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For many Central and Eastern European Jews who suffered under Nazi Germany’s persecution, immigrating to the Americas, Australia, and China was the only way to escape from almost certain deaths in Europe. The city of Shanghai was one of the regions around the world that offered temporary shelter to Jewish refugees. From 1933 to 1950, about 20,000 Jews from Germany, Austria, Poland, and Czechoslovakia lived side by side with about 100,000 Chinese citizens in Hongkew (or Hongkou), an area smaller than one square mile.¹ With mixed feelings of uncertainty, fear, and hope, the Jewish refugees began life in a cosmopolitan city jointly administered by the French, British, American, Japanese, and Chinese governments. During their years of stay in Shanghai, the Jews interacted with the Chinese communities, engaged in cultural exchanges, and substantially transformed the Chinese society by contributing to Shanghai’s artistic and musical landscape as well as assisting the Chinese war effort.
Historical Background

*Shanghai in the 1930s*

Before seeing it themselves, most Jewish refugees envisioned Shanghai as a small coastal city with a homogeneous Chinese population and houses built with mud and bamboos. Contrary to their expectations, Shanghai, a westernized international commercial center in the 1930s, boasted a substantial foreign population and was politically controlled by both foreign and Chinese authorities. Divided into the French Concession, the International Settlement, and Chinatown (or Old Chinese City), Shanghai represented financial vitality and cultural diversity. However, as the Second Sino-Japanese War began on July 7, 1937, political stability in China was completely shattered. The Battle of Shanghai became the first major military engagement between the belligerents. After three months of battle, the number of Chinese refugees in Shanghai and its outskirts climaxed at more than 700,000 people. Most of them moved from Chinatown into the French Concession and the International Settlement.

The unique political and cultural conditions of Shanghai were particularly beneficial for Jewish refugees from Europe. The existence of multiple political interests created administrative gaps that made immigration to the city possible. After Japan gained partial control of Shanghai in November 1937, the Chinese government lost the power to regulate foreign immigration into the city. At the same time, British, French, and American interests prevented the Japanese military from assuming authority on this issue until the beginning of World War II. Consequently, from November 1937 to September 1939, passport and visa controls were loose. Jewish refugees who wanted to enter Shanghai did not need proof of financial support, certificate of employment, criminal record reports, etc. that were required by other countries and could have taken months to prepare. The lack of a convoluted visa application system in Shanghai saved persecuted Jews from going through a laborious immigration process, thus significantly increasing their chance of
escape.

The Battle of Shanghai led to the severe destruction and desertion of the Hongkew District, as well as low living costs in the neighborhood. These were favorable conditions for the destitute refugees. Specifically, food prices in Hongkew were about 30% lower than those of other districts in Shanghai, while rent rates were 75% lower than those in the International Settlement and the French Concession. The Jewish refugees who first came to Shanghai in the late 1930s were able to settle down and survive in Hongkew because of its attractively low costs of living.

Shanghai’s political system also contributed to the development of a distinctive Jewish refugee culture. Since foreign concessions were Chinese territory but not subject to direct control of the Chinese government, foreigners had the chance to engage in cultural and political activities in Shanghai without much constraint. For Jewish refugees from Central and Eastern Europe, this cultural and political freedom gave rise to operettas, concerts, plays, newspapers, and magazines performed or written in German and Yiddish; Zionist organizations and communist-Marxist study groups; Jewish sport teams and leagues; as well as European-style restaurants, cafés, and shops. These diverse activities allowed the nostalgic émigrés to preserve their cultural identities and overcome the hardships of the war years. Moreover, the continuous presence of western cultures and substantial foreign populations in Shanghai fostered cultural exchange between the Chinese and the refugees. After decades of contact with westerners, the Chinese had changed their initial amazement towards western culture to gradual acceptance and spontaneous adoption. Because of this openness, many Chinese were able to acquire the languages, customs, and professional knowledge of Jewish refugees.

**Chinese Perception of Jews**

The Jewish war refugees from Central and Eastern Europe were not
the first group of Jews that settled in China. After the initial arrival of Jews in the eighth century, Jewish immigrants have resided in Kaifeng, Beijing, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Chongqing, and more over the centuries. About 1,000 Sephardi Jews from Britain and 7,000 Russian Jews had already created their own communities and distinct cultures in Shanghai prior to the arrival of the refugees.

Several factors contributed to the Chinese’s lack of hostility against Jewish immigration. While European anti-Semitism was largely entrenched in religious conflicts between Christianity and Judaism, the Chinese community was almost exclusively non-Christian and had no inherent hatred against Jews. Chinese culture, which is based on Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, shares more similarities than differences with Judaism. Both emphasize male dominance, prescribe women’s roles, value kinship ties, and preserve cultural identity over time. These similarities between Chinese culture and Judaism reduced emotional distances between the two groups and fostered mutual understanding. Furthermore, the Chinese and the Jews shared experiences as victims under the oppression inflicted by European Christians and fascist powers. After the First and Second Opium Wars, the Chinese suffered under military aggressions initiated by French, British, German, Austrian, American, Russian, and Japanese troupes. The Chinese and the Jews’ mutual suffering gave rise to empathy towards each other’s experiences and hatred against common enemies.

The Jewish Refugees’ Influences on the Chinese Community

“Little Vienna”

Prior to the arrival of Jewish refugees, Hongkew was one of the poorest neighborhoods in Shanghai. Severely damaged during the Battle of Shanghai in 1937, Hongkew was filled with dilapidated buildings, ruins, rubble, and deserted houses. Since most of the original middle-class residents moved into other residential areas to avoid warfare, Hongkew became relatively
sparsely populated by the end of 1937. The Chinese families who stayed were uneducated, impoverished citizens from the lower classes.

When the Jewish refugees arrived in Hongkew between 1937 and 1941, they transformed the neighborhood into an exquisite Viennese enclave, replacing the Chinese houses with European-style architecture. They refurbished, redecorated, and rebuilt decaying houses—adding flush toilets, bathtubs, and balconies—so that the furnishings inside the buildings could better suit European lifestyle. Cafes, clothes stores, restaurants, bars, bakeries, and clinics with German sign boards replaced demolished Chinese shops. Indeed, the area around Chusan Road (or Zhoushan Road) and Huoshan Road became so exotic that Hongkew was given the new nickname “Little Vienna,” or “Kleines Wien.” To this day, Hongkew’s Central European architectural style is still preserved in former neighborhoods of the refugees.

The Jewish newcomers not only transformed the layout and appearance of the Hongkew District, but also introduced the Chinese to Central European fashion and cuisine through the various authentic Viennese eateries and apparel shops. “Bong Street,” a clothing store opened by a German Jewish refugee, specialized in designing popular western-style apparel. In the early 1940s, wearing clothes with the “Bong Street” label became a symbol of high social standing. “Fiaker” (費雅克) restaurant, owned by an Austrian Jewish refugee, attracted Chinese celebrity clienteles such as Soong Mei-ling, Soong Ching-ling, Soong Tse-ven, and Mei Lanfang. Although Shanghai was not new to foreign culture, the Central European elements of “Little Vienna” were certainly central to the city’s cultural montage in the 1940s.

Cultural and Academic Influences

Among the Jewish refugees were many talented people. As musicians, painters, dancers, film directors, and doctors, they brought professional knowledge to Shanghai and introduced the Chinese community to European art and culture. The music scene in Shanghai did not leave a positive
first impression on the refugees. There were few places where music of high culture, such as orchestral music, was played, and theaters lacked professionally trained musicians. The situation quickly improved as some Jewish immigrants found employment in all kinds of bars, night clubs, cafés, restaurants, and rooftop gardens in Shanghai, thus introducing more diverse Jewish-western pop music to the city.

Some professional Jewish musicians taught in Shanghai’s universities, and many of their Chinese students later became nationally prominent figures in orchestras. For instance, Ewin Felber, art director of the European Jewish Artist Society (EJAS), took part in the music scene by teaching at the University of Shanghai, publishing music critiques in English and German newspapers, and learning Chinese music. Alfred Wittenberg, a German Jewish refugee who immigrated to Shanghai in 1939, worked as professor in the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. His students include Chinese violinists Tan Shuzhen, Chen Zonghui, and Mao Chuen, as well as pianists Fan Jisen and Li Minqiang. Composers Wolfgang Fraenkel and Julius Schloss, both German Jews who left for Shanghai after internment in Sachsenhausen and Dachau, also taught in the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. Their students Ding Shande, Qu Xixian, Sang Tong, Tang Zhengfang, Huang Yijun, and Chen Chuanxi all became nationally renowned composers in the following decades.

Otto Joachim, violinist and composer, along with his brother, cellist Walter Joachim, opened a music studio and organized a band in Shanghai after leaving Germany in 1939. One of their most famous Chinese students was cellist Situ Zhiwen. Otto Joachim recorded more than thirty Chinese albums through his studio and composed the famous “Rose, Rose, I Love You” with Chinese pop song lyricist and composer Chen Gexin. The English version of the song, translated in 1945 and first recorded by Frankie Laine in 1951, introduced Chinese pop music to the United States.

Justus Keil-Pasqual, a professional German dancer who earned a
reputation internationally through his solo performances around Europe, founded a dancing academy in Shanghai after emigrating from Germany in 1939. The academy offered a wide array of courses including classical dance, acrobatics, folk song, and cabaret while specializing in social dance, gymnastics, and ballet. Famous Chinese dancer Wang Yuan was one of the graduates of the academy.

Furthermore, former Jewish employees of the German film industry made significant contributions to China’s nascent film business. Jacob and Louise Fleck, Austrian directors of more than 300 silent and sound films, came to Shanghai in 1940 after being detained in Dachau for 16 months. They quickly got in contact with Fei Mu, Chinese film director and head of Lianhua Film Company, out of professional interest and curiosity about the Chinese film industry. Fei Mu invited Jacob and Louise Fleck to direct a Chinese film titled *Children of the World* (《世界儿女》). The first Chinese film made by foreign directors, *Children of the World* attested to the solidarity between all anti-fascist allies by promoting sentiments against fascist powers and advancing peace. The Flecks initially searched for Chinese actors who spoke fluent English in order to produce an English version of the film and release it in Europe and the U.S. However, because of the outburst of the Pacific War at the end of 1941, the Japanese army occupied the International Settlement, and *Children of the World* was banned from screening.

Multiple Jewish refugee artists were inspired to create paintings and woodcuts of experiences in China. Friedrich Schiff (Chinese name: 许福), an Austrian Jewish artist who first came to China in 1930, decided to remain in Shanghai long-term after the Anschluss. Having lived in China for over twenty years, Friedrich Schiff produced multiple painting series that feature rickshaw coolies, fortune tellers, barbers, nightclubs, and wealthy westerners, thereby presenting the contrasting lives of the rich and poor in Shanghai. A complete collection of his cartoons was compiled and published by Gerd Kaminski in *China Painted: Chinese Contemporary History in the*
Pictures of Friedrich Schiff (Original German title: China gemalt—Chinesische Zeitgeschichte in Bildern Friedrich Schiff’s).

Another prominent Jewish refugee artist in Shanghai was David Ludwig Bloch. Born and raised in Bavaria, Bloch was expelled from the State School for Applied Painting (Staatsschule für angewandte Malerei) in Munich after Kristallnacht and was detained in Dachau. After arriving in Shanghai in May 1940, he continued to pursue his interests in watercolor paintings and woodcuts. His personal art exhibition held in the Shanghai Art Gallery on Nanjing Road gained unanimously positive reviews from colleagues and visitors. Bloch’s paintings and woodcuts mainly focused on lower-class Chinese workers. His most famous woodcut collection, Rickshaw, was first published in Shanghai in 1942 and was later reprinted in Holzschnitte, Woodcuts: Shanghai 1940-1949.

Other cultural and academic contributions of Jewish refugees to the Chinese society include Adolf Josef Storfer’s introduction of Freudian psychoanalysis to China and the translation of Haim Bialik’s writings from Hebrew and Yiddish to English and Chinese.

United Against the Fascists

Jewish Refugees and Chinese Communists

Although the European refugees were able to escape from the horrors of genocide, they still constantly witnessed first-hand the agony and torture experienced by ordinary citizens under Japanese aggression. Out of compassion, indignation, and shared experiences as victims, the Jewish refugees in Shanghai began to help their Chinese neighbors to endure the inhumane conditions of war and to actively assist the Chinese war effort against the Japanese. In particular, about twenty to thirty German Jews with leftist ideologies formed a study group that regularly met to discuss Marxism and Leninism, and many group members later took part in the war efforts of the Chinese Communists.
Hans Shippe, former member of the German Communist Party, settled in Shanghai after the NSDAP seized power in Germany in 1933. Working as a journalist in 1938, he interviewed leaders of the New Fourth Army, such as Ye Ting, Xiang Ying, Zhou Zikun, and Yuan Guoping, in order to promote the war efforts of the Chinese Communists.\(^{38}\) He later died fighting against the Japanese in a battle in the Yimeng Mountains.\(^{39}\)

Another member of the study group, Ruth Weiss (Chinese name: 魏璐诗), also served as the bridge between anti-fascist parties in China and overseas. An Austrian Jewish journalist who had been reporting in Shanghai and Chengdu since 1933, Weiss disclosed situations of the anti-Japanese battles in China to western societies, served as translator for high-ranking officials of the Red Army, and worked as nurse on the battlefield.\(^{40}\) After learning that her parents were both killed in concentration camps, Weiss applied for Chinese citizenship in 1939.\(^{41}\) She continuously contributed to the war against the Japanese and the establishment of Chinese socialism until her death in 1983.\(^{42}\)

Jacob Rosenfeld (Chinese name: 罗生特), an Austrian physician who was twice detained because of his leftist ideas and Jewish ethnicity, came to Shanghai in August 1939.\(^{43}\) Upon learning about the war efforts of the Chinese Communists, he applied to become a medical officer in the New Fourth Army in March 1941. During his subsequent service in the Eighth Route Army, the Northeast Democratic Coalition Army, and the People’s Liberation Army, he cured hundreds of Communist soldiers and officers, thus becoming a close acquaintance of Generals Chen Yi and Luo Ronghuan.\(^{44}\) In addition, he helped to improve the medical conditions of the Communist army by offering lectures on anatomy, physiology, and surgery to 162 medical staff of the New Fourth Army. In 1942, Rosenfeld became a special member of the Chinese Communist Party, and he later obtained the highest military title offered to a foreigner.\(^{45}\) Yao Huang and Huixin Zhang’s book *Jacob Rosenfeld in China* offers a more detailed account of Rosenfeld’s experiences.
from 1939 to 1949, the year in which he returned for his relatives in Austria.

Richard Frey (original name: Richard Stein, Chinese name: 傅莱) had experiences similar to Rosenfeld’s. After arriving in Shanghai as an Austrian Jewish refugee on January 15, 1939, Frey became a medical officer of the Communist army under General Xiao Ke in 1941. From 1942 to 1944, he rescued injured soldiers on the battlefield while imparting professional skills to Chinese medical staff. In order to overcome the language barrier, he spent a considerable amount of time studying Mandarin. Even Chairman Mao honored Frey’s distinguished service to the Communist army after he established laboratories that could produce penicillin. Frey later joined the Chinese Communist Party and became a member of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) after the founding of the People’s Republic.

**Mutual Support During the War**

Whereas Jewish journalists and physicians directly influenced the outcome of the war against Japanese fascists, many Chinese citizens and Jewish refugees of Hongkew contributed to the war effort on an interpersonal level by supporting each other during times of hardship. Li A-hao, a Chinese citizen born in 1927 who had lived side by side with the refugees in Hongkew during World War II, recalled that his Jewish neighbors often exchanged their rice and bread for his corn flour pies and tofu residues in order to save his starving family from death. Another Jewish neighbor of Li, who formerly worked as a physician, cured Li’s wife for free when he heard that the destitute Chinese couple could not afford the medical costs necessary to cure Li’s stomachache. In return, Li’s family helped a single mother to look after her young daughter Maya for several years.

Frank Theyleg’s way of supporting the Chinese was more daunting. After arriving in Shanghai in 1939, Theyleg searched for job opportunities as an engineer and got in contact with Wang, a street vendor.
soon discovered that Wang was in fact head of a workers’ association, and he quickly received employment in a factory through Wang’s contact. The Japanese soldiers later expropriated the factory and ordered all workers to produce hand grenades for the Japanese army. Based on mutual hatred against Japanese aggression, Wang and Theyleg reduced the length of the fuses so that no hand grenade would explode. Theyleg’s courage to sabotage the production was exceptional, considering that the owner of the factory was immediately executed after the Japanese found out about the act. The Jewish émigrés’ professional expertise and empathy for the Chinese war effort certainly played a significant role in the final victory of 1945.

Memories of Shanghai: Contact Between Chinese and Jews After the War

The end of the Second World War marked the end of the Jewish refugees’ stay in Shanghai. From 1946 to 1951, most refugees emigrated to Israel, the United States, Canada, and Australia, while a minority went back to Europe in search of surviving relatives. Although few refugees chose to settle permanently in Shanghai, the friendship between the Chinese and the Jewish community continued in the following decades. The Chinese strove to preserve the footprints of Jewish refugees by reconstructing the White Horse Inn, a café opened by Austrian refugees, establishing the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum, and contacting former refugees for historical research. Former refugees regarded Shanghai as an integral part of their identity. They immortalized their memories of the Chinese city by writing memoirs, directing films and documentaries, and forming organizations that help all refugees keep in touch with each other. It is through this mutual effort of the Chinese and the Jewish refugees that these two civilizations could continue to maintain harmonious relationships with each other to the present day.

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Notes

1. The number of Jewish refugees in Shanghai was never precisely determined. Figures range from 18,000\(^{56}\) to 20,000\(^{57}\) and to 25,000.\(^{58}\) The sources of data include records of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and reports of local newspapers. I consider 20,000 to be the most reliable estimate since it is the most frequently reported in scholarly research and in memoirs of the refugees. This number only includes refugees who considered Shanghai as their final destination on the route of escape and excludes those who went to other Chinese cities or other countries via Shanghai.

2. Although the majority of refugees settled down in Hongkew, some Jews with better financial means also chose to reside in better-furnished houses of the French Concession or the International Settlement. Unfortunately, in February 1943, the Japanese authorities ordered all stateless refugees who came to Shanghai after 1937 to move into Hongkew before August 1943 and renamed the district as the Hongkew Ghetto.\(^{59}\)

3. Three groups of scholars disagree on when exactly Jews entered China (For detailed information, see Shapiro, Jews in Old China). Some claim that Jews already came to China during the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 B.C.), drawing evidence from the Old Testament and records left on the tablet inscriptions of Kaifeng Jews.\(^{60}\) Some believe that Jews may have come to China through the Silk Road upon the beginning of the Jewish Diaspora. However, most scholars think that Jews came to China during the Tang Dynasty (618–907 A.D.) based on more reliable archeological evidence.\(^{61}\)

Endnotes

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42. Ibid, 209-211.
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51. Shi, Pan and Li, 181.
52. Ibid, 179-180.
54. Pu and Huang, 251-261.
57. Shi, Pan and Li, 41.
58. J. Wang 2.
60. Pan and Wang, 6.
61. Ibid, 7.