

*Gao Bei, Shanghai Sanctuary. Chinese and Japanese Policy toward European Jewish Refugees during World War II, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 185.*

*by Laura De Giorgi*

Based on extensive archival research in China, Japan, the United States and the United Kingdom, this book is a study of the policies adopted by the Chinese Nationalist Government and the Japanese Empire toward the Jews who, in the late 1930s, were compelled to leave Europe and arrived in Shanghai. For these refugees the cosmopolitan and semi-colonial metropolis on the Yangzi river became the “port of last resort” – as in the title of the 1998 documentary by Paul Rosdy and Joan Grossman and the 2002 book by Marcia Ristaino – where they managed to escape Nazi persecution thanks to the *de facto* protection provided by the Japanese occupiers of the city after 1937.

Since the 1990s, their experience has become a topic of historical research, and, at the same time, the memory of the events has had an important part in the cultural diplomacy between China and Israel, as the visits to the so-called “Shanghai ghetto” by the last survivors and the several memoirs written by the protagonists show. Gao Bei’s book draws upon this literature, among other sources, to reconstruct the experience of European Jews in the “Shanghai sanctuary”; but her main goal is to understand what made this experience possible. The answer to this question is to be found in Chinese and Japanese strategy in international politics in wartime.

The premise of Gao Bei’s book is that anti-Semitism has no cultural or historical roots in East Asia. In China, a community of Jews, most of them in the city of Kaifeng, had lived peacefully for centuries. Later, after the First Opium War, several Baghdadi Jews, most of whom became British nationals, moved to Shanghai. They were among the most important players in the development of the metropolis, amassing great fortunes from trade and real estate business. Among them were families such as the Sassoons, the Harpoons and the Kadoories. From the Chinese and the Japanese points of view, this Jewish community was primarily representative of the West, as no obvious racial or religious features seemed to make them different from the Western colonial élite. Besides, awareness of the Jewish question and of the Zionist movement was mediated by the Western press in East Asia; Chinese nationalists such as Sun Yat-sen treated them with empathy as an embodiment of the same patriotic spirit that was supposed to inspire the Chinese in their struggle for their homeland. Gao Bei argues that these

feelings impeded the development of anti-Semitism among Chinese political élites, while in Japan, by contrast, especially among the military, a negative attitude towards Jews began to emerge in the 1920s as a consequence of European - particularly Russian and German - anti-Semitism. As a matter of fact, it is quite evident that several stereotypes, especially the view of the Jews as a transnational, rich and powerful capitalist élite, affected both the Chinese and the Japanese way of treating Jewish refugees in wartime. As the author explicitly affirms, "Both China and Japan formulated plans to use Jewish financial power to achieve final victory in the war" (p.55).

The most important consideration impacting Chinese and Japanese political choices concerning the Jews who had reached - or attempted to reach - Shanghai was relations with Germany and with the United States. Though Gao Bei argues that the Chinese Nationalists, unlike the Japanese, were also motivated by humanitarian reasons, decisions were effectively taken based on an estimate of the greatest possible political benefits.

The third chapter focuses on Chinese plans to settle Jewish refugees in unoccupied China during the war, such as the one formulated in 1939 by Sun Ke, Sun Yat-sen's son and a prominent member of the Nationalist Party. The plan depended on American Jewish financial assistance; it was considered essential for winning the support of American public opinion for Chinese resistance against Japan. However, American funding proved impossible, leading to the failure of the plan, as the Chinese had insufficient financial and political means to protect the Jews on their own. According to the author, the Chinese Nationalists were not supportive of German anti-Semitic policy, even though they were careful not to damage their relations with Berlin in the first years of the war. As evidence of this, Gao Bei argues that steps taken by Chinese consuls in Europe, such as in the well-known case of He Fengshan in Vienna, who granted European Jews visas for Shanghai, were actually consistent with instructions issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, despite some pro-German Nationalist Party leaders' opposition. As Gao Bei affirms, though visas were not required to get to Shanghai, the Nationalists issued them for symbolic reasons, as a sign of Chinese sovereignty; in addition, visas were required by the Nazi authorities in order for Jewish refugees to leave their country.

The book's last two chapters are a detailed study of Japan's Jewish policy, covering, beyond the case of Shanghai, plans to settle Jews in Manzhouguo (Manchukuo) and focusing especially on the role of the so-called "Jewish experts" in the Japanese

military, such as Yasue Norihiro in Manchuria and Inuzuka Koreshige in Shanghai. Manchuria, where a community of Russian Jews continued to exist until the 1930s, and Shanghai were strongly connected in the way the Japanese thought of Jewish presence in China. Japanese policy is analyzed in light of inner conflicts unfolding within the Japanese army and their impact on Japanese foreign policy and wartime military strategy. From 1937 to late 1939, the Japanese "Jewish experts" worked to create the conditions to facilitate Jewish migration in China and Manzhouguo. There is also a discussion of the relationship of Japan's "experts" with the Shanghai Jewish élite and with international Jewish relief organizations. Gao Bei argues that the primary objective of the Japanese experts was to "use" the Jews to finance the development of Manzhouguo, on the one hand, and to appease American public opinion about Japanese imperialism, on the other. But, as noted, difficulties arose due to the need to take German interests and anti-Semitic aims into account. In fact, prior to the conclusion of the Tripartite Pact in 1940, relations with Berlin were a bone of contention within the Japanese military and political élites, a fact which permitted Japanese experts on the Jewish question to transform Shanghai into a safe haven for European refugees, as per official policy in 1938. Gao Bei provides an in-depth discussion of the various policies and regulations issued by the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, devoting special attention to the influence of the military and the relations of local Japanese authorities with the Shanghai Jewish élite. Once the alliance had been concluded with Germany and Italy in 1940, Japan's policy towards European Jewish refugees in China changed. The alliance with Germany became fundamental to Tokyo's foreign policy and military strategy; even so, in summer 1940 the Japanese consul in Lithuania, Sugihara, went on issuing visas to Polish Jews leaving Europe for Asia (a community that settled in Kobe, to be moved later to Shanghai). Jews in Shanghai were not deported to Europe, but merely confined – in poverty but without risk to life – in the Shanghai ghetto.

Gao Bei emphasizes that the Japanese policy toward Jewish refugees did not originate from any kind of humanitarian sympathy for their plight, but only from utilitarian considerations, which were ultimately subordinated to political and military strategy. In this way, she suggests that there was a difference between China's and Japan's approaches to the Jewish refugees. Her book makes it evident that the main factor behind the difference was each country's political and military strength and ability to pursue their domestic and international goals. Anti-Semitism had no real influence in either China or Japan, and for both the Jewish question was only one particular element to be taken into consideration when

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dealing with international developments and maximizing national interest during the war.

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