refugee Experience*

The European Jewish refugees arrived in Shanghai during the 1930s to find a cosmopolitan but divided city, both physically and socially. Shanghai was opened to foreign trade in 1843 following the defeat of China during the Opium War and divided among the British, French, and Americans, creating sections of extra-territoriality within the city. After the Sino-Japanese war at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Japan also became a ruling power in Shanghai.<sup>v</sup> The European Jewish refugees first arrived in Shanghai in late 1933 on the SS Conte Verde, adding to city's existing complexity.<sup>vi</sup> Corresponding with anti-Semitic events in Europe, Jewish immigration steadily rose in the 1930s and peaked in 1939 when 12,089 refugees arrived in Shanghai. During the 1930s, over 18,000 refugees arrived, mainly from Germany and Austria. The European Jews arrived just as power shifted in Shanghai, following Japan's Invasion of Northern China and the subsequent Battle of Shanghai in 1937, to Japanese civilian and military forces effectively controlling the Greater Shanghai Municipality through a Chinese puppet government.<sup>vii</sup>

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<sup>v</sup> Golstein, *The Jews of China*, 217.

<sup>vi</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 95.

<sup>vii</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 5-106.

Most of the European Jewish refugees arrived in Shanghai with little financial resources and were forced to start their lives over in a foreign environment. Jews leaving Nazi Germany were forced to pay steep exit taxes and could only leave Germany with 10 German Marks (4 USD) in cash and the Jewish refugees, many of whom were professionals in Europe, found themselves impoverished in Shanghai. Various Jewish organizations, both locally and internationally, helped the refugees adapt to life in Shanghai by providing education and business loans. Until the beginning of the Pacific War, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee provided the majority of financial aid to the refugees helping them resettle in Shanghai. <sup>viii</sup>

The European refugees were also outsiders in Shanghai, largely isolated in the city's northern district of Hongkou where they focused primarily on their personal survival. The refugee community was not represented in the city's government and, for the most part, the refugees did not consider the politics of their situation or even the events occurring outside of their community.<sup>ix</sup> The Hongkou district was part of the international settlement, an area which had been extensively damaged during the Battle of Shanghai and, therefore, offered the best deals for housing. The area became a vibrant, isolated Jewish community with Jewish bakeries, restaurants, and beer taverns within the increasingly Japanese dominated international settlement. However, the European refugee community was initially divided by strong cleavages: different nationalities, degrees of religiosity, and language polarized the refugee community. Competition and feelings of superiority created tension, especially between the Polish Jews and the German and Austrian Jews. Ristaino explains,

Many of the German Jews had become highly assimilated into German culture, to the extent that they saw themselves first as Germans...Some even reported anti-Semitic attitudes among friends and acquaintances who regarded themselves as superior to most of the rest of the Shanghai Jewish community.<sup>x</sup>

Nonetheless, as World War II expanded into the Pacific and Japan took control of all of Shanghai, the Jewish refugees reluctantly came to the realization that internal differences would have to be put aside in order to deal with the difficulties of wartime.<sup>xi</sup>

Upon arriving in Shanghai, the European Jews found themselves part of a strong existing Jewish presence in Shanghai. Sephardi Jews from the Middle East, especially from Baghdad, immigrated to Shanghai beginning in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when David Sassoon, the most influential Jew in Baghdad, sent his son Elias to Shanghai to expand the family's trading business.<sup>xii</sup> The Sassoons encouraged Sephardi Jewish immigration to Shanghai by creating Jewish institutions and new business opportunities in the city. By the beginning of the first waves of European Jewish immigration, the Sephardi Jews played a

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<sup>viii</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 101-24.

<sup>ix</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 5-125.

<sup>x</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 144.

<sup>xi</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 106-278.

<sup>xii</sup> Goldstein, *The Jews of China*, 217.

substantial role in Shanghai's economy, with the Sassoon, Haroon, and Kadoorie families all amassing huge amounts of wealth in real-estate and trade.<sup>xiii</sup>

The wealthy Sephardi Jews provided assistance, though arguably limited, to the new European refugees through the city's various Jewish relief organizations.<sup>xiv</sup> The Kadoories personally sponsored a meeting of the Baghdadi Jews to develop a plan to assist the refugees in 1938 and personally financed an elementary school for the refugees in Hongkou.<sup>xv</sup> The Sassoons allowed their Embankment Building to be used to register, feed, and temporarily house the refugees.<sup>xvi</sup> Furthermore, the Sephardi Jewish community initiated the Zionist movement in Shanghai in the 1920s, which provided further financial assistance.<sup>xvii</sup> Despite their many good efforts, the wealth of the Sephardi Jewish community, the fact that they lived away from the European Jews in the city's southern districts, and the Sephardi Jews' feelings of superiority created friction between the communities. Furthermore, the Sephardi Jews were businessmen and were greatly concerned with ensuring that the arrival of the refugees placed minimal stress on Shanghai's economy, even going as far as to petition in 1939 for the limitation of Jewish immigration to "only a few desirable from time to time".<sup>xviii</sup>

In addition to the Sephardi Jewish Community, the European Jews also joined Shanghai's substantial Russian Jewish community. Russian Jews began arriving in China in large numbers during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, fleeing the violent Russian pogroms, and, by the early 1920s, the Russian Jewish community outnumbered the Sephardi Jews.<sup>xix</sup> The number of Russian Jews increased drastically as Jews fled Russia following the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 and northern China following the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931.<sup>xx</sup> By the 1930s, Russian Jews numbered approximately 4,500 and created a middle class Jewish community of merchants and small store owners.<sup>xxi</sup> Like the Sephardi Jews, the Russian Jews helped the European refugees during World War II by creating the Committee for Assistance to Jewish Refugees from Eastern Europe and, later, by using the freedom their Soviet citizenship granted them under the Japanese to aid the recent Jewish Polish immigrants.<sup>xxii</sup> Yet, also like the Sephardi Jews, the Russians initially worried about the economic cost of the influx of refugees and feared the inevitable economic competition the refugees would create, which created tension between the groups.<sup>xxiii</sup>

With such a vibrant Jewish community in Shanghai, one has to wonder why anti-Jewish violence never emerged in Shanghai while erupting in the West

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<sup>xiii</sup> Goldstein, *The Jews of China*, 218-19.

<sup>xiv</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 275.

<sup>xv</sup> Goldstein, *The Jews of China*, 270.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 102.

<sup>xvii</sup> Goldstein, *The Jews of China*, 225.

<sup>xviii</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 113-44.

<sup>xix</sup> Goldstein, *The Jews of China*, 218.

<sup>xx</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 44; <http://www.chinajewish.org/JewishHistory.htm> (retrieved October 9, 2006).

<sup>xxi</sup> <http://www.chinajewish.org/JewishHistory.htm> (retrieved October 9, 2006).

<sup>xxii</sup> Goldstein, *The Jews of China*, 221.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 112.

during the same period. In order to understand this, one must look at the origins of the rise of violent anti-Semitism in European society.

### *The Foundations of Anti-Semitism in Europe*

Anti-Semitism can best be described as “hatred and agitation against Jews” and has its roots in the structure of European pre-industrial society, where Jews were viewed by most Europeans as foreigners.<sup>xxiv</sup> Jews were not allowed to participate fully in society and were restricted from the bureaucracy and nobility of most European countries. Consequently, the Jews were encouraged to enter the occupations of money lending and commerce, careers which were seen as morally tainting by Christians, and played important roles in developing Europe’s economy.<sup>xxv</sup>

The industrial revolution caused massive social upheaval and insecurity in Europe, and the Jews, who were closely associated with commerce, were the natural scapegoats. The Jews became associated with all destructive forces in Europe and were accused of trying to subvert traditional values.<sup>xxvi</sup> They were portrayed as ruthless, manipulative, greedy businessmen who banded together to consolidate their wealth and power.<sup>xxvii</sup> In the 1870s and 1880s, anti-Semitism increased dramatically, especially in Germany and Eastern Europe, as many members of the educated middle class and farmers became bitter that they did not advance under industrial capitalism as much as they had expected and blamed the Jews for creating the new insecure economic order.<sup>xxviii</sup> Furthermore, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many in Europe had been influenced by anti-Semitic publications like the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* which claimed that the Jews were involved in an international conspiracy to control the world.<sup>xxix</sup> Both Hitler and Stalin accused the Jews of being destructive parasites that work their way into power through the economy and then slowly destroy the state from the inside. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler wrote,

Jews first enter other communities as importers and exporters. Then they become middle men for internal production. They tend to monopolize trade and finance. They become bankers to the monarchy. They lure monarchs into extravagances to make them dependent on Jewish money-lenders.<sup>xxx</sup>

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<sup>xxiv</sup> Alexander J. Groth, “The Politics of Xenophobia and the Salience of Anti-Semitism,” *Comparative Politics* 4, no. 2 (1971): 89-108. 89.

<sup>xxv</sup> Groth, “The Politics of Xenophobia,” 92-3.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Groth, “The Politics of Xenophobia,” 95-8.

<sup>xxvii</sup> J.F. Brown, “Social and Psychological Factors in the Anti-Semitic Attitude,” *Journal of Educational Sociology* 16, no. 6 (1943): 351-354, 352.

<sup>xxviii</sup> William W. Hagen, “Before the ‘Final Solution’: Toward a Comparative Analysis of Political Anti-Semitism in Interwar Germany and Poland,” *The Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 2 (1996): 351-381.

<sup>xxix</sup> <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005175> (retrieved October 20, 2006).

<sup>xxx</sup> Groth, “The Politics of Xenophobia,” 101.

Jews were further accused of actually preventing the advancement of Christians, a claim which politicians like Hitler were able to exploit to gain wider support.<sup>xxxii</sup>

In addition to the economic motivation for anti-Semitism in Europe, Christians have an inherently negative view of Jews because of biblical teachings. Christians are raised believing that Jesus, their savior, was killed by the Jews, which creates an inherent distrust among Christians of Jews.<sup>xxxiii</sup> In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, many pogroms in Russia were actually motivated by rumors among the Christian community that Jews were using the blood of Christian children as part of their religious ceremonies.<sup>xxxiii</sup> The inherent suspicion of Christians of the ostracized Jewish community, combined with the more political and economic distrust of Jews, put European Jews in the precarious and vulnerable situation which set the foundation for the rise of Nazi Germany and the Holocaust during World War II, which resulted in the systematic extermination of Europe's Jewish population.

Shanghai has many of the elements that led to the rise of anti-Semitism and subsequent violence against Jews in Europe, yet widespread anti-Jewish violence never emerged and the city sheltered over 20,000 Jews, while their families and friends were slaughtered in Europe. The Chinese and Japanese were forced to live in an increasingly financially burdened city due to World War II among foreign, isolated Jewish residents, some of whom, the Sephardi, were incredibly wealthy and dominated Shanghai's economy. Both the Chinese and the Japanese believed many of the anti-Semitic ideas that circulated Europe and the situation in Shanghai marked the first time the outcome of these beliefs would be tested. While the anti-Semitic ideology ignited unprecedented violence under similar circumstances in Europe, the very same ideas protected the Jewish Diaspora in Shanghai. The next section will demonstrate how the difference in interpretation of European anti-Semitic ideology by both the Chinese and Japanese resulted in Shanghai's Jewish Diaspora surviving World War II.

### *Chinese Perceptions of the Jews*

Chinese and Jewish interaction was fairly limited in Shanghai, both prior to World War II and during. In Shanghai, the Chinese were the lowest of all the social classes, especially after the Japanese came to control the city.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Tens of thousands of the Chinese in Shanghai were refugees who had fled the chaos and fighting in the countryside associated with the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1912 and later the Japanese during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Many of the Chinese were utterly impoverished in Shanghai, living in makeshift housing or merely homeless on the streets. Despite living among the Chinese in Hongkou, the Jewish community had very little contact with the Chinese on a personal level and the situation of the Chinese went largely unreported by the Jewish

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<sup>xxxii</sup> Hagan, "Before the 'Final Solution'," 360.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> J.F. Brown, "Social and Psychological Factors," 353.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/article.php?lang=en&ModuleId=10005175> (retrieved October 20, 2006).

<sup>xxxv</sup> Rena Krasno, *Strangers Always: A Jewish Family in Wartime Shanghai* (Berkeley: Pacific View Press, 1992) xiiv.

community.<sup>xxxv</sup> Most of Shanghai's Westerners, including the Jewish community, had neither visited a Chinese person's house nor invited a Chinese person to their home.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The Chinese did not interfere in the daily activities of the Jews and the Jews did not play a major role in the daily lives of the Chinese.<sup>xxxvii</sup> One exception to this general rule was the Baghdadi Jew Silas Hardoon who actually integrated himself into Shanghai's Chinese community through his marriage with Luo Jialing, a poor woman from Fujian province of Chinese and French descent. However, Hardoon's defiance of the Jewish community's strict social boundaries was an extreme aberration and most Jews, especially the Sephardi Jews, had little interaction outside of the Western community and certainly not with the Chinese.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Though the Chinese did not have much interaction with Jews, they held an overall positive perception of the Jews built ironically on European anti-Semitic stereotypes and, subsequently, never threatened the existence of Shanghai's Jewish community. The Chinese actually reinterpreted many of the negative European stereotypes in a positive light. The Chinese first became aware of the existence of the Jews in the 1830s, most likely from their encounters with protestant missionaries.<sup>xxxix</sup> The Chinese came to view the Jewish race as one of the world's superior races and placed Jewish civilization on a similar level to their own and, even today, many Chinese consider themselves and the Jews to be the two oldest living civilizations.<sup>xl</sup>

Chinese scholars were sent to the West in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century where they studied European Jewry and reported that the Jews were wealthy due to their business talents.<sup>xli</sup> The Chinese adopted many other Western stereotypes of the Jews including that Jews had superior abilities in science, economics, literature, and diplomacy. The Jews were seen as an extremely smart people and some Chinese philosophers even adopted the title of "Jew" because of its connotation with intelligence. Leading scholars Hu Shi, Zhu Xi, and Dai Zhen, were all referred to as "Jews" in their 20<sup>th</sup> century biographies.<sup>xlii</sup> The contributions of Jews, such as Freud, Marx, and Einstein, to Western civilization were greatly respected by the Chinese.<sup>xliii</sup> In fact, Yu Songhua, a member of China's modernizing elite, wrote in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, "From antiquity to modern time, the Jewish race has produced many of the world's first class geniuses...How shameful we are when compared with Jewish people and how disgraceful we are to our ancestors".<sup>xliv</sup>

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<sup>xxxv</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 196-282.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Krasno, *Strangers Always*, xiiv.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 282.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Goldstein, *The Jews of China*, 219-26.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Shalom Salomon Wald, "China and the Jewish People: Old Civilizations in a New Era," The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, 2004. (Retrieved October 5, 2006 [www.jpppi.org.il/JPPPI/SendFile.asp?TID=67&FID=2449](http://www.jpppi.org.il/JPPPI/SendFile.asp?TID=67&FID=2449)), 9.

<sup>xl</sup> Zhou Xun, *Chinese Perceptions of the 'Jews' and Judaism: A History of the Youtai* (London: Curzon Press, 2001) 94; Wald, "China and the Jewish People", 10.

<sup>xli</sup> Wald, "China and the Jewish People", 48.

<sup>xlii</sup> Zhou, *Chinese Perceptions*, 94-5.

<sup>xliii</sup> Wald, "China and the Jewish People", 10.

<sup>xliv</sup> Zhou, *Chinese Perceptions*, 96.



Most Chinese do not have the inherent Christian suspicion of the Jews like most Europeans and the image of the “smart and educated” Jew was seen as a great attribute by the Chinese rather than as a threat.<sup>xlv</sup> Furthermore, Jewish power, wealth, and success in business was not viewed with suspicion but instead was viewed as something that the Chinese would like to emulate. Wald explains,

The Jews are admired, but perhaps also envied because they are seen to have what every Chinese wants to have for himself and his nation: money, success, and power...in General, the Chinese traditions with regard to money and wealth are similar to those of the Jews, and different from the moral reticence that Christianity often maintained towards wealth. Both Chinese and Jews celebrate riches, success, and well-being in this world, not poverty.<sup>xlvi</sup>

While careers associated directly with money were stigmatized in Europe, accumulating wealth was not taboo in China.<sup>xlvii</sup>

Chinese respect for the Jews ran so deep that many Chinese intellectuals, especially those of the New Culture Movement like Yu Songhua and Qian Zhixiu, believed that the Jewish community should serve as a model for a new China and could help the Chinese modernize.<sup>xlviii</sup> Like many anti-Semites in Europe, the Chinese believed that the Jewish community dominated world politics and global finance; however, the Chinese did not view this negatively, but rather, as modernizing elite member You Xiong wrote, a result of the fact that the “Jewish race...has the intellectual gifts of quick understanding, rational thinking, good judgment, good organization, and fast action”.<sup>xlix</sup> The Chinese believed these attributes could help transform China to be able to compete in the modern world.

While Jews were attacked for creating exclusive cliques in Europe, the Chinese, who are historically extremely divided, admired the strong sense of Jewish communal identity. Divided among Western powers and fighting the Japanese, the Chinese were inspired by Zionism and viewed the movement as a “model of the restoration of the Chinese race”.<sup>1</sup> The Chinese modernizing elite member, Yu Songhua said of the Zionist movement,

I believe if we Chinese people would have the enthusiasm and the perseverance which Jewish people have for their renaissance movement, then we would no doubt be able to achieve even more than what the Jews have achieved in their renaissance movement<sup>li</sup>

Sun Yatsen and other nationalists saw the rise of Zionism as an inspiration to Chinese racial nationalism. Sun Yatsen wrote,

Chinese nationalism disappeared when China was conquered by foreigners [the Manchus]. But China was not the only nation that had been

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<sup>xlv</sup> Zhou, *Chinese Perceptions*, 103-53.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Wald, *China and the Jewish People*, 63.

<sup>xlvii</sup> Wald, “China and the Jewish People”, 10-63.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Zhou, *Chinese Perceptions*, 96.

<sup>xlix</sup> Zhou, *Chinese Perceptions*, 95.

<sup>1</sup> Zhou, *Chinese Perceptions*, 96.

<sup>li</sup> Zhou, *Chinese Perceptions*, 119.

conquered. The Jewish people also lost their country...Though their country was destroyed, the Jewish nation has existed to this day.<sup>lii</sup>

Lin Huixiang argued that the Arabs were able to reach their golden age during the middle ages because they had Jews living among them, while the Spanish and Portuguese suffered greatly due to their persecution of the Jews during the Inquisition. With this idea in mind, Sun Fo, son of Sun Yatsen, even proposed in 1939 the creation of a Jewish settlement in South-West China to help solve Shanghai's increasing refugee problem and gain the support of supposedly pro-Jewish America, but primarily as Sun Fo said to benefit from the "rich and intelligent Jewish race". Sun Fo's proposal was even accepted by the GMD government in Chongqing but was never implemented due to the government's lack of funds.<sup>liii</sup> While anti-Semitic ideology inspired many in Europe to believe that they had to exterminate the Jews among them in order to advance, many Chinese intellectuals believed that Jewish absorption was the key to progression.

Aside from Chinese respect for the Jews, the Chinese also identified with Jewish suffering, especially after the realities of the Holocaust emerged, and equated Jewish suffering under the Nazis with their's under the Japanese. Some Chinese even referred to the Jews as "shoulán tongbào" which means "suffering comrades".<sup>liv</sup> The Jews were seen as a stateless and oppressed people fighting for their survival and freedom, much like the Chinese fighting Western and Japanese imperialism. During World War II Japanese propaganda tried to introduce European ideas of Western and Jewish imperialism as a threat to the Chinese in an attempt to legitimize Japanese rule, but most Chinese did not believe this idea because the only people actually devastating China were the Japanese themselves. Though personal interaction was limited, the Chinese could see the Jews suffering alongside them in impoverished Hongkou. Both the Chinese and the Jews had to deal with Japanese restrictions, including passing through stringent Japanese checkpoints when leaving the Hongkou district and the Chinese empathized with the Jews as fellow victims of fascism.<sup>lv</sup> Leftist intellectual, Li Zheng wrote in 1938, "the tears, blood and deaths of the Jewish people have awakened the oppressed Chinese".<sup>lvi</sup> The Chinese believed that the Jews, like themselves, were victims of the white man, suffering under the Russians and the Germans. The Chinese empathized with the insecurity of the stateless Jews because they too were under foreign attack.<sup>lvii</sup> Furthermore, after the Rape of Nanking during which approximately 300,000 Chinese civilians were massacred by the Japanese, the Chinese increasingly associated the atrocities they suffered under the Japanese with the plight of the Jews.<sup>lviii</sup> Interestingly, the term

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<sup>lii</sup> Wald, "China and the Jewish People", 49.

<sup>liii</sup> Zhou, *Chinese Perceptions*, 95-122.

<sup>liv</sup> Zhou, *Chinese Perceptions*, 153.

<sup>lv</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 200; Zhou, *Chinese Perceptions*, 107-53.

<sup>lvi</sup> Zhou, *Chinese Perceptions*, 108.

<sup>lvii</sup> Wald, "China and the Jewish People", 48.

<sup>lviii</sup> Maisie Meyer, "A Great Leap Forward", *Jewish Quarterly Spring* 2005: 197. Oct. 20 2006 <<http://www.jewishquarterly.org>>.

“Guizen”, meaning devil, has been used in Chinese writing to refer to both the Japanese and the British, but has never once been used in regards to the Jews.<sup>lix</sup>

Anti-Semitic ideology was used in Europe to blame the isolated, foreign Jews for the hardships of the European people. Following the events in Europe, many in Shanghai feared that economic competition created by the influx in European Jewish immigrants would incite anti-Semitism among the Chinese. However, Chinese admiration of anti-Semitic images of the wealthy, successful, politically influential Jew and identification with Jewish suffering protected Shanghai’s Jewish community. The Japanese remained the real enemy of the Chinese and Shanghai’s isolated, foreign Jewish community, rather than becoming the scapegoat for Chinese suffering, was left in peace by the Chinese.

### *Japanese Perceptions of the Jews*

While the Chinese never persecuted Shanghai’s Jewish community because they respected and related to them, the Japanese never committed violence against Shanghai’s Jews because they respected the power of the Jews and viewed them as a tool towards the creation of a Japanese empire in East Asia. The Japanese in Shanghai had been influenced by Russian anti-Semitism and originally combined a sense of admiration for the Jews with the belief that Jews could be manipulated to the benefit of Japan; however, after Japan went to war with the US, the Jews were viewed with greater suspicion. Nonetheless, anti-Jewish violence never emerged in Shanghai, in spite of German pressure on the Japanese to solve Shanghai’s “Jewish problem”.

Before the beginning of the Pacific War, the Japanese’s conception of the Jews was a strange mixture of respect, admiration, suspicion, and a desire to exploit the Jews for the Japanese cause. The Japanese were still grateful for Jewish aid during the Russo-Japanese War, when Jacob Schiff, a wealthy Jewish New York businessman, arranged \$180 million in loans for Japan to enable the Japanese to defeat the Russians who had been committing pogroms against the Jews. The Japanese did not forget Schiff’s action and felt indebted to the Jewish community. Tokayer and Swartz describe that,

In Japan, Jacob Schiff became a hero. National newspapers devoted page after page to his role in the victory. History books added whole chapters about him. Emperor Meiji, in an absolutely unprecedented act, invited Schiff, a commoner to luncheon in the Imperial Palace...No honor was too great for this man!<sup>lx</sup>

As the Japanese expanded in China, they recalled the Schiff loans and believed they could once again use perceived Jewish influence and wealth to help establish Japan’s Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. During the late 1930s, the Japanese supported the Jewish National Council of the Far East in the hope that this action would be recognized by the rest of the world and help attract Jewish wealth and support, particularly from the American Jewish community. However, many prominent American Jews were outraged to hear that Jews in Asia

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<sup>lix</sup> Zhou, *Chinese Perceptions*, 144.

<sup>lx</sup> Tokayer and Schwartz, *The Fugu Plan*, 46.

were working with the Japanese who they deemed to be as equally fascist as the Germans. Receiving such an unexpected response, the Japanese became obsessed with understanding the Jews and studied the Jewish community of Shanghai intensely, researching all of the Jewish leaders, their connections to global leaders, and possible ways that they could aid the creation of the Japanese empire.<sup>lxi</sup> The research led the Japanese to believe that a Jewish “ziabatsu”, or business connections, had great power over the United States’ and Britain’s foreign policy and influence over the media in the United States.<sup>lxii</sup> Though the Japanese findings mirrored European anti-Semitic ideas they yielded different conclusions.

Instead of inspiring the Japanese to destroy the Jews, the Japanese belief in Jewish domination of global business and politics caused the Japanese to decide that it was increasingly important to gain the support of the Jews. Though the Japanese recognized the potential threat of the perceived Jewish power, unlike the European anti-Semitic image of the Jews as harmful parasites, the Japanese believed that they could form a symbiotic relationship with the Jews. The Japanese developed the Fugu Plan in 1939, named after the fish which is a fine delicacy if prepared properly, but can kill if not.<sup>lxiii</sup> The Japanese believed that the Jews could be a great tool towards the creation of their empire but, if not controlled precisely, could also destroy it.<sup>lxiv</sup> Japanese Colonel Yasue Norihiro explained that the Japanese must not follow in the path of the Germans, but instead should protect the Jews under their control in order to strengthen Japan’s increasingly strained relationship with the US.<sup>lxv</sup> The Japanese believed that they could use Shanghai’s Jews’ talents and American Jews’ wealth to help build their empire in return for a safe haven from the Holocaust.<sup>lxvi</sup> Towards the goal of courting Jewish support, the Japanese leadership in Shanghai devised a plan to create a settlement, into which both new Jewish immigrants and the Jews of Hongkou could move, and promised entry visas to the families of Shanghai’s Jews in return for their support of the Japanese. The plan was abandoned with the beginning of the Pacific War, as the Japanese aim to garner US support through Shanghai’s Jews became obsolete and the Japanese became much more hostile towards Shanghai’s Jewish community.<sup>lxvii</sup>

With the beginning of the Pacific War in 1941, the Jews lost some of the leverage their perceived influence over the US had given them over the Japanese; however, the Japanese still did not commit violent acts against Shanghai’s Jews, largely because they still feared inciting US retribution. Japanese propaganda became increasingly anti-Semitic during the lead up to conflict with the US because the Japanese believed the Jews had influence over US anti-Japanese policy decisions. To justify their action in China, the Japanese blamed the Jews for the suffering of the Chinese, claiming the Jews were imperialistic and the greatest opponent to the obstacle to Asian unity and the creation of the Great East

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<sup>lxi</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 32-151.

<sup>lxii</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 151.

<sup>lxiii</sup> Marvin Tokayer and Mary Swartz, *The Fugu Plan: The Untold Story of the Japanese and the Jews During World War II* (New York: Paddington Press, 1979).

<sup>lxiv</sup> Tokayer and Swartz, *The Fugu Plan*, 9.

<sup>lxv</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 151.

<sup>lxvi</sup> Tokayer and Swartz, *The Fugu Plan*, 9.

<sup>lxvii</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 154-56.

Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. The Japanese became increasingly influenced by the Germans and began to subscribe to the European anti-Semitic idea that the Jews were threatening their authority.<sup>lxviii</sup> Furthering tensions, the influx of new Jewish refugees in 1939 strained Hongkou's resources, placing the Japanese authorities and civilians in increasing competition with the Jews. The Japanese restricted Jewish immigration into Hongkou in 1938 and in 1943 all refugees who arrived in Shanghai from Europe since 1937 were forced to move into designated area in Hongkou, effectively creating an isolated European Jewish ghetto.<sup>lxix</sup> Though the Sephardi and Russian Jews remained fairly unaffected by the Japanese restrictions, the European Jews were not allowed to leave the area without a pass.<sup>lxx</sup> The Japanese believed that by isolating the Jewish community they would be able to control and monitor them.

The Jewish community in Shanghai became increasingly concerned about the threat Japanese rule in Shanghai posed and, after Japan signed the Tripartite Pact in 1940, rumors circulated through the refugee community in Shanghai that the Japanese planned to continue the Holocaust into Shanghai. Fears were increased with the arrival of prominent Nazi party members in the early 1940s including Josef Meisinger, who was known for killing thousands of Jews in Poland. Furthermore, Shibata Mitsugu, a Japanese official with strong ties to the Jewish community, informed the Jews that there were low-level discussions between the Japanese and Germans to murder Shanghai's Jewish population. According to Shibata, Meisinger offered to help Tsutomu Kubota, the Japanese Director of Refugee Affairs, kill all Shanghai's Jews by launching a pogrom on the eve of Rosh Hashanah in 1942. In return for allowing Germany to complete its final solution, the Japanese, who were increasingly desperate for resources in the early 1940s due to the war, would receive all of the Jew's property in Shanghai. However, in spite of pressure by the Nazis, the central Japanese government who had no interest in unnecessarily harming the Jewish community never approved the plan.<sup>lxxi</sup>

While the Japanese can be, and should be, criticized for increasing anti-Semitic propaganda and restricting the Jewish community during the 1940s, ultimately, the Japanese did provide a safe haven for 20,000 Jews during the Holocaust. The Japanese refused to participate in Germany's final solution and even had relatively good relations with Shanghai's Jewish community overall. The Japanese actually worked closely with Jewish relief organizations and Jewish Leaders and even donated money to aid the refugees. While the Japanese can be criticized greatly for their actions against Shanghai's Jews, the Jewish community was treated decidedly better than the Chinese.<sup>lxxii</sup> All residents of Shanghai, including even the Japanese, suffered during the war, but the conditions in Hongkou never approached those of European ghettos. Furthermore, the Jews could live relatively freely within Hongkou if they followed Japanese rules.<sup>lxxiii</sup> As part of the Fugu Plan, Shanghai's Jews could be persecuted but they could not be

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<sup>lxviii</sup> Zhou, *Chinese Perceptions*, 143-44.

<sup>lxix</sup> Goldstein, *The Jews of China*, 270.

<sup>lxx</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 239.

<sup>lxxi</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 173-80; Tokayer and Swartz, *The Fugu Plan*, 222-34.

<sup>lxxii</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 196.

<sup>lxxiii</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 208.

physically harmed, as the Japanese believed it would further the United State's cause against Japan.<sup>lxxiv</sup> In a bizarre turn of events, the Japanese consolidation of power actually protected Shanghai's Jews because the Japanese refused to allow anti-Semitic violence to emerge in the city. Tokayer and Schwartz explain,

The beginning of the Great East Asian War (WWII) might have forced Japan to reappraise her relationship with world Jewry, but neither the Gaimusho nor the military saw any reason to alienate that community unnecessarily... Even to accommodate her ally, the Japanese government was unwilling to engage in a 'final solution'.<sup>lxxv</sup>

Despite increasing Nazi desire to commit violence against Shanghai's Jews in the 1940s, the Japanese control over Shanghai protected the Jewish community by claiming that only they had the authority to deal with the Jewish situation.<sup>lxxvi</sup>

### *The Survival of the Jewish Diaspora*

China seems a peculiar place to find a strong Jewish Diaspora, yet, during World War II, Shanghai was one of the world's great Jewish centers, providing a desperately needed haven for approximately 20,000 Jews from the Holocaust during World War II. While Europe erupted in anti-Jewish violence and much of the world turned a blind eye, the Jews found rather unlikely allies among the Chinese and even the Japanese.

Upon first encountering Chinese and Japanese perceptions of the Jews, both groups seem to subscribe to many of the same hateful anti-Semitic ideas found in the most intolerant parts of Europe. However, ironically, it was Chinese and Japanese belief in European anti-Semitic ideology that saved the Jewish community in Shanghai. The Chinese interpreted European anti-Semitic ideas of the wealthy, business focused, influential Jews as positive attributes which the Chinese should strive to achieve. Similarly, the Japanese interpreted the European anti-Semitic idea that the Jews dominate the global economy and world politics as a reason to work with Shanghai's Jews to further Japanese colonial interests, rather than as a reason to destroy them. Furthermore, the European anti-Semitic exaggeration of Jewish influence in the United States made the Japanese fear the repercussions of committing violence against Shanghai's Jews.

History is the documentation of perception and few situations prove this fact more than that of Shanghai's Jewish community. Anti-Semitic ideology in Europe resulted in the decimation of Europe's Jewish population during the Holocaust; however, the very same anti-Semitic beliefs were interpreted by the Chinese and Japanese in a manner which saved the lives of Shanghai's Jews. Tokayer and Schwartz write, "In Europe, six million Jews—an entire people—would die. In Shanghai, a tiny remnant of European Jewry would live".<sup>lxxvii</sup> The very anti-Semitic ideas which doomed Europe's Jewish population can be credited for the survival of Shanghai's Diaspora.

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<sup>lxxiv</sup> Tokayer and Swartz, *The Fugu Plan*, 233-34.

<sup>lxxv</sup> Tokayer and Swartz, *The Fugu Plan*, 234.

<sup>lxxvi</sup> Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort*, 157-231.

<sup>lxxvii</sup> Tokayer and Swartz, *The Fugu Plan*, 234.

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