Some Final Remarks

Escape to Shanghai was for most of the Central Europeans escape into the unknown. Although works about China and translations of Chinese works into German were available between the wars, only few would have read these and most were addressed to scholarly circles. Some might have gained their impressions of Shanghai together with its ill and opium-smoking Chinese from such novels as Vicki Baum’s *Hotel Shanghai* (1939), but these would have only confirmed their view of the unwholesomeness of the place. It took much courage and a great deal of desperation for these middle class merchants and pampered bourgeois daughters to decide to leave comfortable homes, families, and friends.

On the other hand, I want to suggest that perhaps the Yiddish speakers from Poland might have been better informed about China. Included in this group, arriving in 1941 from Kobe, was a considerable number of so-called “intelligentsia,” writers, journalists, and scholars. These would have been newspaper readers, in addition to readers of Yiddish publications about Chinese philosophy and poetry. The latter were available in inexpensive editions and such papers as *Haynt* and *Der Moment*, published in Warsaw, carried articles about current Chinese events. A history of modern China was published in Vilnius, Lithuania as late as 1940. Although we have no evidence who might have read this book, it is entirely possible that, say, a scholar like Yehoshua Rapoport would have picked it up to find out more about China.

Still, not many among the refugees would have been aware that they were fleeing to a country at war, large parts of which were under Japanese occupation. Nor would most of them, as we saw, have been able to relate compassionately and sympathetically to Chinese among whom millions endured incredible hardships. This was not only because they too were in dire straits, but also because, no matter how badly off, for the most part they considered themselves superior to the unwashed “yellow” kuli. It was, therefore, highly unusual when Yiddish writers like Yosl Mlotek or Jacob Fishman in Shanghai pointed out the plight of Chinese fellow human beings in their poetry and prose. Of course not all of Shanghai’s Chinese were poverty stricken. There was a sizeable middle class, wealthy entrepreneurs and industrialists; students, intellectuals, and writers. Similar to the Chinese, however, who were largely unable to distin-

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1 This is the book by Layzer Boimgarten, *Khine* (China), Vilna: Farlag Tamar, 1940. There is no information about the quantity printed. However, an earlier modern history of China by J. Raymon, printed in Kiev in 1927, for example, was published in an edition of 3,000 copies, a not inconsiderable quantity.
guish one Westerner from another, Westerners could not easily differentiate various kinds of Chinese unless they were the abject poor.

Nonetheless, and this is of great importance, the absence of anti-Semitism on the part of the city’s Chinese population made Shanghai truly a refuge. Contrary to their experience under the Nazi hordes, in Shanghai these Jews could be free, at least until 1943, when stateless Jews were confined to the ghetto by the Japanese occupation. Indeed, one might say, Shanghai’s Chinese received them hospitably and the memoirs tell frequently of Chinese-Jewish cooperation in business enterprises and work situations. It would be good to know more about these interactions as well as about Chinese concert goers and Chinese audiences at dramatic performances. Might young people have had opportunities for forming friendships? Unfortunately, evidence for all this is lacking. Whatever interaction there was between refugees and Chinese seems to have ended with the establishment of the ghetto in February 1943, and at the end of war there were new problems for both Chinese and refugees. Yet even then, when anti-imperialist sentiments were running high, anti-Semitism was not in evidence and it must have been a genuine relief for the refugees to encounter a society that may not have exactly loved them, but that did not despise them for what and who they were.

But should active interaction between Jews and Chinese, friendships – whether between Bagdadis or refugees and Chinese – be expected? Or is this a fallacious assumption? To answer these questions, we must first and foremost remember that Shanghai was like a mosaic, consisting of many variegated pieces that all somehow fit together, despite the pervasive inequality between colonialists and colonized. Not only was the Chinese population divided by social and native place differences, but the foreign population too was divided by national origin differences. As far as the Jews were concerned there was not one Jewish community but, in fact, five – Sephardic, Russian, German, Austrian, and Polish. Linguistic differences between groups militated against close social relationships even where Germans and Austrians were concerned. To be sure, German speakers made efforts to learn English, though more for purposes of earning a livelihood than for establishing social relations. Adapting to Shanghai, therefore, did not necessitate reaching out beyond one’s familiar group. It did not mean adapting to a Chinese environment. It meant adapting

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to the specific and unique environment of Shanghai. It was the mosaic-like
structure of Shanghai society that eased the settling-in process of newcomers,
be they Chinese or Europeans. For the refugees from Central Europe a second
advantage was that they had become estranged from their native countries
before becoming strangers in Shanghai.³

To return then to the questions posed above, except in rare instances nei-
ther Chinese nor foreigner would have found it necessary to establish friend-
ships among the “other.” Linguistic and cultural barriers were formidable and
the outbreak of the Pacific War confronted both peoples with a new situation.
New barriers were created.

The departure of the Jews from Shanghai, Tianjin, and Harbin after WWII
closed a chapter on Jewish life in modern China. I hesitate calling them Dias-
pora or exile communities – except for the German and Austrian communities.
Such terms obscure the real differences and make them appear monolithic.
These terms also do not allow us to see that for some China had become home,
whether they were born there or were families like the Baghaddis who had
lived in Shanghai for several generations. Had it not been for war and revolu-
tion, some would have elected to remain. Even the establishment of the state
of Israel would not have changed that. As it was, they departed and it took
more than thirty years for a Jewish presence to make itself felt once more
in China.

But how different are these people who arrive today! Businessmen, single
or with families, come for longer or shorter periods of time. They come from
many parts of the world: Europe, America, Israel, and they are vastly different
from the Jewish population of seventy years ago. Today’s Jews are not refugees,
nor are they associated with colonialist enterprises. They are free men and
women then as now hospitably received by their Chinese hosts; then as now
suffering no discrimination for what they are and cannot help being. Although
synagogues are no longer in evidence, except here and there as monuments of
a bygone era, religious observances take place, and in 2008 a wedding was at
last celebrated in Shanghai’s Ohel Rachel, even if the synagogue is no longer
used for religious purposes.

Finally, Chinese interest in Jews and Israel as well as in Jews who once
lived among them is widespread today. Not only scholarly works, but also a
number of recent popular publications support this interest. Several universi-

³ Mulan Ahlers, “Die Emigranten kämpfen mit Shanghai wie Jacob mit dem Engel,”
andere Themen, p. 117. Her perceptive article stresses the importance of better
understanding the issue of adaptation.
ties have Jewish Studies institutes and visiting professors teach courses on Jewish topics. Translation work is flourishing and books on Jewish topics and fiction by major Israeli novelists are being translated. A new and very different chapter in Chinese-Jewish relations has begun.