


Chinese Philosemitism and Historical Statecraft: Incorporating Jews and Israel into Contemporary Chinese Civilizationism

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Abstract

Philosemitism – the idealization of Jews and Israel – and Chinese-Jewish history function as a platform of soft power for growing China–Israel relations and as a means to bolster Chinese nationalism. Given the Chinese Communist Party’s current positioning of China as a globally dominant power as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, this article re-examines the contemporary incarnation of philosemitism in China as part of a civilizationist narrative designed to position China as globally central and superior. This not only places heavy emphasis upon Jewish racial stereotypes and erases genuine historical Jewish voices but it also ignores evidence of anti-Semitic beliefs in China.

Keywords: philosemitism; civilizationism; Israel; historical statecraft; anti-semitism; BRI; China

There has been increased engagement with Israel and Jews on both a popular and official level in China in recent years. This includes a number of wider activities such as the creation and funding of memorials to historical Jewish communities, the founding of Jewish centres and academic research institutes, advertisements for talks on this subject, museums, restorations of historical sites and numerous other “cultural outreach” activities including the first Chinese “Israeli culture week,” held in Shanghai in November 2017.¹ There has also been a rising interest in this subject area on Chinese popular media, while a significant number of books exploring Chinese-Jewish history were published throughout the 2000s and into the 2010s.

While such developments suggest a wider cultural, theological and historical interest in Judaism in an increasingly globalized China, dominant Chinese impressions of Jews and Israel remain very stereotypical and tend to embody

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1 See Efron et al. 2019, 80, for a comprehensive list.

the superficial positive qualities known as philosemitism.² This strong and recognized construction originated in 19th-century Europe and has been increasingly prominent in China since the establishment of Chinese–Israeli diplomatic relations in 1992.³ Similar to anti-Semitism, discourses on philosemitism have been traditionally interpreted through Christian doctrinal beliefs and, outside of this context, exploration of this phenomenon has been limited.⁴

This paper seeks to (re)examine philosemitism within the rapidly changing post-2010 context of a growing China–Israel economic relationship and the repositioning of China globally by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Building upon existing research that addresses the close relationship between philosemitism and Chinese nationalism coupled with the current “historical statecraft” of the CCP,⁵ this paper argues that current constructions of Jews and Israel now function to position “Chinese-ness” as globally central and superior in a Chinese form of what Rogers Brubaker terms civilizationism.⁶ It will further illustrate how this construction results in both silencing the authentic voices of historical Jewish suffering and ignoring the presence of negative anti-Semitic discourses. Methodologically, the article depends upon existing research conducted into Chinese–Jewish history in China and research addressing philosemitism in China, as well as drawing upon empirical materials such as popular reports, media representations and political statements.

The Post-2010 Chinese–Israel Economic Relationship

After 2010, exports and trade between China and Israel increased significantly and civilian and economic ties largely replaced the previously quiet military-based cooperation that had dominated relations between the two countries since their inception in 1992.⁷ A number of high-level diplomatic visits occurred during this period. In 2014, the China–Israel Joint Committee on Innovation Cooperation was set up to promote collaboration, and by 2015, 40 per cent of all venture capital going into Israel came from China.⁸ The Israeli Ministry of

2 Ehrlich 2010, 7.

3 Philosemitism in contemporary China can be traced back to 2002 when the Israel–Palestine situation calmed somewhat and access to new online information challenged the legacy of China’s anti-Zionist/pro-Palestine position. This had been dominant in China up to around the 1980s: see Zhang, Ping 2008, 103–06. For a full analysis of philosemitism in China, see, e.g., Efron et al. 2019; Ehrlich 2008a; 2010, Song, Lihong, and Ross 2016; Maor 2008; Zhang, Ping 2008, among others.

4 Philosemitic stereotypes have no doctrinal basis in China and can be attributed to the original achievements of the Baghdadi-Indian Jewish traders in major Chinese cities in the 1800s and 1900s (Ehrlich 2008a, xxvii). Sun Yat Sen also expressed his praise for Judaism, while leading historical Jewish-identified intellectuals such as Einstein, Marx and Freud are all admired and well known in Chinese thought specifically as Jews. See Song, Lihong 2016, 206. For analysis of philostemitism in Asia, see Ainslie 2019; Goodman 2000 and Schilling 2018.

5 Meyer, Maximilian 2018.

6 Brubaker 2017.

7 Kumaraswamy 2013; Evron 2017.

8 Such is the volume of Chinese investment that concerns have been raised about China’s “hold” over this country, as well as the potential damage this could cause to the longstanding US–Israel relationship. See Efron et al. 2019, 3; Evron 2019; Goldstein 2008; Ella and Lavi 2018.

Economy also worked to support Israeli exporters in China with an Israel–China Task Force, which was launched in 2015.⁹ Large Chinese companies such as Baidu, Alibaba and Ping An invested directly in Israeli science and technology. By 2016, overall Chinese investments in Israel totalled US\$16.5 billion, a dramatic increase from US\$50 million in the early 1990s.¹⁰ In 2017, the volume of bilateral trade between the two countries was around US\$13 billion, with China having invested more than US\$7 billion in technological innovation in Israel. China is now Israel’s third largest trading partner and its largest in Asia, representing Israel’s second most important export market after the United States, with exports valued at about US\$2.8 billion in the first half of 2018, an increase of 80 per cent compared to the first half of 2017.¹¹

Such developments also include closer academic ties between Israeli and Chinese universities, with overseas campuses and centres of Judaic studies opening up at major Chinese institutions and increased opportunities for student exchange. Chinese tourism to Israel also increased by over 40 per cent from 2016 to 2017, and, in 2016, Israel and China introduced ten-year entry visas, an agreement China only shares with a very small number of countries.¹² There are now 13 direct flights a week between China and Israel and three new Israeli visa centres have opened in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, with some offering an “express lane” ten-year visa within 24 hours.

In particular, Israel is significant to the massive Chinese overseas investment scheme of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road – the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Unveiled in 2013, this ambitious project involves the wide-scale construction of infrastructure across Eurasia and is designed to provide China with easy access to world markets through a highly modernized trade route, with the Middle East forming an important part of such a plan. Israeli technology has proven important to this initiative, with many Sino-Israeli memoranda of understanding focusing upon agricultural technology, an area in which Israel is particularly adept. Although Israel’s role in this initiative is somewhat limited owing to its small size and lack of connectivity throughout the region, China is heavily involved in construction projects in Israel, particularly in ports which act as a gateway to the Mediterranean Sea and the African and EU markets.¹³

9 This initiative sought to assist Israeli companies who had difficulty penetrating the Chinese market owing to their limited financial resources, small size and lack of adequate government support platforms, with a negative trade balance to Israel’s disadvantage (see Evron 2017). Likewise, many risk-averse Chinese companies were at times reluctant to operate in Israel (*ibid.*).

10 Baroud and Rubeo 2018; Abrams 2018.

11 Israeli exports to China are mostly of electronic equipment, photographic technology and medical apparatus. “Chinese enterprises in Israel create association to seek better ties, further cooperation.” *China Daily.com*, 23 April 2018, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201804/23/WS5add4db2a3105cdf6519e20.html>. Accessed 14 September 2019; Cohen 2015; Tepper 2015.

12 Ella and Lavi 2018.

13 Efron et al. 2019; Evron 2019.

Philosemitism and Chinese-Jewish History

Such increased links are mutually desired and mutually beneficial: Israel continues to see an influx of investment from China, and China can increase its presence in the Middle East, a region where it would like to play a greater role. As a means to support and cultivate this economic relationship, there is a strong focus upon and reference to Chinese-Jewish history from both Israeli and Chinese sources in the post-2010 context. This has effectively become a source of “soft power” for both nations. The Jewish presence in China is generally conceptualized through three historical stages and situations: the early Kaifeng 开封 community of Jews in medieval times, the growth of Jewish communities in major cities such as Harbin at the end of the second opium war and after the 1917 Bolshevik revolution, and finally the Shanghai refugee community formed during the Second World War. Since the beginning of modern Sino-Israeli relations in the 1990s, this Chinese-Jewish history and heritage has played an important and very visible part in cultivating the Sino-Israeli economic and political relationship.¹⁴

This function continues today, with these historical communities acting as a “platform” upon which to build stronger political and economic ties between contemporary China and international Jewish communities, namely Israel.¹⁵ Conducted at a high government level and with increasing frequency, the emphasis placed on these historical links in order to strengthen bilateral relations reflects the CCP’s general focus on reconstructing the past. Since the late 2000s, such “historical statecraft” has become a means to both legitimate CCP rule and bolster nationalist discourses. Online Chinese news articles highlighting and commending the deepening ties between Israel and China regularly reference Jewish-Chinese history to support such contemporary developments.¹⁶ The Chinese ambassador to Israel, Zhan Yongxin 詹永新, frequently refers to a “1,000-year” Chinese-Jewish historical connection in articles and speeches.¹⁷ Likewise, research projects and publications addressing Chinese-Jewish history are funded and promoted as a means to support the contemporary Sino-Israeli relationship. Published in 2017, the Chinese language monographs, *The Study of Jews in North-east China (Zhongguo dongbei youtairen yanjiu 中国东北犹太人研究)*¹⁸ and *Research on Jewish Refugees in China (1933–1945): History, Theory and Model (Lai hua youtai nanmin yanjiu (1933–1945): shi shu, lilun yu moshi 来华犹太难民研究 (1933–1945): 史述、理论与模式)*¹⁹ were funded by a grant from the prestigious National Social Science Fund of China, a government

14 Maor 2008, 240; Song, Lihong 2016; Shai 2019.

15 Ehrlich 2010, 87

16 “Yisielie zhuanjia: Yisielie qidai yi Zhong guanxi geng shang yi ceng lou” (Israeli experts: Israel looks forward to building up China relations). *People.cn*, 20 March 2017, <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2017/0320/c1002-29155372.html>. Accessed 24 August 2019.

17 Zhan 2018.

18 Zhang, Tiejiang 2017.

19 Pan 2017.

fund which supports projects of national significance. An article on *Chinaneast.gov.cn* (a government news and politics website for China's north-east provinces) recommends the use of the first book as a means to enhance China's current international relations with "Jewish people" and the "practical significance" of this.²⁰ Similarly, the Chinese-language Amazon description of this book also stresses its usefulness within diplomacy.²¹

Similar to China, Israeli authorities also engage significantly with historical statecraft. Israel and China's comparable history of "precarious sovereignty" results in a similar emphasis on cultivating discourses of nationalism and cultural uniqueness.²² Israeli and Chinese politicians can therefore recognize and balance their mutual interests, accounting for the speedy development of this very profitable relationship in the current era. An appeal to this discourse can also sidestep tricky political issues. For example, in his 2017 visit to China, Israeli president Benjamin Netanyahu immediately expressed gratitude to the Chinese for the "helping hand" they gave to Jewish refugees during the Second World War after Chinese premier Li Keqiang 李克强 stressed a desire for a two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinian Territories.²³

Along with this historical construction, the Israeli and Chinese states and their popular and political actors also draw upon the ongoing strong Chinese philosemitic construction of Jewish achievements and financial prowess. Chinese admiration for Jews goes back much further than the establishment of Israeli–Chinese relations to the arrival of Jewish traders and investors in China in the 19th century who were successful in wealthy business ventures. Sun Yat Sen 孙中山 admired and expressed support for the Zionist movement, while some prominent Shanghai Jews later enjoyed close links with Communist authorities.²⁴ The overall philosemitic construction of Jews and Israel in China is similar to the idealization of Jews in the British imperial world, which admired and highlighted positive notions of Jewish "political governance" and "national identity."²⁵ Such notions are transferred to a collective quality admired in Jews and the state of Israel, including "moral refinement, advanced civilization, and a will to survive."²⁶ In China, this is an embodied image of heightened intelligence, wealth and a strong focus upon the family;²⁷ Israel is seen as "brave and innovative."²⁸

20 "Zhongguo shoubu dongbei youtairen lishi yanjiu zhuanzhu zhengshi chuban" (China's first north-eastern Jewish history research monograph officially published). *Chinaneast.gov.cn*, 20 November 2017, http://www.chinaneast.gov.cn/2017-11/20/c_136765978.htm. Accessed 20 June 2019.

21 "Zhongguo dongbei youtairen yanjiu" (The study of Jews in north-east China). *Amazon.cn*, <https://www.amazon.cn/dp/B07BN6ZHB4>. Accessed 24 August 2019.

22 Feinstein and Bonikowski 2019.

23 "Li Keqiang tong Yisielie zongli Neitanياهو ju xing huitan" (Li Keqiang talks with Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu). *81.cn*, 21 March 2017, http://www.81.cn/gnxw/2017-03/21/content_7539960.htm. Accessed 20 September 2019. For Li to voice such an expression was an unusual step, as China generally separates the Sino-Israel economic relationship from these political issues. See Evron 2019.

24 Ehrlich 2010; Meyer, Maisie 1999; Medzini 2013; Shai 2019.

25 Karp and Sutcliffe 2011, 7.

26 *Ibid.*, 2.

27 Ehrlich 2010, 21.

28 Ehrlich 2008b, 8.

The idealizing of Jews is part of a wider process of constructing social identity and should be related to contextual developments in a society.²⁹ In contemporary China, these stereotypes provide an important model of imagined modernization during a period of rapid economic and technical advancement.³⁰ Jews and Israel became a model of Western-associated economic and social success (and one in contrast to the Euro-American positioning of Jews as an “other”).³¹ This association continues in the post-2010 context. For instance, an article in the Party mouthpiece, *People’s Daily* (*Renmin ribao* 人民日报), celebrates the “wisdom” and “creativity” of “every” Israeli while also constructing the country as outside of the “Oriental” nature of China.³²

In the post-2010 context, philosemitism continues to be an established part of Chinese discourse. There is significant interest in the Talmud, which, as is the case in South Korea, appears to be seen largely as a source of business advice for material prosperity. Chinese translations are available through online shopping sites such as *Taobao* 淘宝网, sitting alongside recommendations for self-help business books and get-rich manuals.³³ Likewise, Jewish and Chinese scholars highlight affinities between Confucian-influenced societies and Judaism, stressing the mutual emphasis on education, family unity and respect for elders. Analysis posits that these traditions offer similar models of “cultural identity” and the potential for dialogue, particularly when grappling with issues of reform and modernization in a rapidly changing environment.³⁴

Philosemitism appears most evident and influential in online reports, popular blogs and Wechat articles. For instance, an article on *Sciencenet* (*Kexue wang* 科学网), a major website for the Chinese global scientific community which is connected to national centres of academia, describes the “shrewdness, hard work and power of the Jews” (*men yi youtairen de jingming, qinlao he qiangda de ningji li* 们以犹太人的精明、勤劳和强大的凝集力).³⁵ This is followed with a somewhat disturbing social Darwinist reference to Israel’s advantage, which according to the article is owing to the “survival of the fittest” (*shi zhe shengcun* 适者生存).³⁶ Similarly, a *China Daily* article also makes reference to “Jewish wisdom,”³⁷ and a blog on *Sina Weibo* analysing Jewish parenting styles begins with

29 Judaken 2008.

30 Song, Lihong 2016, 207.

31 Ibid., 209.

32 “Jiemi Yiselie di rengong zhineng yu chuangxin meili” (Secret intelligence and innovation charm of Israel). *People.cn*, 13 June 2018, <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0613/c1002-30055698.html>. Accessed 25 October 2018.

33 Fish 2010; Friedman 2012; Schilling 2018.

34 Patt-Shamir and Rapoport 2008; Patt-Shamir 2008; Fu 2008.

35 “Shanghai: zhanluan zhong youtairen di nuo ya fangzhou” (Shanghai: a Noah’s Ark for Jews during the war). *Sciencenet*, 16 November 2018, <http://news.sciencenet.cn/sbhtmlnews/2018/11/340973.shtm?id=340973>. Accessed 20 October 2018.

36 Ibid.

37 “Nanwang Shanghai bihu zhi en xiri youtai nanmin xiang dui Shanghai shuo sheng “xiexie” (China’s unforgettable asylum of Shanghai, Jewish refugees wanted to say “thank you” to Shanghai). *China Daily*, 6 November 2018, http://world.chinadaily.com.cn/wykgz/2018-11/06/content_37209568.htm. Accessed 25 October 2018.

a statement describing Jewish people as smarter and more adept at business, then lists a number of traits that are supposedly unique to Jewish families, including independence, trust and having respect for elders.³⁸ Reflecting racial politics that are still prevalent in China, a *Baidu* 百度 article, entitled “Why are Jews so smart?” (*Youtairen wei shenme tebie congming?* 犹太人为什么特别聪明?), attempts to explain the development of high IQs among Jewish people, claiming that Jewish intellectualism is an inherited biological trait.³⁹

Such stereotypical constructions are also evident in Chinese academia. In 2008, a sociology professor, Zhou Xiaozheng 周孝正, from the renowned Renmin University of China, published the pro-Israel blog essay, “Israel is a good country” (*Yisielie shi ge hao guojia* 以色列是个好国家), which quickly went viral.⁴⁰ The essay commends the military restraint of Israel and the financial compensation paid to families of Chinese workers killed in a terrorist attack in Israel, yet it also affirms philosemitic stereotypes about Jewish “wisdom” and wealth. Likewise, a *China Studies* article by Song Jian 宋健, an academic at the Chinese Academies of Science and Engineering in Beijing, also claims that “the Jewish people have developed a tough, confident and incisive character and a culture that highlights creative thinking, practicality and pursuit of knowledge and truth.”⁴¹

Chinese Civilizationism

Yet, in the complex changing context of current day China, the positive qualities attributed to Jews and Israel become emblematic of more than merely Western modernity: post-2010 constructions serve to support China as a global economic and moral centre in keeping with the current agenda of the CCP. This narrative of cultural uniqueness and global superiority depends strongly upon evidence from history, which also plays a significant role in China’s soft power internationally, with elaborate displays of Chinese cultural imagery constructing China as an inevitable global superpower.⁴² Notions of culture and tradition play a crucial role in such (re)constructions, which seek to present a Sino-centric (rather than Western-centric) version of history that propagates Chinese uniqueness and attempts to place China at the centre of this newly crafted version of history.

The contemporary Chinese construction of Jews and their history in China feeds into a Chinese version of “civilizationism,” a notion attached to the current

38 “Youtairen di jiajiao zhi zuo dao liang ge zi, haizi shuang shang jiu bao biao” (Jewish parenting only follows two words, their children can be incredibly smart). *Sina Weibo*, 3 December 2018, <http://edu.sina.com.cn/ischool/2018-12-03/doc-ihprkvnvs8084124.shtml>. Accessed 7 December 2018.

39 “Faxian: youtairen weishenme tebie congming?” (Discovery: why are Jews so smart?). *Baidu*, 3 December 2018, <https://yuedu.baidu.com/hybrid/column/71363b4ebfd5b9f3f90f76c66137ee06eff94e2b>. Accessed 7 December 2018.

40 “Zhou Xiaozheng: Yisielie juedui shi ge hao guojia” (Zhou Xiaozheng: Israel is definitely a good country). *China Report Weekly*, 7 January 2009, <https://www.china-week.com/html/4629.htm>. Accessed 9 March 2020. Re-postings of this article were still to be found on the Chinese-language internet at the time of writing.

41 Song, Jian 2014, 123.

42 Meyer, Maximilian 2018.

resurgence of far-right European political organizations.⁴³ This extends ideas of national-popularism to argue that in Europe (particularly northern and western Europe), the distinction drawn between the self and the other transcends the national and is played out in much broader pan-European civilizational terms. The focus is upon a threat to European civilization (represented largely by Islam), which becomes a form of “civilizational identity.” This re-characterization of the nation invokes far less emphasis upon national differences and more upon civilizational differences, which tend to be embedded within notions of tradition.

Brubaker’s concept of civilizationism intersects with the newly globalized construction of Chinese nationalism, and in particular the creation of a “Sino-centric world order.”⁴⁴ Such aspirations require a narrative beyond purely nationalist discourses in which China can be placed at the centre of human destiny. The BRI, in particular, involves creating a geopolitical arena which perceives “Eurasia” as a “holistic economic and moral unit,” so de-emphasizing national boundaries (and excluding large parts of the mostly Western world) in favour of a Sino-centric identity that stretches across Eurasia and originates in China.⁴⁵ Within this geopolitical arena, “Chinese-ness” becomes less a signal of national identity and more a form of civilizational identity founded upon the benefits and assistance that the morally and economically superior China can bring to the rest of the world.

As part of their construction of civilizationism, many recent European populist far-right parties (which were traditionally anti-Semitic) have been displaying a “philosemitic turn,” incorporating Jews and Israel into their own narrative. In so doing, these parties reinforce their own “superiority” by attaching themselves to positive philosemitic attributes.⁴⁶ These organizations place Israel and Jews in opposition to the constructed threat of Islam, redefining Jews as European and positioning Jewish people and Israel as embodying a sophisticated form of modernity; they then place themselves as protectors of this.⁴⁷ In the Chinese context, China and its historical Jewish connection functions as another part of the Party’s constructed reworking of history to produce a non-Western civilizationist Chinese narrative that is globally, and rightfully, dominant. This constructs the Chinese people and the Chinese state as the collective global historical saviour and continual protector of Jews and their superior philosemitic attributes.

The Shanghai Jews and their Chinese “Haven”

This construction largely focuses upon notions of Chinese benevolence towards Jewish refugees in Shanghai during the Second World War.⁴⁸ This subject matter

43 Brubaker 2017.

44 Meyer, Maximilian 2018, 1220.

45 *Ibid.*, 1228.

46 Brubaker 2017.

47 *Ibid.*

48 From the early 1930s until around 1941, Shanghai received a huge influx of Jewish refugees, with

also allows the superiority of Chinese-ness to become a global and historical phenomenon. The Shanghai Jews largely began to be of interest in the early 2000s (both within and outside of China) when Jewish studies in China shifted from its previous focus on the early Kaifeng settlement.⁴⁹ Mirroring the far-right parties of Europe (although through engaging with a historical rather than contemporary situation), the Chinese narrative constructs the nation, people and government as personally responsible for the survival of this group. This construction began prior to the current Sino-Israeli relationship and even before the 21st century, although it is increasingly prominent today on both an official and popular level.⁵⁰ Chinese and Israeli politicians and media now use excessive maternal language and imagery in descriptions of the Shanghai Jews, implying selflessness, sacrifice and a collective nature to Chinese actions in the Second World War while simultaneously deploying narrative as soft power for contemporary Sino-Israeli relations. The Israeli consul general in Shanghai has described how Chinese people “opened their arms” (*zhangkaishuang bi* 张开双臂) to Jewish refugees.⁵¹ Also, at a 2019 ceremony to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Israeli Consulate in Shanghai, the consul referred to the city as a benevolent historical “shelter.”⁵² Such imagery is also evoked with biblical language, with the above mentioned *Sciencenet* article describing Shanghai as a “Noah’s Ark for Jews” during the Second World War (*zhanluan zhong youtairen de nuoya fangzhou* 战乱中犹太人的诺亚方舟).⁵³ This sentiment was also expressed by the Chinese ambassador to Israel, who called China and Shanghai an “Oriental Noah’s Ark” and described Chinese people as receiving Jewish refugees with an “open gate.”⁵⁴

Popular entertainment also advances this narrative. *Shimmer: A Story of the Jews in Shanghai* was the first Chinese musical to have an open-ended run on Broadway and was promoted widely in China, Israel and the US.⁵⁵ The play

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reliable estimates going up to around 20,000 (Eber 2018). Many of these immigrants arrived in a very short space of time during the latter years, until the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, when movement became much more difficult. Many did not stay after the end of the war and the establishment of the PRC, moving on to countries such as Israel and Australia after a decade or so.

- 49 Ehrlich 2008a, xxviii; Song, Lihong 2016, 224. The Shanghai community has already played a significant part in China–Israel relations. In the early 2000s, the “gratitude” Israel expressed for the sheltering of Jewish refugees in Shanghai during the Second World War was a significant factor in countering previous negative constructions of China in Israel, feeding directly into nationalist trends among Chinese youth (Zhang, Ping 2008, 111–12).
- 50 Song, Jian 2014, 124.
- 51 “Yisielie shipin duanpin ganxie Zhongguo erzhan qi jian jiena youtairen ‘zhe fen youyi zhi de yongyuan mingji’” (Israeli video clips thank China for accepting Jews during the Second World War: “This friendship is worth remembering forever”). *People.cn*, 31 August 2015, <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2015/0831/c1002-27532521.html>. Accessed 28 May 2019.
- 52 “Israeli consulate in Shanghai celebrates 25th birthday.” *ChinaDaily*, 18 June 2019, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201906/18/WS5d085681a3103dbf14328de9.html>. Accessed 28 May 2019.
- 53 *Sciencenet*, 16 November 2018.
- 54 Zhan 2015.
- 55 The bilingual production originally premiered in 2015 as part of the 17th Shanghai International Arts Festival and mainly functioned as a vehicle to introduce Chinese theatre and performance to Broadway.

depicts Shanghai as a “sanctuary,” “saviour” and “haven,” which participated in a “humanitarian rescue,”⁵⁶ a description echoed in Chinese language blogs on *Baidu*.⁵⁷ In 2015, the short video, “Thank you, Shanghai” was commissioned and issued by Israel’s consulate general in Shanghai and is available on numerous online platforms.⁵⁸ The video includes Israelis from many parts of contemporary society, including the survivors and descendants of the Shanghai Jewish community, holding up “thank you” signs in Mandarin, Hebrew and English. The *Jerusalem Post* describes the video as “a public service video to thank China for rescuing thousands of Jews during World War II,” again depicting this humanitarian act as a deliberate and collective action of the Chinese state.⁵⁹ Likewise, in articles about the survivors of this community, news websites *China Daily* and *People’s Daily* report sentiments of immense gratitude and frame this in nationalistic terms, which are evident in the titles of the articles: “Former Jewish refugees recalling the selflessness of the Chinese people” (*Xiri youtai nanmin zhuyi Zhongguo renmin wusi shen chu yuanshou* 昔日犹太难民追忆中国人民无私伸出援手)⁶⁰ and “Jewish refugees wanted to say ‘thank you’ to Shanghai” (*Xiri youtai nanmin xiang dui Shanghai shuo sheng “xiexie”* 昔日犹太难民想对上海说声“谢谢”).⁶¹ Such expressions are also voiced by extremely prominent and high-level politicians: the “Thank you, Shanghai” video even ends with Netanyahu saying, “we are eternally grateful and we will never forget.”⁶²

This narrative begins to support a broader civilizationist identity when it draws opposition between the self and the other upon the global scene, a phenomenon that is not evident in earlier constructions of the Shanghai Jews. Now, rather than remaining within purely national terms, contemporary depictions and references heavily emphasize the supposed exclusivity of Chinese benevolence and sacrifice internationally, evident in the aforementioned *Sciencenet* article: “Everyone

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The musical was also intimately connected with the solidifying of Sino-Israeli links: the show went to Israel as part of the 25th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Israel and was sponsored by Israeli religious leaders as well as Chinese entertainment companies.

56 Merwin 2016.

57 “Zhongguo cidì zeng shì youtairen jù qū, zhū shū wàn youtairen, shuō youtai yǔ, chāng youtai gē” (China used to be a Jewish settlement, with tens of thousands of Jews, speaking Jewish and singing Jewish songs). *Baidu*, 5 February 2018, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1591522213129372117&wfr=spider&for=pc>. Accessed 5 March 2019.

58 “Thank you, Shanghai.” *Youtube*, 30 August 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qnhNrSLBBTY>. Accessed 29 August 2019.

59 “Watch: after Israel thanks China for saving Jews, China says ‘you’re welcome’.” *The Jerusalem Post*, 11 September 2015, <https://www.jpost.com/Not-Just-News/WATCH-After-Israel-thanks-China-for-saving-Jews-China-says-Your-welcome-415963>. Accessed 3 June 2019.

60 “Xiri youtai nanmin zhuyi Zhongguo renmin wusi shen chu yuanshou” (Former Jewish refugees recalling the selflessness of the Chinese people). *People.cn*, 18 November 2015, <http://world.people.com.cn/n/2015/1118/c157278-27830257.html>. Accessed 25 March 2019.

61 *China Daily*, 6 November 2018.

62 *Youtube*, 30 August 2015.

knows that in countless countries and cities around the world, only China, only Shanghai, with open arms, welcomes Jews to her embrace” (*suoyou ren dou zhi-dao, zai quan shijie shu bu qing de guojia he chengshi zhong, zhiyou Zhongguo, zhiyou Shanghai zhangkaishuang bi, huanying youtairen lai dao ta de huaibao* 所有人都知道，在全世界数不清的国家和城市中，只有中国，只有上海张开双臂，欢迎犹太人来到她的怀抱).⁶³ In 2017, Beijing Satellite TV and Jiangsu Satellite TV broadcast *The Last Visa* (*Zuihou yi zhang qianzheng* 最后一张签证), a programme telling the story of Ho Feng Shan 何凤山, a famous Chinese diplomat who saved thousands of Jews during the Second World War and who has been honoured by Israel for his actions.⁶⁴ The writer of *The Last Visa*, Gao Mantang 高满堂, clearly emphasizes the importance of such globality in constructing this story when he states that his motive in making the programme was to “let you know the greatness of the Chinese people, and let Chinese culture really go international” (*ye yao rang Zhongguo wenhua zhen-zheng zouxiang guoji* 也要让中国文化真正走向国际).⁶⁵

Chinese benevolence, protectionism and generosity towards Jews during the Second World War is also juxtaposed with Japanese oppression and cruelty at that time, forming a barbaric other to the civilizational self. An article from the *People's Daily* depicts Japanese cruelty as existing simultaneously within the same space and time as Chinese kindness towards Jews, so enhancing and strengthening the notion of Chinese benevolence by implying this was exercised while Chinese people were also suffering global persecution themselves.⁶⁶ The Chinese ambassador to Israel, Zhan Yongxin, has also made reference to the “untold sufferings”⁶⁷ experienced by Chinese and Jewish people and has talked about “our intersecting fates of the past.”⁶⁸ Similar claims were made by the Chinese ambassador to the US at an event to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Sino-Israeli relations: “the Chinese people helped the Jews when facing great difficulties and grave danger themselves.”⁶⁹ Chinese scholarship on the matter is also imbued with the same narrative. Song Jian states that “Chinese people have always sensed sympathy and commiseration for the misery Jewish people

63 *Sciencenet*, 16 November 2018.

64 As consul-general in Vienna during the annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany, Ho issued travel visas for Shanghai to over 2,000 Austrian Jews and their families, enabling them to leave Austria and survive the Holocaust. In 2000, Ho was posthumously honoured by Israel's Yad Vashem as a “Righteous among the nations” and is regularly cited in the post-2010 narrative of Chinese benevolence.

65 “‘Zuihou yi zhang qianzheng’: yiyue yiri kaibo Gao Mantang huanyuan erzhan chenfeng lishi” (*The Last Visa* opens on 1 January and Gao Mantang restores the dust-covered history of the Second World War). *People.cn*, 20 December 2016, <http://culture.people.com.cn/n1/2016/1220/c22219-28961904.html>. Accessed 20 October 2018.

66 *People.cn*, 18 November 2015

67 Zhan 2018.

68 Zhan 2015.

69 “Remarks by Ambassador Cui Tiankai at the screening of the documentary ‘Survival in Shanghai’ and the reception in celebration of the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the diplomatic relations between China and Israel.” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 1 November 2017, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbd_665378/t1429632.shtml. Accessed 18 June 2019.

have suffered.”⁷⁰ Likewise, in the musical *Shimmer*, the Jewish and Chinese characters are depicted as battling together against “the oppression of the Japanese.” In its description of *The Last Visa*, the *People’s Daily* online news platform claims that “Chinese and foreign people jointly fought against fascist oppression” (*Zhong wai geguo renmin xieshou fankang faxisi yapo de fengyun sui yue* 中外各国人民携手反抗法西斯压迫的风云岁月).⁷¹ Likewise, Chinese news reports attribute any hardship suffered by Jewish refugees in China solely to Japanese aggression at that time.⁷²

Along with Japanese cruelty, the civilizationist narrative is also reinforced by a supposed apathy and idleness from Europe, which functions as another other. This construction also supports the CCP’s Sino-centric version of history by presenting China as central to solving the problems of the Second World War. At an exhibition about Jewish communities in modern China, which was held to celebrate 25 years of Sino-Israeli relations, the chargé d’affaires of the Chinese embassy in Israel employed such a construction, deliberately contrasting Chinese and European actions.⁷³ The Israeli ambassador to China has also made similar claims: “When many countries in the world stood idly by, the Chinese people opened their hearts to Jewish refugees” (*Dang shijie shang henduo guojia xiushou pangguan shi, Zhongguo renmin xiang youtai nanmin changkai xinfei* 当世界上很多国家袖手旁观时, 中国人民向犹太难民敞开心扉).⁷⁴ This construction is also evident in the representations of and references to Ho Feng Shan. Descriptions suggest that Ho’s bravery in saving Jewish people during the war is because he behaved differently to the rest of anti-Semitic Europe at the time, actions that are again attributed to his Chinese-ness.⁷⁵

Erasing the Jewish “Voice” and Chinese Anti-Semitism

The CCP’s civilizationist project is particularly problematic in the way that it selectively crafts and substantially simplifies the complex historical position of Chinese Jews. The strong focus of popular and academic sources on the Shanghai Jewish diaspora of the Second World War is indicative of how well this community’s narrative can function as soft power in the civilizationist discourse. Such selective interest also represents a shifting away from the older Kaifeng Jewish community and heritage. This comes at a time when the descendants of the Kaifeng community are now subject to growing authoritarian suspicion and suppression owing to the potential undermining of Chinese nationalism

70 Song, Jian 2014, 123.

71 *People.cn*, 20 December 2016.

72 *Sciencenet*, 16 November 2018; *China Daily*, 6 November 2018.

73 Bar-Ilan University 2015.

74 “Yisielie zhu hua dashi zhuanfang: cong Yisielie huilai di mei ge Zhongguoren dou shi dashi” (Interview with Israeli ambassador to China: every Chinese returning from Israel is an ambassador). *Weibo*, 26 November 2018, <https://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404310666503660052>. Accessed 22 June 2019.

75 Zhan 2015.

by this alternative form of (internal Jewish, as opposed to diasporic Jewish) Chinese identity.⁷⁶

The dominant construction of the Shanghai Jewish community also removes any genuine “voice” represented in historical analysis and testimony.⁷⁷ This perspective quickly becomes subaltern as history is manipulated by political actors and key information overlooked. For instance, while Shanghai did indeed provide a haven for Jewish refugees during the Second World War, this was not an act of benevolence on behalf of the Chinese state. The Shanghai Municipal Council did not actually provide any assistance to arriving refugees and the existence of Shanghai as a haven was not deliberate or planned but in fact owing to the lack of any controlling power at the time. Rather than the Chinese state, it was largely left to the struggling and very tiny existing Jewish community and philanthropic individuals within it to resettle a huge influx of refugees in a very small space of time. What has become known as the Jewish “ghetto” in Shanghai in fact endured significant levels of poverty as well as inevitable tensions with the local Chinese population.⁷⁸ Likewise, while the Shanghai Jewish community certainly suffered harsh treatment at the hands of the occupying Japanese forces,⁷⁹ the Japanese regime was at times sympathetic to the Jews’ plight and its attitude regarding the anti-Semitism of the European Nazi regime was deeply complex.⁸⁰

A situation that was used by survivors to highlight human suffering as a result of racism and fascism is therefore turned into a means to cultivate both economic cooperation and discourses of global superiority. Such a change can be seen in the aforementioned “Thank you Shanghai” video clip. While the video was purportedly made to mark 70 years since the end of the Second World War and the defeat of fascism, the video itself makes no mention of this fact. The concluding text from the consulate instead states that the video is in fact celebrating “20 years of friendship and cooperation,” and makes no mention of the defeat of authoritarianism.⁸¹

76 Buckley 2016; Bernstein 2017.

77 Such volumes include the 1992 book *Strangers Always: A Jewish Family in Wartime Shanghai*, the 1993 publication *Escape to Shanghai: A Jewish Community in China*, which includes interviews with survivors of this community, and the autobiographical account *Shanghai Refugee: A Memoir of the World War II Jewish Ghetto*. Moving into the 2000s, *Ten Green Bottles: The True Story of One Family’s Journey from War-torn Austria to the Ghettos of Shanghai* was published in 2004, while *Shanghai Remembered ...: Stories of Jews Who Escaped to Shanghai from Nazi Europe* is a collection of accounts from this community published in 2005. Published in 2008, Irene Eber’s *Voices from Shanghai: Jewish Exiles in Wartime China* brought together accounts and testimony from Jewish refugees during the Second World War. Sigmund Tobia then published the personal story, *Strange Haven: A Jewish Childhood in Wartime Shanghai* in 2008. *Exodus to Shanghai: Stories of Escape from the Third Reich* was published in 2012 and the book, *Shanghai Escape*, which was aimed at younger readers, was published in 2013, with *Shanghai’s Baghdadi Jews: A Collection of Biographical Reflections* published in 2016.

78 See Eber 2008; 2012.

79 Ehrlich 2008a.

80 See Gao 2013 for a thorough analysis of this situation.

81 Youtube, 30 August 2015.

Likewise, the construction of the narrative surrounding the heroic role of Ho Feng Shan is also very selective. Ho's actions were problematic in their relationship to the Chinese state: by issuing visas he disobeyed senior orders and, after 1949, Ho rejected Communist China and moved to Taiwan. Chinese representations therefore omit wider details about Ho's complex life and actions, co-opting instead a story that depended upon an individual's deliberate disobedience of authority into a narrative that reinforces conformity to the state.

The construction of Chinese benevolence as a globally superior and exclusively Chinese quality also enables the Chinese state to avoid and deflect any potential critique of its own human rights situation. The emphasis on Chinese hospitality and benevolence towards a minority that has historically been the recipient of extreme persecution in Europe can counter Western criticism of China's own human rights record.⁸² This is evident in contemporary Chinese scholarship on the subject. The abstract to Song Jian's *Chinese Studies* article concludes with the sentence: "China is one of a few countries that have always been treating Diasporas graciously as compatriots for a millennium."⁸³ This far-reaching claim would be difficult to support.

Finally, philosemitic beliefs in China tend to be celebrated as a positive phenomenon, alongside claims of a complete absence of Chinese anti-Semitism from both politicians and academics.⁸⁴ China is regularly referred to as a "land without anti-Semitism," with the long historical presence of Jews in China, the "rescuing" of the Shanghai Jews and the lack of any doctrinal basis for this form of racism all cited as factors. In keeping with the promotion of soft power to benefit Sino-Israeli relations, Chinese scholars claim that "Jews have never suffered from anti-Semitism in China,"⁸⁵ and Jewish scholars contend that "the Chinese are completely innocent of anti-Semitism."⁸⁶

However, there is a history of anti-Semitism in China as well as evidence of this in post-2010 China. While not comparable to nearby Japan and South Korea,⁸⁷ anti-Semitic stereotypes were present in China in the 19th and early 20th centuries, many translated from Western and Japanese sources, while the early 2000s introduced anti-Semitic discourses into Chinese cyberspace.⁸⁸ The Anti-Defamation League, which attempts to measure and record anti-Semitic attitudes globally, estimates that 20 per cent of the Chinese adult population harbour anti-Semitic views.⁸⁹

The heavy emphasis upon philosemitism as part of contemporary Sino-Israeli relations and soft power also raises other potential concerns. Both anti-Semitism

82 Ehrlich 2010, 23.

83 Song, Jian 2014.

84 See Maor 2008; Ehrlich 2010.

85 Bar-Ilan University 2015.

86 Patt-Shamir and Rapoport 2008, 49.

87 See Medzini 2013 for a thorough analysis of the reasons behind differing Chinese and Japanese attitudes.

88 Zhang, Ping 2008; Ehrlich 2010.

89 "ADL global 100: country list Asia," <http://global100.adl.org/#map/asia>. Accessed 27 August 2019.

and philosemitism deploy constructions that rely upon racial stereotyping to generalize and distort this group of people, a practice known as “allosemitism.”⁹⁰ Jewish scholars and journalists are concerned about the reduction of Jewish people to a mere representation, registering discomfort with this “othered” position.⁹¹ In the Chinese context of strong ethno-nationalism, the harsh treatment of ethnic minorities and negative attitudes towards outsiders, there is the potential danger for philosemitic constructions to quickly become negative.⁹² Certainly, the erasing of any genuine Jewish historical and contemporary voices means that these racial stereotypes are particularly fluid and can quickly transform from xenophilia into xenophobia (and vice versa).⁹³

When the philosemitic construction of Jews does not contribute towards the civilizationist narrative of Chinese global superiority and centrality, admired qualities of intelligence and global domination can become evidence of cunning, sneakiness and dishonesty. Notions of Jewish financial prowess invert to depict Jewish people as dangerously influential owing to their conspiratorial control of global finances. The year 2007 saw the publication of Song Hongbing’s highly successful *Currency Wars* (*Huobi zhanzheng* 货币战争), which singles out Jews when advancing theories of conspiratorial global banking controls against China.⁹⁴ Such ideas are now very present in Chinese cyberspace: a *Baidu* article claims that US money is “in the pocket of Jews” (*zai youtairen de koudai li* 在犹太人的口袋里),⁹⁵ while another article on *Sohu.com* contends that the wealth of Russia, Britain, France and Germany is all in the hands of Jews.⁹⁶ An article on *Eastday.com* purports to explain how Jews became rich, giving business strategies that are supposedly unique to the global “control” enjoyed by this ethnic group. It then goes on to warn that “when five Jews come together, they can control the gold market of the whole human race” (*wu ge youtairen cou zai yiqi, bian neng kongzhi zhengge renlei di huangjin shichang* 五个犹太人凑在一起, 便能控制整个人类的黄金市场).⁹⁷ Perhaps more worryingly, there are also articles giving support to Holocaust denial and statements of Jewish culpability for the holocaust: two *Sohu.com* articles attribute the philosemitic quality of heightened Jewish

90 Karp and Sutcliffe 2011; Bauman 1998; Judaken 2008; Schilling 2018.

91 Colborne 2017.

92 Ehrlich 2010, 21–22, 25.

93 Ehrlich 2010, 15; Zhang, Ping 2008, 111; Altfelix 2000.

94 Song, Hongbing 2007.

95 “Weishenme youtairen zhenme fuyou, zhe pian wen zhang kan liao, jiang rang ni shou yi yi sheng!” (Why are Jews so rich, read this article, it will benefit you for a lifetime!). *Baidu*, 14 May 2018, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1600404337076523106&wfr=spider&for=pc>. Accessed 17 August 2019.

96 “Jiemi: youtairen weishenme hui chengwei quanqiu zui fuyou de minzu” (Secret: why did Jews become the richest nation in the world?). *Sohu.com*, 9 August 2017, http://www.sohu.com/a/190596119_801260. Accessed 17 August 2019.

97 “Yi ge gushi gaosu ni youtairen ruhe chengwei youqianren” (The story of how the Jews became rich people). *Eastday.com*, 10 April 2016, <http://mini.eastday.com/mobile/161004202818339.html#>. Accessed 17 August 2019.

intelligence as the means by which Jewish “manipulation” of the history of the Second World War and the Holocaust is achieved.⁹⁸

Conclusion

As part of the strengthening Sino-Israeli relations in recent years, China is engaging in increased cultural ties with Jews, Judaism and Israel. While such developments can be attributed to the growth of Sino-Israeli economic relations and the nationalistic discourses that philosemitism is known to support, such constructions feed into a Chinese version of civilizationism on the global scene. China now becomes both globally central and superior through positioning the nation and its people as the sole historical protectors and nurturers of the superior philosemitic qualities attributed to Jews. This recent cultural engagement is therefore symptomatic not of specific qualities unique to Judaism or the historical circumstances of Chinese-Jews and China’s relationship with Jews, but rather the complicated reconstruction of Chinese-ness in the formation of a new globalized yet Sino-centric world.

Such an agenda has wider consequences for understanding philosemitism in contemporary China, a discourse that is generally celebrated for understandable reasons yet also greeted with some suspicion by Jews themselves. The erasing of genuine historical voices, the side-stepping of current human rights issues and the growth of xenophobic forms of nationalism that philosemitism supports are concerning for their repercussions. The continuing treatment of Jewish people and Israel as a stereotype and “representation” can also result in the xenophobia which Chinese and Israeli politicians are so eager to overlook in their encouragement of Sino-Israeli relations. Such beliefs could be countered by more rigorous and in-depth theological and historical engagement with Judaism and Chinese-Jewish communities, as represented in the many recent emerging academic volumes cited throughout this paper. On a popular and political level, however, the short-term economic and ideological benefits supported by the philosemitic narrative make such a move seem unlikely.

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Conflicts of interest

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98 “600 wan youtairen bei tusha, zhenxiang rang ren chu hu yiliao” (6 million Jews were slaughtered, the truth is surprising). *Sohu.com*, http://www.sohu.com/a/121478090_545223. Accessed 10 July 2019. “Erzhan shi Xitelei weishenme yao fengkuang tusha youtairen?” (Why did Hitler kill the Jews in madness during the Second World War?). *Sohu.com*, 8 January 2017, http://www.sohu.com/a/121478090_545223 http://www.sohu.com/a/123718088_395602. Accessed 2 June 2019.

Biographical note

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摘要: 热爱亲犹太人主义 — 理想化的犹太人和以色列人 — 既利用中国 — 犹太历史作为中国软实力的一个平台来发展中国/以色列的关系, 又作为一种加强中国民族主义的手段。这篇文章以中国共产党正通过一带一路为中国取得国际大国的位置为背景, 重新审查当代热爱亲犹太人主义的化身作为文明叙述来达到中国在国际上取得重要中心地位的手段。这种叙述不但强调了对犹太人种族的偏见, 并且磨灭了真正历史上犹太人的声音, 同时也忽视了中国反犹太人观念的证据。

关键词: 热爱亲犹太人主义; 文明主义; 以色列; 历史治国方法; 反犹太人; 一带一路; 中国

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