# Older Jewish Refugees in China: From a History of the Other to Multidirectional Memories

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# Introduction

From the 1930s onwards, as Hitler came to power and the anti-Semitic acts of Germany’s Nazi regime intensified, countless European Jews were forced to leave their homeland and flee to different parts of the world. Eventually, more than 20,000 Jews, mainly from Germany and Austria, arrived in China as refugees following a period of displacement. They spread to Harbin, Tianjin, Beijing, Qingdao, Nanjing, Shanghai, Chongqing, Hong Kong and other Chinese cities. However, most lived in the port metropolis of Shanghai, where they formed a Jewish refugee community of over 10,000 people.

In recent decades, the overall political, lifestyle, and cultural history of Jewish refugees in Shanghai has been more systematically studied in works on Jewish exile in China. Jewish history is undergoing a process of shifting from the East-West historical writing of the “other” to the opening up of a multi-directional dialog of memory. At the same time, academics have yet to give sufficient focus on subgroups of the Jewish refugee community in Shanghai. For example, there is a lack of research on the elderly among them. In recent years, as the international academic community has continued to expand in the field of Holocaust research, social factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, and class have been incorporated into the research landscape. Hence, the study of the relationship between the elderly and the Holocaust is gradually deepening.

Therefore, in this paper, I select several elderly Jewish refugees in Shanghai as case studies viewed under the global perspective and problematic context of Holocaust research and Jewish exile studies based on Western and Chinese historical archives. Through exploring their individual destinies as elderly refugees, we can get a glimpse of the group circumstances of elderly Jewish refugees and re-examine the history and memory of Jewish people’s exodus into China. The issues that will be the focus of this article’s investigation and discussion are: 1.) What role did aging factors play in the experience of exile for these Jewish refugees who fled from Europe to China with their families? 2.) What role did aging factors play in their life decisions? and 3.) What inspiration does this provide for future generations when it comes to understanding connections between the elderly, the Holocaust, and exile?

# Jewish Exile in China: A Reflection

In post-World War II historical writing on the Holocaust and exile, Jewish refugee groups fleeing to China were long considered “emigration on the fringe” (see Dreifuß 1980) and “exile of the little people” (Hans 2012). It was not until the 1970s that historian, David Kranzler, first systematically studied the Jewish refugee community in Shanghai (see Kranzler 1976). In the half-century since then, international scholarship on Jewish exile in China and the practice of memory have yielded fruitful results. This history has gradually become known to a wider international public through image production, museumization, and media dissemination, thus transforming itself from a “memory reservoir” (“speichergedächtnis”) in Assmann’s sense to a functional and significant cultural memory (see Assmann 1990).

We can see an important feature when we look back at the writing and commemoration of this period of history over the past 50 years. The relevant historical research and memory discourse has gone through a process of transformation from Western-led “Orientalist writing” to China’s “self-Orientalized narrative,” and finally towards a shared history and a multi-directional memory dialog. In one respect, for the Jews, China was a last option for escape out of necessity and a transit point for their post-war emigration to Western countries, such as the United States.

This kind of thinking has profoundly influenced the mainstream Western history of the Jewish exile since 1970. In many memoirs and historical works, it is the “norm” for Jews to go into exile in Western countries such as the U.K. and the U.S., while fleeing to Third World countries is often regarded as a “special exception.” Thus, W. Michael Blumenthal, a Jewish refugee via Shanghai, and former U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, wrote:

Thus, the Jewish refugees lived for several years isolated and crammed together in a ghetto in China, a most peculiar and special variation of the emigrant fate of German Jews in other parts of the world. There the emigrants tried to settle into a new society [...] . We saw Shanghai only as a temporary shelter. Everyone wanted to leave again as soon as possible, to more ‘normal’ countries, some - at least in the beginning - even back to their so-called homeland.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This kind of “exceptionalism” essentially points to a narrative of Jewish/Western civilization’s self-rescue in the exotic Orient after a period of hardship against the backdrop of the Holocaust and exile. Behind this lies a binary logic of “self/modern/advanced” versus “other/pre-modern/backward” that has its roots in colonialism. Thinking about China through this logic is not completely free from the framework of Orientalism.

In his discussion of Orientalism, Edward Said accurately points out that Orientalism otherizes, marginalizes, and symbolizes the East, shaping a fantasy world of the East so as to highlight the superiority of Western culture and to achieve Europe’s own subjectivity and cultural identity (see Said, 1978, 2014). Some Chinese scholars have also pointed out:

The image of China in the Western eye [...] has always been historically shaped to represent values that are considered different from Western ones. China, India […] has all served as foils to the West at one time or another, either as idealized utopias, alluring and exotic dreamlands, or lands of eternal stagnation, spiritual purblindness, and ignorance (Zhang 1988: 127).

Moreover, these stereotypes of China are directly reflected in many Jewish exile historical narratives, including Kranzler’s writings. Therein, China is only a storyboard with Jews/Westerners as the protagonists, and Shanghai, where Jewish refugees are most concentrated, is described as both a “sin city” and a “city of hope” (Buxbaum 2008: 25). Such characterizations still fall into the mold of a false cultural view of the East.

At the same time, in the context of China’s Opening Up Reforms, Chinese scholars since the 1980s have begun to translate, draw on, and learn from the past research of Western historians. By building on “Orientalist writing” made from the perspective of the European-centered (Eurocentric) point of view, they have increased the collection, collation, and research of Chinese historical materials, and gradually developed “a Chinese reading of its own” (Kreissler 2012: 237). This means a historical narrative and memory discourse that takes the perspective of being Chinese-centered (Sinocentric) and that also emphasizes China’s specificity. For example, a historian from the Center for Jewish Studies Shanghai concludes:

This historical memory of Jewish refugees taking refuge in Shanghai during World War II is a unique part of the Holocaust research community in China and abroad. Others commemorate the dead. Only Shanghai commemorates the living, commemorates the survivors, and commemorates the rescue. The Sino-Jewish friendship forged in this ordeal is the most humane page in the tragedy of the Holocaust (Wang 2016: 305).

Nevertheless, if we look at the global historical context of the Holocaust and Jewish exile, this conclusion of shaping China as a “special” place of exile from another perspective is undoubtedly debatable. Behind this “self-orientalism” (auto-orientalism/orientalization of the East itself) narrative is China’s own consideration of diplomatic issues and the politics of memory. There has been a clear trend of politicization, diplomacy, and instrumentalization of the attention and commemoration of this period of Jewish exile in China, especially since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Israel in 1992. The former “Hongkew ghetto” and the Shanghai Jewish Refugee Memorial Museum have not only become tourist attractions bringing in foreign tourists, but also the “necessary agenda” for many Western politicians visiting Shanghai (“a quasi compulsory programme”; Kreissler 2012: 233). Hence, one scholar has commented:

Thus, the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum can be seen as a process with which Chinese authorities could present China as a mirror image of the West. The museum epitomizes a historical self that is eager to be affirmed in the eye of the others, that is, by assertion from the West. In this sense, this endeavor to be in line with the West, discourse serves a means of articulating the spectacle of China’s imagined modernity (Pan 2014).

[End of initial draft translation for review purposes]

[Bibliography and Biography from the source text]

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Biography

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1. See text written by Blumenthal for the 1997 Shanghai Jewish Exile Exhibition in Berlin, taken from the front and inside cover of the exhibition catalog (see Barzel/Jüdisches Museum Berlin 1997). Text cited originally in German has been translated into English by the author of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)