

Chinese Perspectives on the Jews of China

Marta Aureli

Shanghai International Studies University,
Department of International Relations and Diplomatic Affairs,
West Dalian Road 550, Shanghai 200083, China.
E-mail: marta.au89@gmail.com

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Abstract

This article approaches the theme of Jewish presence in China and provides a new point of view, as it tries to analyze such presence through a Chinese perspective. After the Opium Wars, foreign communities established concessions in open port cities, and among them were an important number of Jews. The most relevant Jewish communities were located in the open-port cities of Shanghai and Tianjin and in the former Russian city of Harbin.

The Jewish world has always praised China for the help received after the Russian Revolution and especially in the wake of Nazism in Europe, but academic and

political recognition of this history occurred especially in conjunction with the beginning of the diplomatic relations of the PRC and the State of Israel in 1992. New interest in the Jews of China was again produced as a side effect by the “Belt and Road Initiative” in recent years. As this piece of history tends to be exploited by both parties when particular needs arise, we are left wondering how the Chinese average man considers the Jewish past of its country. For such purpose the article analyses the results of a survey conducted to Chinese nationals who were asked to reflect upon Jewish presence in their homeland. Doing so, the article tries to understand how many people in China are aware of its Jewish past and what kind of consideration they have of it.

Keywords: Jewish presence in China; Jewish Studies; Chinese Jews; Shanghai; Tianjin; Harbin

1. A Concise Historical Background

Jews and Chinese first met presumably around the Han dynasty as it has been engraved in a stele left by these foreign people in the Synagogue of Kaifeng already in 1512 (Kupfer, 2008). Many are the relics and the



artefacts left behind by Jews in China that confirm such an early stage of Jewish presence inside the Chinese Empire, for example the first one is a carved translation of a Bible dated 781 BC found in the area surrounding Xi'An (Ehrlich, 2008). Nevertheless, is to the Kaifeng Jews we refer to when mentioning Jewish presence in Imperial China, as in this city was based a well-established community that prospered from the 10th until the 19th century. The understanding we have of this earliest stage of Jewish presence in China changed drastically when the Jesuit Matteo Ricci met the Jew Ai Tian in 1605 in Beijing and suddenly this concealed community was discovered by the outer world (Laytern et al.,2017). However, the Jews of Kaifeng faced a gradual process of assimilation into the Chinese surrounding culture. As they started taking part into the official Confucian imperial exams, as they started to play a role in the Chinese governmental machine, as they adopted the Chinese language, as they forgot the Hebrew language; the Jews of Kaifeng that were once considered visitors during the Tang dynasty, became first foreign residents on Chinese soil during the Song

dynasty and finally a minority in the multicultural Yuan empire (Leslie, 2000).

Quite different fate was waiting for the Jewish communities established in China in the second half of the 19th century and that gradually got dismantled after the foundation of the People's Republic of China. Jews started to arrive in modern times first into the open-port cities of Shanghai and Tianjin, and then in the Russian new towns freshly built along the railway tracks of the Chinese Eastern Railway. The Shanghainese Jewish community started to take shape in 1842, after the opening of the city as an open port, and it soon hosted one of the most diverse Jewish communities in China, as it was made up of Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews alike. The first Sephardi Jewish settlers to arrive were originally from Baghdad, Basra and Aleppo but then escaped political and religious persecution in British colonies, so from India they entered Shanghai as members of the British community (Meyer, 2000). The Sephardi Jews came to Shanghai to exploit its great business opportunities and so they arrived here with the clear intention to make



Shanghai their new home (Betta, 2003). Soon this group will be joined by the Ashkenazi Jews escaping the aftermath of the Russian Revolution in 1917. As Jews used the Chinese Eastern Railway to escape from their motherland, most people stopped in Harbin, an international city that was hosting a vibrant Jewish community; nevertheless, many believed that the Shanghai concession could provide more protection for the future, so they reached the southern city (Krasno, 2000). At last, the Jewish community of Shanghai peaked when Jewish Refugees escaping the Nazi persecution were arriving from Europe. The United States, Britain, France, Canada, Australia, and many other countries stated that they could not accept Jewish refugees, even Switzerland, which had remained neutral for a long time, was reluctant to shelter Jews (Friedlander, 1997). At that time, Shanghai was in a situation of disputes between foreign powers, in fact there were four administrative areas: the Chinese area ruled by Chiang Kai-shek's National Government, the Hongkou area occupied by the Japanese army, the French Concession and the international colonial area jointly

managed by eleven countries. This status allowed Jewish refugees to enter Shanghai without a visa and so Shanghai became the most promising escape route for European Jews in danger (Eber, 2012).

Different was the situation of the Jews arriving to Tianjin after the opening of the city in the aftermath of the loss of the second Opium War in 1860. Russian Jewish entrepreneurs started to arrive in Tianjin to benefit from the economic growth of the town and officially they founded the Tianjin Hebrew Association already in 1904 (Pan, 2019). Their main place of residence in Tianjin was in the several Western concessions and their number was always relatively small, yet the community witnessed a relative growth when receiving refugees escaping from the Russian Revolution in 1917 and also during the rise of the Nazi regime in Europe (Fang, 2000). The main source of income for the Jewish community in Tianjin was the fur business and the trade of other meat-related products, businesses that were facilitated by the strategic position of the town and its port; at the same time many were the Jews of Tianjin who dedicated their lives to small retail



activities such as grocery stores, delicatessens, bakeries, butchery's, dairy shops, restaurants, and even real estate, and pharmacies (Goldstein, 1999). Basically, the Jewish community in Tianjin was a self-sufficient little world.

The same could be affirmed in regard to the Jews of Harbin. Harbin witnessed a quite different historical development compared to the open-port cities of Shanghai and Tianjin. The birth and the development of the city of Harbin after 1898 were closely connected with the Russian Empire expansionism in Manchuria represented by the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER), a company that managed the administration of the Chinese section of the Trans-Siberian railway (Patrikeeff at al., 2007). The Russian government was administrating the railway under the name of the CER and all the land that it was crossing, so Harbin was born as a Russian town on Chinese soil (Chiasson, 2003). Imperial Russia had been discrimination and legislating for so many years against the rights of the Jewish ethnicity: Jews were limited in their daily life by a rigid set of anti-Semitic laws and so the idea of starting a new and free life in China was very

appealing to them (Aronson, 1990). Ashkenazi presence in Harbin was steadily growing in China, after the establishment of the town (Goldstein, 1999), after the end of the Russo-Japanese war in 1905 (Wang et al., 2013), after the Russian Revolution of 1917 (Romanova, 2012), and so the community prospered and flourished.

From the second half of the 19th century until the second half of the 20th century, Shanghai, Tianjin, and Harbin hosted the biggest Jewish communities in mainland China. These communities were very different, but they all similarly came to an end when the People's Republic of China was founded and, almost at the same time, the State of Israel was born (Ember et al., 2004). Therefore the Jewish communities in China extinguished once more, this time within a century from their establishment, and for this reason they were never included in the new social system that saw China as a country made of 56 ethnic groups.

This was not the end of Jewish presence in China, in fact a new wave of immigration towards China was registered after the Opening and Reform era. Economical



exchanges between the RPC and the State of Israel started in 1979 in the wake of the Reform Period and if at that time just a bunch of selected Israeli businessmen was working in China, by 2008 260 Israeli commercial and technical trading companies had already opened an office inside the Middle Kingdom (Yang, 2013). In 2017 a census conducted by Sergio DellaPergola on the Jewish population worldwide found out that over 3.000 Jews were living in China at the time, of course this is not a big number, but is still a significant one since it raised moderately fast in the last few years (DellaPergola, 2020). At the moment in China we can count 16 active communities spread in 8 different cities: four in Beijing, five in Shanghai, two in Shenzhen, and then one in each of the following cities Guangzhou, Foshan, Ningbo, Yiwu, Chengdu.

2. The Rise of Jewish Studies in China

On the 23rd of January of 1992, China and Israel recorded the beginning of their new stage of international relations and so the interaction of these two populations reached a new and more promising level. As the two

states were getting closer, the interest in rediscovering and celebrating the past of the Jews of China grew exponentially.

As the diplomatic relations between the PRC and Israel were about to start, the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs urged the Chinese Ministry of Education to start some academic courses of Hebrew, that is why the course on Hebrew studies that opened in Beijing in 1985 in the notorious Peking University was significantly implemented and funded (Chen, 2013). Now this program of the Peking University, located under the department of Oriental Languages, offers both a bachelor's degree and a master's degree program (Peking University, n.d.). In the late 1990's other universities similarly tried to establish a Hebrew course or courses on Jewish Studies, but unfortunately these trials were short-lived, and the courses were suppressed by lack of enrolled students or of number of professors after a trial academic year (Anoushiravan et al., 2017). Among these universities, the first one to attempt building a course on Jewish Studies was the Beijing University of Communications back in



2005 (Yang, n.d.). In 2008 three universities will establish courses on Jewish Studies and they are the Shanghai International Studies Universities, the Beijing Foreign Studies Universities and the PLA University of Foreign Languages, but just the course in Shanghai will survive to the graduation of its first class of students (Yang, n.d.). In Shanghai International Studies University, the course on Hebrew studies is part of the School of Asian and African Studies, and it comprehend both a bachelor's and a master's degree (Shanghai International Studies University, n.d.). Beijing Foreign Studies University also started a bachelor's degree program in Hebrew under the School of Asian and African Studies (Beijing Foreign Studies University, n.d.). About the program by PLA University of Foreign Languages we have now left very few and fragmented information. Even if Jewish related studies developed later in China, now they are growing at a remarkably high speed, especially as a consequence of the One Belt, One Road Initiative: such program renewed the interest for this field of studies as part of its attempt to promote the development of “less-taught” languages.

In the wake of this new interest in Jewish Studies, Fudan University started to offer Modern Hebrew courses since March 2016 after the establishment of its Multilingual Center (Fudan University, n.d.). In the same year, also the Sichuan International Studies University started offering a bachelor's degree program of Hebrew and connected studies under the Chongqing college of Multi-Languages (Sichuan International Studies University, n.d.). In the same year, Beijing Foreign Studies University started to re-establish its old curricula on Jewish Studies. In 2017 Beijing International Studies University initiated a bachelor's degree program on Hebrew language (Beijing International Studies University, n.d.) and the same did Tianjin Foreign Studies University (Tianjin Foreign Studies University, n.d.).

Within the Institution of Universities, we can sometimes find thin-thanks or centers fully devoted to the studies and research of Jewish related topics, the most famous ones are definitely the *Center for Jewish Studies* of Shanghai and the *Institute of Jewish Studies* in Nanjing. The *Center for Jewish Studies* of Shanghai was



founded in 1988 by Pan Guang, one of the biggest experts on Jewish Studies in China, and it was located under the Shanghai Academy of Social Science. Its focus has always been about the history of the Jews of China especially in the 20th Century, particularly about the Jews who were sheltered in Shanghai during the World War II (Center for Jewish Studies, n.d.). While the *Institute of Jewish Studies* -consequently renamed *The Diane and Guilford Glazer Institute for Jewish and Israel Studies* to pay homage to the philanthropists who helped the Institute to gain more funds- opened in 1992 in Nanjing University under the leadership of the luminary professor Xu Xin (Nanjing University, n.d.). Similarly, in 2002 Henan University established the *Center for Israel Studies* which focus lays on Jewish and Israel history and critical Middle Easter issues (Henan University n.d.). Now the center is able to provide undergraduate programs as well as master's degree programs, PhD and post-doctoral programs and thanks to its hard work in 2015 it succeeded in founding the Cultural Association for Jewish Studies. In Harbin there has been a big effort to celebrate the historical Jewish

background of the town and to collaborate with the former Jewish residents, and for this reason in 2002 the *Center of Jewish Study* at the Social Science Institute of Heilongjiang was founded under the lead of prof. Dan Ben-Canaan (Institute of West-Asian and African Studies, n.d.). A similar institution, focused more on the research of the religious aspects of Judaism, opened again in Shandong University in 2003: the *Center for Judaic and Inter-Religious Studies*, previously named *Institute of Jewish Culture* of Shandong University and in this form, it was established in 1994 (Shandong University, n.d.). In 2006 Sichuan International Studies Universities founded the *Center of Judaic and Chinese Studies* as an interdivisional research institute, which aim was to publish cross-disciplinary conversations and research with students engaged in Jewish and Israeli Studies (Jewish and Israel Studies at Sichuan International Studies University, n.d.). Other courses related to Israel and Jewish History are found under the *Middle Eastern Studies Institute* at Northwestern University and the *Institute of International Relations* at Yunnan University (Ehrlich, 2008).



The renewed interest towards Jewish studies was, as mentioned before, due to the One Belt, One Road Initiative, but at the same time in recent years also the Israeli Government decided to fund and promote through this form of soft power a pro-Israeli trend in Chinese academia (Anoushiravan et al., 2017). In this sense, the most influent institution is surely the Sino-Israel Global Network and Academic Leadership: a non-profit organization formed in 2011 and part of China's Silk Road Think Tank Association (SRTA). This institute not only actively participated in opening new Jewish-studied courses in Chinese Universities -for example the one in Sichuan International Studies University- but they also supported Chinese scholars interested in these studies in their career's development (SIGNAL, n.d.).

3. The Survey

A retrospective on the booming of Jewish studies and its consequent impact on the research of the topic of the Jews of China raised several questions. As this piece of history was rediscovered just when a political or diplomatic reason arouse, some aspects of the lives of

the Jews of China were highlighted and some were neglected. For instance, the Shanghai Jewish European Refugees became the true protagonists of most of the academic papers connected to this topic, and yet in these pieces several were the occasions when authors failed to mention that Shanghai was able to host up to 18.000 refugees for a mere technicality. When some of the features of Jewish presence in China have been manipulated, is interesting to understand what Chinese people actually think of the Jews of China. What is the Chinese perception of the Jews that inhabited their homeland form more than a century? At the same time, when the academia is tightening its grip on the matter of the Jewish past in China since China and Israel are strengthening their cooperation, we are left wondering how many Chinese nationals are actually aware of the great contribution that their country has given to the Jews of all over the world. In order to reply to these and other questions as well as to estimate how Chinese actually value the role played by “the Jews of China” this research will now analyze the results of a survey done to



a research sample of more than 500 people.

The sampling frame only request was the nationality: all the people in the samples are in fact Chinese nationals, living both inside the country and outside. After deciding that the only condition that truly mattered was the nationality, the sampling method acquired was a random one; as gender, age, and education were all examined elements but irrelevant to the aim of the survey itself. Among the full sample, the 69, 26% of the candidates were female and the remaining 30% were male. 46% of the sample is made up of people whose age is between 26 and 35 years old, a 20% was made up of people younger than 25 years old and another 20 % was composed of people between the age of 36 and 45 years old and finally the remaining 12% were candidates above the age of 45 years old. Let's now examine their educational background: exactly half of the whole sample holds a bachelor's degree diploma, a 21% retains a master's degree or an even higher educational level, a 13% graduated in college for professional training, and the remaining 13% ended its education at high

school or even earlier. Another factor that was examined was the location of residence of the participants to the survey, since the goal was to estimate a cross and inclusive point of view of China as a whole: all the four municipalities of Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing, and Tianjin are represented in the survey, even if the Shanghai area was reached with a much higher intensity. 20 of the provinces of mainland China were also reached, as candidates who took part in the survey respectively according to numbers of residents -from the higher to the lower- live in Inner Mongolia, Liaoning, Zhejiang, Shandong, Guangdong, Jiangsu, Fujian, Heilongjiang, Henan, Shaanxi, Hainan, Hubei, Xinjiang, Jiangxi, Anhui, Sichuan, Gansu, Yunnan, Hunan and Guangxi. A very small number of candidates also comes from Hong Kong and Taiwan. The Chinese diaspora is also represented as answers to the survey arrived from the United States, Europe, Australia, Japan, Korea and Kyrgyzstan, countries are again listed according to the number of questionnaires filled in these countries, respectively from the highest presence to the lowest.



Having shortly examined the candidates, let us now list the questions they have replied to. Here there are the 12 questions that composed the survey, after the initial investigation about the personal background.

1. Have you ever had contacts with a Jew?
2. In your point of view, can we identify a Jew as a westerner?
3. Are you aware of a Jewish presence in China before the foundation of the People Republic of China?
4. If yes, in which city was this presence settled?
5. Have you ever visited the Jewish Refugees Museum of Shanghai or the Harbin Museum of Jewish History and Culture?
6. If not, would you be interested in paying a visit?
7. Are you aware of the fact that in China there was a Jewish presence since the Tang Dynasty particularly active in the town of Kaifeng?
8. Do you think that the Jewish Communities in China have enriched and influenced in a

positive way the cultural-economic development in the PRC of the 20th century?

9. Do you think that being opened to other communities in the past century was an advantage for the Chinese culture, or was it a weakness for China?
10. Are you aware that from the middle of the 1800 till 1916 China has hosted and freed Jewish refugees coming from Russia?
11. Are you aware that China has hosted and sheltered Jewish Communities escaping the Nazism of Hitler, especially in the town of Shanghai?
12. Are you aware that Japan -Nazis Ally- during the occupation of Shanghai and the creation of the puppet state of Manzhouguo, has not limited the life of the Jews of Shanghai, Harbin and Tianjin?

4. Who is a Jew?

The aim of this survey is clearly to understand how much this piece of history is known among Chinese



citizens, at the same time it also tries to understand how people in China think about Jews and foreigners in general. The first attempt is to understand if the “Jewish person” is a known element for the candidates, therefore the simple question “Have you ever had contacts with a Jew?” actual aims to a deeper subtext of what defines a Jewish person. Many debates worldwide can argue about who is a Jew today and who does not fit to this category. Several are the academic research on Jewish identity, an identity that tends to vary and adapt to every culture that has hosted or came to terms with a Jewish community, for example a research on who is a Jew in America tends to be very different from the same research settled in the UK or in Israel. To better understand the extension of this “confusion” it is enough to quote an episode happened in the United States of America on the 11th of December 2019. Former president Trump, in order to fight anti-Semitism, signed an executive order allowing the federal government to punish universities for proliferating anti-Semitism in campus -usually as a consequence of debates over the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This decision

surely is a good-faith attempt, as Rabbi Jonah Pesner - head of Reform Judaism's Religious Action Center - defined it in an interview to the Washington Post (Zazumer, 2019), but is at the same time very controversial. The punishment that the guilt party would receive is, according to Trump's decision, due to the Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, a clause that deals with crimes of race, ethnicity, and nationality (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Administration & Management, 1964). This executive order raised a big polemic, especially in the USA, since a Jew was now being defined according to elements of race and ethnicity, but not according to a religious element. The discontent of American Jews was so high, that the hashtag #MyJudaismIs went viral on Twitter, pushing many Jews all over America to define themselves according to their own standards, and not by the ones of someone who is alien to their community. This confusion or controversy stands upon the fact that the Jewish identity is difficult to define as it can include characteristics of ethnicity, religion, culture, and nationality all together at once (Cohen, 2010). For such reason, the interviewed



shall have asked itself “who is a Jew?” before answering about an encounter with such person.

The main focus of the research regarding the Jewish identity falls upon whether or not a Jew simply belongs to the much bigger category of “westerners” in the point of view of a Chinese person. Jews are not a monolithic block, they actually divide in 3 main subcategories: Ashkenazi, Sephardic and Mizrahi or Oriental Jews. The Ashkenazi are descendants of the Jews that under the Roman Reign settled in Germany and northern France, the Sephardic are the Jews who at the same time settled in Spain and witnessed a peak of their civilization under the Muslim conquest of the peninsula in 711 and they forcibly left for the Ottoman Empire when the Christians regained control of the area, and lastly the Mizrahi Jews were the first Jews to be expelled from the land of Israel and lived under Islam in the East (Zion, 2005). If the topic of discussion is the race, is easy to understand that as a matter of fact the “white -and therefore western- Jews” can only be the Ashkenazi Jews, while the rest of the Jews can be linked to different races.

However, it is important to note that even the Ashkenazi never fully identified themselves as Europeans, in fact as Professor Eric Goldstein¹ puts it: «*What you have is a group that was historically considered, and considered itself, an outsider group, a persecuted minority*» but following the professor's considerations this group - especially in America - "became white" as it integrated and gained more and more success into the society and in fact in the same interview for *The Atlantic* he will state that «*It wasn't the skin color of Ashkenazi Jews of European descent that changed, though; it was their status*» (Green, 2016).

Of the interviewed people, just the 31% have encountered with a Jew in their life, the remaining 68% have not. Moreover, a strong 41% consider a Jew as a Westerner, 38% states that they can somehow be considered as westerners and a mere 19% recognize to

¹ Eric Goldstein is an Associate Professor at Emory University, joint appointment in the Department of History and Institute for Jewish Studies. Author of *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, 2006). Articles include, "Different Blood Flows in Our Veins: Race and Jewish Self-Definition in Late Nineteenth Century America," *American Jewish History* (1997).



Jews a more complex identity. Looking at these data, a rough 80% of people in China tends to see Jews just as people coming from Western countries and this is reasonable as the relations between China and the Jewish world are much feebler than the ones that link both European and Arabs to the Jews. In the historical background it was noted how Jewish presence in China started as early as in the Han dynasty and therefore this past is long-lasting, nevertheless it is not comparable to the history of Jews in Europe or in the Middle East area and this also justify the misconception that a high percentage of Chinese can have towards the Jewish identity; an identity that is complicated to define even in Western countries. What is clear to westerners and to Jews but not to Chinese, is that the Jews always represented a group of people that were different from the rest, and probably for this reason Jews have been fighting against racial discrimination for such a long time in Western countries.

An interesting deduction we can get from such results on the Jewish identity for Chinese nationals is

which role this misconception of the Jews played in the tolerance shown towards them in the 20th century in China. We have seen that these people came to the Middle Kingdom to both find shelter from an increasingly more and more intolerant Russia and to escape the horrors of the Nazi persecution in Europe. This tolerance has been praised both by the Chinese government and the Israeli one to reinforce the diplomatic relations between the two countries, and as a matter-of-fact Jews worldwide are appreciative for the help that they have received in China. Usually, the biggest praise is for having saved roughly 18.000 Jews fleeing the Nazi's persecution in Shanghai, but as we have seen this was possible because of the city's fragmented condition and the consequent lack of a central and unified ruling government. Even if the Jews could enter the city because of such cavi, still they knew no harm from the Chinese citizens, similarly to what was already happening in China before the World War II period in Shanghai as well as in Harbin and in Tianjin. There is no episode of racial discrimination experienced by Jewish residents in



China by the hand of Chinese nationals, the only anti-Semitism that Jews knew in China was for example the results of actions of groups of fascist White Russians in the Northeast area. Can this tolerance be the result of honest ignorance regarding the peculiar identity and history of the Jews? It is difficult to admit that it is the direct consequence but considering how still today 80% of the population finds it hard to differentiate Jews from Westerners, it is definitely a relevant factor.

5. How Known are the Jews of China in China?

The second aim of the survey is to understand what position the history of the Jews of China retains in the collective memory of Chinese people. Is relatively easy to understand why Jews are cherishing the memories of the help received by China, especially when many of the other countries were or discriminating upon them or refusing to open their doors to them even in a time as dark as the raise of Nazism and Fascism in Europe. But what about China, how many Chinese know about the Jewish past in their homeland?

A 38% of the population is aware of a Jewish

presence during the Imperial period and another 29% admits knowing something about this remote Jewish past, just a 31% declares itself completely ignorant about it. This means that in China 67% of people are fairly aware about this long-lasting Jewish past in the middle kingdom. Before the questions getting specific, the survey presents an open question where the interviewed is invited to write down which cities witnessed a Jewish presence independently from the time frame. Just the 53% of interviewed people answered this question. Some of the given answers were incorrect: a margin of people misinterpreted the question and gave wrong answers, and some others mistakenly named Chinese cities such as Beijing, Guangzhou, Qingdao, Ningbo, Xi'an, Wenzhou or areas such as Xinjiang, Fujian and the Yangtze River Delta. Two candidates respectively correctly named Hongkong and Macao, but this research was referring just to Mainland China, so these data will not be taken into consideration. Shanghai was written among the answers 149 times, and three of these candidates even specified that Jews used to live in the Hongkou district. Kaifeng is



also very well known as 111 people named it in their answers and another 3 people indicated Henan as the region where Jews were living. Harbin was named 19 times and Tianjin just two. We can't have percentages about these data, as each candidate was welcomed to name as many cities as wanted, but still we can consider that among the 53% of people that filled the question, the Jewish Community that is more largely known is the Shanghainese one, while Harbin and especially Tianjin are way less known. This can also be linked to the extension that the Jewish communities reached in these three cities: it is an undeniable fact that Shanghai hosted the most varied and active community, and much publicity is given to the Jews of Shanghai also by the global achievement of the city in sheltering the European Jews persecuted by the Nazi. This last feature can be even confirmed by the fact that the Hongkou area was named three times among the received answers, this specific area was devoted to the European Jews and such a detailed answer suggests that this event has a resonance over the perception of the Jews of China inside the nation. Is also

relevant to add here a reflection about question number five: 21% of the candidates admitted having visited the Jewish Refugees Museum of Shanghai or the Harbin Museum of Jewish history and culture, and with the much higher presence of interviewed people living in Shanghai comes a much higher probability that people have visited the Jewish Refugees Museum of Shanghai. This data once more confirms a trend of a fair recognition to the Jews of Shanghai and their history. At the same time, the relatively ignorance towards the Jews of Tianjin does not surprise as this community was a carbon copy of the much bigger one in Harbin to some extent, and usually was a connection point between the Jewish community of the north and of the south: for many of the Chinese Jews Tianjin was an in-between accommodation where to reside while waiting to move to Shanghai. The Jews of Harbin are also relatively not known, even if the community they built was strong in numbers and in activism, but probably being settled in a much more isolated area of China, it attracted less interest to their historical memory.



What does not surprise is the good rate of appearance of Kaifeng and Henan in the answers to this question, especially because the 67% of the candidates has already declared being aware of a Jewish presence in China in Imperial time, probably some of them were answering that question already having Kaifeng in their minds. Deepening the considerations about the Jews of Kaifeng and how are they remembered today in China, question number 7 was specifically inquiring about Kaifeng: candidates were asked to reply on how familiar they were with the Jewish presence in China during and after the Tang dynasty, with special reference to the Jewish community of Kaifeng. 9% of people states to be familiar with this piece of history and another 21% declares to partly know about it, while the 69% declares to completely ignore the presence of a Jewish community in Henan at that time. This data seems to be in conflict with the ones resulted from the question number 3. In fact, if roughly 67% of people declares to know at least something about a Jewish presence in Imperial China, then just 30% admits having some

knowledge of the Jewish community settled in Kaifeng. What can be deduced is that most likely people in China are aware of a Jewish past in ancient times in their own country, but most of them would have difficulties in localizing this presence both spatially and temporally.

To finish the evaluation on the extent of how the Jews of China are remembered today in China, the focus will now shift exclusively to the Jewish presence that took place in the 20th Century, especially referring to the second and third wave of Jews arriving to China respectively in concomitance with the Russian Revolution in 1917 and the raise of Nazism and Fascism in Europe in the 30's. These two timeframes were selected because they represent the moments when the numbers of the Jews residing in China peaked, therefore the moments when their presence was easier to identify. When the answers to these following questions will be analyzed, the spatial difference between the communities of Shanghai, Harbin and Tianjin will stop being considered, we will look at the situation in China generically. Firstly, the focus was on how China welcomed Jews escaping



from the Russia of the post Revolution: the free pass into the nation through the CER for the Jews was inestimable, but in contrast with its historical importance, in China just a 10% of people is nowadays fully aware of this great contribution. 34% of Chinese states to be partly aware of the help given to Jews escaping from the Russian intolerant environment, but more than half of the population is unaware of all of this.

Secondly, the analysis moves on the refugees from World War II. As anticipated before, the percentage of people aware of China's involvement in saving roughly 18.000 Jews from Hitler's madness is much higher than compared to what people know about Jewish presence in China in different timeframes. 41% of Chinese admits being informed about these events, and another 23% says to have some knowledge about it, only 34% of Chinese citizens says they are not aware of it. Nevertheless, these numbers change drastically if we add more information to the question asked regarding the same events in the same timeframe. When candidates are required to reply about how much they know on how safe China was at

that time for Jews in spite of the Japanese occupation of all the three cities that hosted Jewish presence and in spite of the Japanese alliance with Hitler's Germany, then the memory of this part of history also gets more elitist and less inclusive. Just 19% of Chinese is fully conscious about it and a 24% is relatively aware of it while a big majority of 55% of the population does not know about it. This contrast can allude to an important factor: the history of the Jews saved in China from the holocaust is actually well known in China, Chinese people do take pride in the part they played in a dramatic chapter of the world's history. How much and how in detail do people know about the situation that was going on in Shanghai, Harbin and Tianjin is very different. This is because probably even when Chinese states to be aware of the situation of the European Jewish refugees in their nation, actually they are merely just aware of the fact that these events took place, and they do not know why these people reached China, how it was possible for them to reach the country and what were the challenges that they faced in the country.



In the end, this research proves that China retains a certain collective memory of its Jewish past. Some parts of this past are more known, some parts are still more hidden to the majority of people. What is interesting is to see that a country that, for several reasons, came to rescue so many lives and even succeeded to improve the quality of life for so many Jews for over 50 years in the 20th Century, yet does not celebrate its great contribution enough. China started to emphasize on this past at the beginning of the 1990's, when the time for diplomatic relations with the young Israeli nation were about to blossom. The hope is for such an important chapter of history to be spread and told to the collective memory of the Chinese people, not for any political or diplomatic agenda, but just to remember how in difficult times there was a nation that stepped up, that did not join any politics of oppression of who has always been considered different and has always been marginalized. Yet, is true that maybe this mercy emerged from the inability to distinguish a Jew from a generic foreigner, but isn't this what matters the most? Without labels people are just

people, when decontextualized, the ones that were marginalized in one society, can just be accepted or even considered of great value in another one. This survey proves that prejudice is limited, and can't reach everyone, especially when reading a research as *Chinese Perceptions of the Jews' and Judaism: A History of the Youtai* by Zhou Xun² and realizing that the elite and the government in China has always had a clear idea of who the Jews were and used their perception and adapted it over the years in a propagandistic way, yet the people acted according to their own perceptions and to their own minds.

6. The Evaluation of the Jews of China

What is left to analyze is how people in China think of the Jews of China and how do they consider foreigners in their homeland. For this purpose, questions 3 and 4 as well as 8 and 9 will be taken into consideration. Let us start from the most direct questions, the ones

² The author analyzed how the perception of the Jews changed in China in different times and how the government or the intellectuals emphasized on different aspects of the Jewish identity and their achievements over the years in order to use them in a propagandistic way.



regarding the contribution of foreigners and Jews to the development of the nation. What has been found out is that 63% of people considers the effect brought by foreign presence in the country on Chinese culture throughout the 20th century as a somehow positive one, another 26% recognizes it a very positive effect while 7% sees it as somehow negative and a mere 3% as a complete negative one. Is safe to state, looking at these data, that Chinese nationals still today appreciate what resulted of their interaction with foreigners. The contribution that foreign communities have left in China are of different forms and is remarkable to see that Chinese nationals feel the same way about it, especially because the introduction of foreign presence in China was more than controversial. The loss in the Opium Wars declared the beginning of flourishing International communities inside of China, and this led to a big dissatisfaction among people³, as the beginning of a semi-colonial situation started in the country. Foreigners brought with them innovations, as it was seen in the

³ Dissatisfaction that peaked in the Taiping revolts and the Boxer one.

physical space of the concessions, for example in the modern villas that still today enrich the cityscape of Shanghai or in the communication network of the CER itself. Probably the highest form of cultural development resulted not from what foreigners brought, but more on how what they brought interacted and mixed with the Chinese tradition. For example, the famous Chinese traditional dress *qipao* is a representation of this mixture of cultures because in the 30's what was the real traditional dress got highly influenced by Western fashion trends such as a split that cut the skirt high until the tights, a collar that got modified or even removed for a more revealing neckline, sleeves that also got reduced or removed and so the most iconic and representative dress of the golden age of Shanghai is de facto a result of an encounter of Chinese tradition and Western influence (Goggin, 2017). Even the *Shikumen*, one of the true landmarks of Shanghai, are the results of this mutual influence, in fact they are designed by European architects to include European features as slate-gray bricks and French widows with the typically Chinese



housing features as courtyards or the stone gates (Ren, 2011). Having this in mind, is truly important to recognize the positive effect that the encounter of different cultures can produce. Even if politically one does not rejoice of the foreign presence in China after the forced opening of port cities in the second half of the 19th century, what this presence left on Chinese soil is undoubtedly valuable, so valuable that actually today only a 10% of the population sees it in a negative way.

The analysis gets more specific with the question 8, when the discussed matter is how the Jewish presence in China has influenced the economic and cultural development of the country in the 20th century, a question asked with the specific intent of understanding how Chinese people value their Jewish past. 51% percent of the population recognizes to the Jews a certain grade of positive influence, 27% sees the Jews as great contributors to their own development and 20% thinks that the role they played in the development of the country is not relevant. The great achievements of the Jewish communities of Shanghai, Tianjin, and Harbin are

greatly recognized by Chinese nationals; in fact more than half of the population assigns to the Jews a positive function on the overall economic and cultural development. This encouraging attitude shown in the regards of the Jews of China is a great acknowledgment itself, it is probably connected to the friendly welcoming they always received in China and also to the relatively lack of antisemitism in the nation. Even the authorities back then, having received the influence of Western ideas, since the 20's started to spread the idea of Jews as a superior race in China, inclined to succeed in business, and to achieve greatness in the sciences and in the arts (Zhou, 2013). This idea, that has always surrounded the prejudices around the Jews worldwide, reinforced the image of Jews as “great contributors” to the economy and to the culture of the nation and it has most likely influenced the public opinion regarding Jews. An opinion that seems to be confirmed by the data collected in this survey. Nevertheless, the Jewish past in China, in this sense, can be defined of mutual benefits: Jews were able to live a free life in China, to make their communities



flourish with no limitation to their lives -prior to the beginning of World War II- and China gained something in return, such as new businesses, new schools, new ideas circulating, exquisite new musicians playing in the theaters and so on. This recognition comes in spite of the semi-colonialism that China was suffering, and it is so even more astonishing to think that if politically speaking there should have been resentment, in reality we have positive credit.

To mark and to celebrate this chapter of the Jewish diaspora in China two museums were built inside the country, one in Shanghai and one in Harbin. The Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museums stands upon the number 62 of Changyang Road and gave a new life to the old Ohel Moshe Synagogue in the emblematic Hongkou district and it is valued with AAA by the China National Tourist Attractions Quality Evaluation Committee. The old synagogue was restored and turned into a museum in 2007 and next to the religious site there are two galleries assigned as exhibition hall, the number 2 is a stable exhibition made up of memorabilia of the Jews of

Shanghai, such as photographs, documents, objects that these people left behind, while the No.3 exhibition hall usually hosts temporary exhibitions and is not always open to the public (Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum, 2018).

The Museum of Jewish History and Culture of Harbin was established in the site of the New Synagogue in Jingwei Street at the civic number 162 Daoli District. Originally, the construction work for the New Synagogue, also called Beith Hamidrash, started in 1918 and were completed in 1921. The history of this building has been a long-lasting one, as even after its closure in 1956 it started to be used as a club in the 1990's by the Harbin Municipal Government and in 2004 it finally began to function as a Jewish Museum (Baidu Baike, 2007). The majestic building that hosts the museum is divided in three floors: the first floor hosts a collection of Jewish local artworks, while on the other two floors visitors can enjoy a collection of memorabilia and material regarding the lives of the Jews of Harbin as well as their activities.

In the survey, candidates were asked if they have



visited one of these two museums and unfortunately the majority has not: 78% of people did not visit the Jewish museums in China, even when more than 200 participants to the survey were living in the city of Shanghai at the moment of the survey. This reflects the general trend we have already outlined; the Jewish past is not celebrated enough in China. With the hope that not just the academia will rediscover the past of the Jews of China, the survey added a question regarding whether there is an intention to visit these museums and is encouraging to see how 64% of the people admits they want to pay a visit, another 10% declares they might be interested and finally a last 25% has no intention to go to visit the museums. Having such a big majority of people interested in visiting and knowing more about the lives of the Jews of China gives hope that these communities retain a special place into the collective memory of Chinese citizens, and the willingness to a deeper understanding of their lives is also connected to a positive evaluation of the Jewish past of China.

7. Conclusion

As seen, when in need both China and Israel will refer to the history of the Jews of China to strengthen their bonds, to rediscover their diplomatic relations or to try to develop shared economic interests; making it clear what big role can history play in our present society. Nevertheless, the events that occurred in China in the last century are not very popular, especially in China, so the hope is for this Jewish past to finally receive a more prominent place on history books and to turn such a neglected past into a more widespread one. Understanding the elements and features of foreign cultures should be a prerogative of not only scholars, but of all citizens of the world, so to build a better political and social environment in the era of globalization. The coexistence of two or more populations in the same space has created many conflicts all over the globe, when talking about the Jews our minds cannot prevent but thinking of the hardship that Israelis and Palestinians experience daily as they are forced to share the Holy Land with extreme poor results. However, here in China



we witnessed a different outcome for a similar situation, we saw how even in the limbo of semi-colonialism peaceful coexistence was achievable. Even when waves of rebellions spread throughout the Middle Kingdom with the Boxers and their anti-foreign feeling, the impact on the daily life of foreigners living in the country at the time was mild. Luckily, the world has changed fast in the last century and even though many are the hotspots for malcontent around the world, now most countries grow to be multicultural and multiethnic though a natural process of immigration and free and legal movement of citizens. For example, if we reflect upon Chinese culture and the Jewish one, we will easily connect them also thanks to their shared experience of the two biggest scale diasporas the world has known. Chinese diaspora occurred under different circumstances from the Jewish one, but they probably created similar features of adaptability and resistance into the cultural DNA of Jews and Chinese alike.

As the survey has emphasized there is still a big deal of ignorance when talking about the Jews of China:

ignorance towards the Jewish complex identity and ignorance towards this part of the Chinese history. As what happened to the Jews of China is a lesson in welcoming and sheltering people when they are in need, in creating a livable environment for everyone, the hope is for this Chinese miracle to gain visibility inside and outside of China.

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