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# The Myth of “Shanghai Ark” and the Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum

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*The myth known in Chinese official culture as “Shanghai Ark” concerns the 20,000 European Jewish refugees who found shelter in Shanghai during World War II. While other countries closed their doors to Jews persecuted in Europe, so the myth goes, Shanghai was the only place that generously accepted the Jewish refugees. Not only did the diplomat in Vienna, He Fengshan, risk his life to issue the Jewish refugees thousands of visas, but Jews were warmly welcomed by Chinese civilians, with whom they formed an alliance against the German and Japanese Fascists.*

*Taking the Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum as an anchoring point, my article traces the museum’s formation and change in the past decades within Chinese and international contexts, looks into different forces that contribute to the formation of the myth, and examines the receptions of the myth both on the side of the Jewish and the Chinese civilians. This article aims to better understand the ongoing mystification of Holocaust rescue history at the global level, as well as the interaction between individual agency and a national discourse.*



Johannes Eisele/AFP/Getty, *Shanghai Jewish Museum*. 2015.  
*The Irish Times*. Web. 25 November 2016.

According to the modern myth about Jewish refugees in Shanghai—known in Chinese official culture as “Shanghai Ark”—Shanghai was the only port open to Jewish refugees during World War II, when other countries abandoned them under Nazi persecution. Indeed, from around 1938 to 1941, about 20,000 Central European Jews—mainly from Germany, Austria and Poland—fled Nazi persecution to Shanghai. The “Shanghai Ark” myth highlights how, following the Japanese occupation of Shanghai in 1937 and the establishment of a “Jewish ghetto” in 1941, Jewish refugees and Chinese civilians successfully joined efforts in resisting Japanese colonization. Even decades after the war, after most Jews had emigrated from China, the Jewish refugees and the Chinese civilians remembered and identified with each other. Ultimately, the “Shanghai Ark” myth tells of a friendship, transcendent of time and race, between two repressed people: Jewish refugees and Chinese civilians. This friendship was supposedly based on the humanistic conducts of the Chinese civilians on one hand, and on the gratefulness of the Jews on the other.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Irene Eber, *Wartime Shanghai and the Jewish Refugees from Central Europe: Survival, Co-existence, and Identity in a Multi-ethnic City* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012) and Marcia Ristaino, *Port of Last Resort: The Diaspora Communities of Shanghai* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

The Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum, formally established in 2005, was the first large-scale national attempt to formalize the myth of a national rescue of Jewish refugees. After the Museum's establishment, it became the anchoring point for the development of this myth. The Museum, operating as a national ideological institution, produced and sponsored many cultural and historical products reproducing the "Shanghai Ark" myth.

How did the Museum become a mature embodiment of a myth which crosses the boundary between reality and illusion, and distorts the meaning of the documents and testimonies it presents? This article will trace the formation and development of Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum from 2005 to 2016, showing the role the Museum played in the formation of the myth of the "Shanghai Ark." I will locate China in the context of transnational Holocaust memory, and show how the Chinese case contributes to our understanding of the political instrumentalization of Jewish rescue during the Holocaust.

Jewish emigration from Shanghai started at the end of the war. Most of those who had financial means left to the U.S., and some moved to Israel or returned to Central Europe. Others moved to Australia, Canada, and South America. Although most of the Jewish refugees did not intend to stay in Shanghai, the Chinese communists who overtook Shanghai in 1947, and the consequential confiscation of Jewish capitalist enterprises, cast a huge shadow on Jews still living there. While Jewish refugees actively sought to emigrate, the occupation by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its anti-foreign policies also contributed to their decision to leave. From 1948 to 1978, the newly established state, the People's Republic of China, refused to establish diplomatic relations with Western countries, demonizing Westerners as dangerous enemies and capitalist colonizers. The presence of Jews in China was marginalized in public discourse in this anti-foreign atmosphere.

While narratives of rescue of Jews during the war in European countries have been developing since the 1960s, the Chinese

government produced the myth of “Shanghai Ark” as a diplomatic strategy as recently as 2005.<sup>2</sup> The myth developed amidst the changing political contexts of the past decade, and gradually won wide acceptance within and outside of China. The myth is represented in cultural essays, tourist books, documentary films, comic books, stage plays, and, above all, academic works. The myth involves local Shanghai civilians remembering the rescue, and the relationship between Chinese and Jewish people as a part of the city’s history. The myth is shaped to make the former Shanghai-landers identify with it.<sup>3</sup> “Shanghai-landers” is the term used by the European Jewish refugees for self-reference.

The Jewish Museum is a distinctive space in the old district of Tilanqiao, a neighborhood in Shanghai in which many Jewish refugees settled upon their arrival. According to the myth, local Tilanqiao civilians welcomed the refugees warmly and treated them as neighbors or even family members. The neighborhood even became known as “little Vienna” due to the flourishing of German Jewish culture that emerged there. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, the occupying Japanese forces in Shanghai forced all Central European Jews to live in Tilanqiao, calling it a segregation of “refugees with no nationality.” Jewish refugees called this enclosure a “Jewish ghetto.” During this “ghetto period,” from around 1941 to 1945, Jewish refugees coexisted with Japanese and Chinese communities.

The museum building is the renovated site of the Moses, or *Ohel Moshe*, Synagogue, originally constructed by Russian Jews in 1907.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the Second World War, the Moses Synagogue

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Gensburger, *National Policy, Global Memory: The Commemoration of the “Righteous” from Jerusalem to Paris, 1942–2007* (New York: Berghahn, 2016), 19; Haim Oliver, *We Were Saved: How the Jews in Bulgaria Were Kept From the Death Camps*, trans. Vesselin Izmirliiev (Sofia: Sofia Press, 1967).

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Heppner, *Shanghai Refuge: A Memoir of the World War II Jewish Ghetto* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska, 1993), 111–112.

<sup>4</sup> Xu Xin, “Jewish Diaspora in China,” in *Encyclopedia of Diasporas: Immigrant and Refugee Cultures Around the World, Volume I: Overviews and Topics; Volume II: Diaspora Communities*, eds. Ember, Melvin, Carol R. Ember, and Ian Skoggard (Springer, 2004), 157.



Yang Lei. The “Shanghai Ark” of *Jewish Refugees*. 2015.  
Sh.qq.com. Web. 26 November 2016.

played an important role in Jewish communal life, especially for the German Jewish community. Hass Gerda, the sister-in-law of the Moses Synagogue’s cantor, herself a former Jewish refugee in Shanghai, remembers, “The synagogue brought people together and provided them a space to pray. Many of them were laymen, not all were schooled people.”<sup>5</sup> In contrast to what the myth of “Shanghai Ark” suggests, the Jewish community which formed around the Moses Synagogue did not rely emotionally and economically on other ethnic communities. The vacant synagogue in the 50s and 60s was used consecutively as a factory, an asylum, and a governmental building.

The building’s design and its new function as a modern national museum contrasts with the disordered, chaotic, and economically underdeveloped Tilanqiao area. In the yard at the back of the building, a wall lists the names of 13,732 former Shanghai Jewish refugees. A sculpture of six people stands in front of the wall depicting an orthodox Jew, an old Jewish woman, a middle-aged man, a child, a young man, and a young woman. These

<sup>5</sup> Hass Gerda, interview 19837, segment 60, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation, accessed November 17, 2016, <http://vha.usc.edu/viewingPage?-testimonyID=21444&returnIndex=0>.



Yan Weiqi. *The Name Wall in Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum*. 2015. News.gmw.cn. Web. 25 November 2016.

characters represent “faith,” “torture,” “love,” “determination,” “light,” and “hope” respectively. According to the director of the Museum, the Shanghai Name Wall “is by no means a wall of mourning and tears, but a wall of life, telling the story of how the Jews gained life again in Shanghai.”<sup>6</sup>

Also in the building’s backyard, the Museum presents testimonies of former Jewish Shanghai residents. Although the witnesses differ in beliefs, ages, languages and origins, they share one thing: they tell stories of the humanity of the Chinese locals, and the love and comradery which developed between the Chinese locals and the Jewish refugees. By weaving together photographs, personal items and video clips, the Museum presents a Shanghai Jewish community indebted to the warmth, altruism,

<sup>6</sup> Xu Huifen, “The Opening Ceremony of Shanghai Jewish-Refugee Name Wall: Documenting 13732 Jewish Refugees,” *Xin lang xin wen chen bao (Sina Morning News)*, September 3, 2014. Accessed November 9, 2016, <http://dailynews.sina.com/bg/chn/chnpolitics/sinacn/20140902/20066054011.html>. Translations from Chinese are by the writer unless otherwise stated.

hospitality and courageousness of the Chinese people. The narrative presented at the Museum supports a transnational and transhistorical friendship between Chinese and Jews based on an unbalanced gift relationship. In a gift relationship there is a “surplus” of kindness and humanism.

### **The Production of the Shanghai Jewish Museum: 1980s–2016**

#### ***1980s–1990s: Return of the Shanghai-Landers***

After China opened up economic and diplomatic relations with the West as a result of its 1978 reforms, elderly Shanghai Jewish refugees began to find their way back to Shanghai to visit their former “waiting room,” a frequently used metaphor by Shanghai Jewish refugees and their researchers to describe their relationship to Shanghai.<sup>7</sup> With residential buildings crowded, the synagogue—then used as a government building—was the only building that the Jewish returnees could get into. It was those Jewish visitors in the 1980s that inspired the transformation of the Moses Synagogue into a half-open space. As a civil servant in the Museum recalled,

When foreigners came, the local Foreign Affairs Office always received them...there needed to be a place to invite them to sit down and chat...Another reason is that...some Jews donated things to us. Therefore, we vacated one floor to receive the Jews who came for a visit, and to exhibit their belongings.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Amnon Barzel, *Leben im Wartesaal: Exil in Shanghai, 1938–1947* (Life in the Waiting Room: Exile in Shanghai: 1938–1947) (Berlin: Jüdisches Museum im Stadtmuseum Berlin, 1997) and Suzanne D. Rutland, “‘Waiting Room Shanghai’: Australian Reactions to the Plight of the Jews in Shanghai after the Second World War,” *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 32 (1987): 407–433.

<sup>8</sup> Du Jiexin, “Kunan zhong de xing: shanghai youtai nan min jinianguan kongjian de shengchan” (“Happiness in Tragedy: Production of Space of Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum”) (MA thesis, East China University of Science and Technology, 2015), 23. My translation.

The formal establishment of the China-Israel relations in 1991 and the subsequent visit of Yitzhak Rabin—the Israeli Prime Minister, himself a second-generation Shanghai-lander—facilitated several subsequent changes to the Moses Synagogue. In 1992, one floor of the Moses Synagogue was turned into a reception room and an exhibition hall, as described by the civil servant above. In 1997, the first floor of the building was turned into a praying room and the attic became another exhibition room. The exhibits consisted of photographs portraying the history and everyday life of the Shanghai-landers. The Museum’s volunteer guides were mostly Tilanqiao residents who had been children when the Jewish refugees came. The target audience of the synagogue exhibits was foreign tourists.

At this point, there was little if any ideological or political investment in the synagogue. The synagogue functioned as a commemoration and reception space. In comparison with later years, the synagogue exhibits of the 1990s were the closest to representing the collective memories of former Shanghai Jewish refugees as these were presented in their memoirs and interviews. The concept of “misfortune” was the main theme of the exhibition until the 2000s. As Jiexin Du writes, “[i]n this period, direct expressions of ‘fortune’ were very rare, only reflected indirectly via the ‘hardship.’ Moreover, because of the lack of relevant resources, the ‘fortune’ was not explicit and certain either.”<sup>9</sup>

As the idea of the Museum developed in the 1980s and 1990s, China experienced comprehensive transformations. Following the policy of “reformation and opening up”, the communist-nationalist discourse showed its limitations, as the case of the Shanghai-landers reveals. The Jewish refugees, having been almost completely dismissed in the discourse in the first thirty years of communist China—as they did not fit into the category of capitalist and colonizing Westerners—were a new element in the 1980s and 1990s that had no counterpart in the communist national discourse. China’s public politics, economic relation-

<sup>9</sup> Du, “Happiness in Tragedy,” 23.

ships and the image of foreigners in national discourse were reexamined and redeveloped to account for the Jewish refugees' history in China. The presentation of the Shanghai-landers in the Museum was less political at this stage, partly because the ideological potential of this history had yet to be activated by a new set of official languages and national vocabularies of the Chinese government.

### **2005–2010: *The Museum as a Battlefield of Ideological Contestation***

The second stage of the construction of the Museum began in 2005, the year that marked the sixtieth anniversary of World War Two, or what China terms it: “the World Anti-Fascist War.” For the first time, the history of the Jewish community in Tilanqiao attracted the serious interest of the Chinese Advocacy Department. This interest was aroused not by any new developments between China and Israel, but by the dramatized tension between China and Japan. Chinese official newspapers first used the metaphor of “Noah’s Ark” to describe the significance of Shanghai to the Jewish refugees. The metaphor was then incorporated into the larger anti-Japanese discourse and immediately popularized as such. Former Shanghai Jewish refugees were invited back “home” to Hongkou. The picture album *Reminiscence of Hongkou: Lives of Jewish Refugees 1938–1945* was published in 2005 as a featured project in celebration of the Anniversary of the World Anti-Fascist War.<sup>10</sup> In the same year, the Shanghai local government recognized the Moses Synagogue as an outstanding historical edifice. All of these events led up to the renovation of the Jewish Museum in 2007.

The year 2007 was marked by the thorny relations between China and Israel. China, considering its own economic and polit-

<sup>10</sup> Song Yan, *Hongkou ji yi: 1938–1945 Youtai nan min de sheng huo* (Reminiscences of Hongkou: Lives of Jewish Refugees 1938–1945) (Shanghai: Xue lin chu ban she, 2005).

ical interests, hesitated to form an anti-Arab alliance with Israel, proposed in the name of opposing Iranian nuclear armament. The China-Israel relationship was recovering from years of deterioration and required further development and stabilization. In this context, the phrase “Shanghai Ark” formally entered the official Chinese vocabulary, becoming the theme of the Shanghai Jewish Museum. The “Shanghai Ark” myth shifted the focus from boycotting the Japanese to emphasizing the cosmopolitan values of peace and humanism. The myth told the story of how the Chinese locals’ hospitably hosted the Jewish refugees despite their own hardships under Japanese occupation. Suggesting that they followed this value system in sheltering the Jewish refugees, the Chinese government would promote the same values of peace and humanism as solutions to Middle Eastern conflicts.

The Museum went through its first large-scale renovations under the new name “Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum,” consisting of two major changes. First, the architecture of the Moses Synagogue was restored according to its original blueprint from 1907. The attic of the synagogue continued to be used for exhibitions, but now it was used mainly for exhibiting photos and gifts of prominent figures who had visited the Museum, as opposed to photographs of Jewish refugees everyday during wartime. A new exhibition hall was constructed in the garden yard, where short films, photographs, models, and artworks were exhibited. Following a lineal-temporal progression, the exhibits were divided into five parts: “Fleeing to Shanghai,” “Free Life,” “Days in the Ghetto,” “Mutual Aids,” and “Starts Again.” The division aimed to display the “good fortune” brought by the “Shanghai Ark.” The message conveyed was clear: although the Jewish refugees suffered from great misfortune under fascism, the long-lasting and sincere friendship of the Chinese people brought them good fortune, and made Shanghai a temporary home. Trained volunteer guides—most of them college students—replaced individual volunteer guides. The main task of these new volunteer guides was to shift the focus from misfortune to “rescue” and “luck.”

The political disputes among China, Japan and Israel resulted in the birth of the Museum as an ideological institution and a kind of Foucauldian heterotopia. According to Foucault, there exists the “heterotopia of deviance,” evident in institutions like the rest house or psychiatric clinics, as well as the realized ideological utopia, such as the library or museum.<sup>11</sup> The aim of the Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum was to represent the Shanghai historical space as part of the schema of Chinese national memory of the Second World War. The staff in the Museum affirms the ideological goals of the Museum by repeatedly using the ambiguous terms “many things” and “something”: “if you ask whether we deliberately convey something, of course we do. This museum displays the national attitude towards many things, the nation’s stands, and the nation’s image—especially because we have many foreign visitors. Therefore, we are very careful when talking about many things.”<sup>12</sup>

However, only very few documents and historical archives were available to support the myth of “Shanghai Ark.” Recalling the period, the director of the Museum said, “An influential museum must be sustained by real historical archives. If we do not have one page of a document, how do we justify ourselves as the former historical spot?”<sup>13</sup> To fill this documentary gap, the Museum would subsequently focus on archive accumulation by reaching out to individual former Jewish refugees for testimonies and personal belongings.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” in *Heterotopia and the City: Public Space in a Postcivil Society*, ed. Michiel Dehaene and Lieven De Caeter (London: Routledge, 2008), 17.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Du, “Happiness in Tragedy,” 32.

<sup>13</sup> Zhang Jingjing, “286 jian Shanghai Youtai nam min dang an de ‘hui gu’i” (The “Return” of 286 Pieces of Archives of Shanghai Jewish Refugees,) *Shanghai dang an xin xi wang* (Shanghai Archival Information), May 13, 2016, accessed 9 November, 2016, [http://www.archives.sh.cn/dajc/201605/t20160513\\_42675.html](http://www.archives.sh.cn/dajc/201605/t20160513_42675.html).

### ***2010– : Archival Collection and Negotiation***

After 2010, the Museum continued to develop in the direction of an ideological spectacle. By calling for the contribution of archival material from former Shanghai Jewish refugees, the Museum influenced individuals to remember certain stories. The Museum then organized these memories in a way as to assimilate individual voices into a larger myth. Making individual memories part of a national ideological structure still preserved the individual stories’ uniqueness and ambiguity. This contributed to the instability of the national discourse and spoke subtly in alternative languages to sufficiently careful listeners. If in the second period the Museum functioned as the “mirror” described by Foucault—one that, in retrospect, controlled the individual by means of the image in the mirror—then by the third period the Museum became a mirror of negotiation, wherein the projection of individual desire interacted with the image reflected back, together producing an unstable subject.

Emotion was the predominant means by which the Museum called for the donation of archives from former Jewish refugees. Driven away by Communist rule in the Chinese Civil War years, former Shanghai-landers had been highly skeptical of the motives of the Museum, as well as reluctant to donate the few items that they had planned to save as family treasures. Moreover, there was competition between the Shanghai Jewish Museum and other Holocaust museums or institutions that also collected archives of the Shanghai-landers. This competition made the task of archival collection more difficult: why should the Shanghai-landers give away their few personal belongings, and why should they give them to the Shanghai Jewish Museum rather than other institutions interested in their stories?

To move these former Jewish refugees to donate, the Museum held exhibitions each year between 2011 and 2015 in the most popular destinations Jews had immigrated to from China, including Germany, Israel, the United States and Australia, with



*"Jewish-Refugees and Shanghai" World Itineration Exhibition in Sydney.* Digital Image. People.cn. 21 April 2015. Web. 26 November 2016.

the aim of attracting the attention of former refugees and their family members. Once in touch with them, the Museum staff took the opportunity to persuade them to donate their personal belongings and to tell their stories. In addition, they made every attempt to befriend the former refugees and to show their sincerity. For example, museum staff recalled how they ordered flowers for the birthday of a former Jewish refugee, who not only donated her daughter's school transcript from wartime Shanghai, but spoke as a representative of the Shanghai Jewish refugees at the opening ceremony of the Museum exhibition in New York.<sup>14</sup>

By 2015, 286 archival pieces had been collected and were acknowledged as the "Shanghai Archival Document Heritage." In the statement made by the director of the Museum, who represented the Museum at a reception held in his honor, these

<sup>14</sup> Zhang Jingjing, "The 'Return' of 286 Pieces of Archives of Shanghai Jewish Refugees."

memories not only belonged to the Jewish refugees, but fully revealed the good-will and generosity of the city of Shanghai and its people, our outstanding Chinese culture, and our core values. Therefore, telling this history is highly valuable for advocating the spirit of our city and the virtue of the Chinese nationality.<sup>15</sup>

By September 2016, the archives had reached 549 pieces, and the collections continues to grow as a result of the ongoing efforts of the Museum. The Museum plans to apply for UNESCO’s Memory of World Programme with these archives.<sup>16</sup>

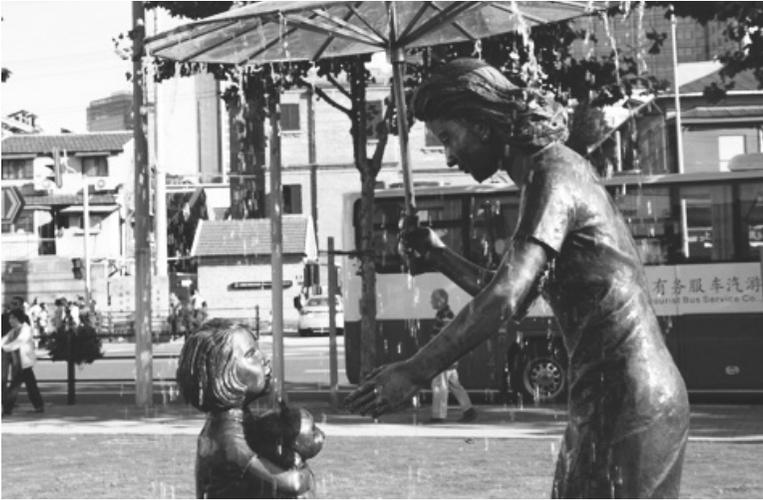
A notable feature of this present stage is the ongoing negotiation between individual former Jewish refugees and the Museum. This negotiation between an individual and an alienating power echoes Lacan’s theory of the relationship between subject and image: “What determines me, at the most profound level... is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects.”<sup>17</sup> However, the human being as the subject of desire “is not, unlike animal, entirely caught up in this imaginary capture. He maps himself in it...The screen is there the locus of mediation.”<sup>18</sup> Instead of submitting to the domination of the single voice of the official Chinese culture, individual Jewish refugees projected their own expectations onto the “mirror” of the Museum, actively participating in the formation of the Museum with their individual agency. Compared to other monumental sites that are officially recognized as “patriotic educational bases” in China, such as the Museum of the Nanjing Massacre, an important reason for the

<sup>15</sup> Zhang Jingjing, “The ‘Return’ of 286 Pieces of Archives of Shanghai Jewish Refugees.”

<sup>16</sup> Xu Xiaoqing, and Sun Qing, “Shanghai Hongkou qi dong ‘shen yi’: Yutai nan min shi liao ji hua shen bao ‘shi jie ji yi yi chan’” (Historical Resources of Shanghai Jewish Refugees are going to apply for the Memory of the World Programme). *People.cn*, February 3, 2015. Accessed November 9, 2016. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-02/03/c\\_1114241383.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-02/03/c_1114241383.htm).

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978), 106–107.

<sup>18</sup> Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 106–107.



Allison Griner, *Statue outside Shanghai Jewish refugee museum*. 2015. Web. Aljazeera Public Liberties and Human Rights Centre. 26 November 2016.

possibility of agency in the case of the former Jewish refugees is that these refugees are external to the Chinese communist-nationalist discourse.<sup>19</sup> Since Jewish refugees are outside of the regime, the Chinese official culture adjusts its propaganda system to appeal to them.

However, once accomplished, the process of negotiation does not prevent its dialectic transformation into a new form of subjugation. Although the major items of the exhibition are personal belongings and individual stories, all of them are retold and rearranged in such a way as to defend the myth of “Shanghai Ark.” This is sometimes done against the will of the individual Jewish refugees. In this way, the latter consciously or unconsciously became collaborators with the Museum in creating a heterotopia of discipline, covering cracks or inconsistencies that might distract the visitors. Indeed, to a careful observer, traces of negotiation are still left in the illusory space of the Museum. For

<sup>19</sup> Varutti, Marzia, *Museums in China: The Politics of Representation after Mao* (Boydell Press, 2014), 34.

example, the individual Jewish refugees’ historical recounts are quite nuanced. They are willing to say that they lived with the Chinese people peacefully, a narrative that does not contradict—yet neither does it support—the myth of the hospitable Chinese community or of a longstanding Chinese-Jewish friendship. In *Ark Shanghai*, a 2014 documentary film produced by the Museum, a former Jewish refugee says, “We came here without asking for anyone’s permission. However, the Chinese tolerated us...and eventually it became a good symbiosis. You know, one lived off the other and benefited from the other.”<sup>20</sup> It is only after a long pause that he says, “the Chinese tried to befriend us.”<sup>21</sup> Although one may argue that his testimony is fictional in the sense that it is a secondary product of the structured video, there are still “truths” lying in his careful selection of words and the long pause. Nevertheless, one could hardly expect one-time tourists who go through the Museum under the guidance of the Museum’s volunteer guides to be aware of such nuance. Thus, the Museum only furthers the national propaganda.

The process of construction and renovation created a space of negotiation full of possibilities of change, influenced both by immediate circumstances and by the Jewish individuals who served as subjects of commemoration. However, such possibilities and openness became increasingly narrow when this process came to an end with the gradual stabilization of the symbolic meaning of the Museum. The rest of this article will examine the Museum after its renovation, including its relation to other synchronic spaces and the reception of the myth by domestic visitors.

<sup>20</sup> Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum. “Ark Shanghai - A History of Jewish Refugees in Shanghai, China.” YouTube video, 37:54. Posted 31 December 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4NZWCkNFddM>

<sup>21</sup> Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum. “Ark Shanghai - A History of Jewish Refugees in Shanghai, China.”

### Domestic Reception of the Imagined Jewish Community and agency in everyday life

If the former Jewish refugees in Shanghai questioned the motive of the Museum as a governmental institute, what was the reception of the Museum among its domestic Chinese audience? Were there any suspicions, indifferences or alternative memories from the society at large in response to the myth of “Shanghai Ark?” Unfortunately, a critical reception of either the Museum or the myth was not a visible phenomenon. In the past few years, a more prevalent phenomenon has been visitors of different social backgrounds and age groups adopting the same language and logic of the Museum to describe their visiting experiences and to recount the history of the Shanghai Jewish refugees. Indeed, it seems that the Museum has successfully performed the role of a heterotopia, a space even more illusory than a utopia.<sup>22</sup>

The popular reactions to the Museum were first triggered by the effort of the Museum to attract both an international and domestic audience for the combined purposes of tourism and patriotic education. In 2010, the Museum was acknowledged as an “AAA”—the third highest level—for a national tourist site in China.<sup>23</sup> Taking the opportunity of the Shanghai World Expo, the Hongkou local government negotiated with the Israeli government to open a particular area in the Israel pavilion in order to exhibit the history of the “Shanghai Ark,” “mainly aiming at attracting [tourists] to Hongkou to continue their visits.”<sup>24</sup> In 2015, the Museum was acknowledged

<sup>22</sup> Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 21.

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer E. Michaels, “Restoring and Utilizing the Past: The Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum” in *Global Mobilities: Refugees, Exiles, and Immigrants and Archives*, ed. Amy K. Levin (New York: Routledge, 2017), 216.

<sup>24</sup> Department of Communication, Shanghai Hongkou Government, “da zao ‘Youtai nan min zai Shanghai’ wen hua pin pai” (Creating the Cultural Brand of “Jewish Refugees in Shanghai”), *Dui wai chuan bo* (International Communications), 8 (2012): 53.

by the nation as a “Site for Patriotic Education.”<sup>25</sup> Beyond the physical space, the Museum collaborated with the cultural industry to facilitate the spread of the “Shanghai Ark” myth. Cultural texts produced or supported by the Museum include the animated film *Jewish Girl in Shanghai* (2010), the exhibition *Ark Shanghai* (2010), the stage play *White Horse Café* (2014) and the musical *Jews in Shanghai* (2015).

As a result of the Museum’s effort to expand its domestic market, two parallel themes emerged: the “Shanghai Ark” and the “Little Vienna.” The former advocates the state ideology of the Chinese helping the Jews, whereas the latter emphasizes the creativity and liveliness of the Jewish community, regarded as part of the diversity of old Shanghai. In non-governmental magazines, popular journals, personal blogs, and other published materials, both themes have been repeated and further developed by professional writers, individual visitors, and anonymous readers. For example, one domestic tourist wrote in her blog on May 2, 2016:

This place once gave the warmest welcome to the Jewish diasporas. It witnessed the generosity and kindheartedness of the Chinese people. ‘Moses Synagogue’ has been like “Schindler,” “Wallenberg,” “Sugihara Chiune” and others, which has become substitutes for “rescue” and “refuge.” For the Jews all over the world, the word “Shanghai” have become part of the history of Israel and Jews in general. After World War II, although lots of Jews immigrated to places all over the world, their gratefulness to the “Moses Synagogue” in Shanghai is deeply rooted in their hearts.<sup>26</sup>

According to other open-access information on her blog, this middle-class retired woman is named Pan Lida, born in 1958

<sup>25</sup> A “Representative National Patriotic Education Site” is a status first announced by the CCP Publicity Department in 1997.

<sup>26</sup> Pan Lida, “Can guan Shanghai Youtai nan min ji nian guan” (Visiting Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum), *Sina Blog*, May 2, 2016, accessed November 30, 2016, [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_6f6c3d670102w807.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_6f6c3d670102w807.html).

and currently living in Shanghai. She had been to Israel and Jordan with a tourist group a year before visiting the Museum, and claimed to have learned about the suffering and endurance of the Jews in her trip to Israel, knowledge confirmed by her visit to the Museum. Although the blogger stands out among most domestic visitors to the Museum in terms of her knowledge of Jewish history, the voice of the Chinese state is so dominant in her diary that her individual voice merely mimics and supplements the voice of the nation. Belonging to a generation born and raised during the first thirty years of Communist China, her case is typical of the reception of the Museum among her age group, who are faithful to the nationalist discourse of the “Shanghai Ark” and care little for the “Little Vienna” theme.

The reception of the Museum by younger generations contains a mixture of both “Shanghai Ark” and “Little Vienna.” This group includes urban female office workers, college students, and freelance professionals, who are more attracted by romantic memories, cultural legends, and alternative histories than the older generation. For example, a blogger born in 1972 writes:

Shanghai knew nothing about Hitler; Shanghai was only an open, innocent city. No one needed a visa to come to Shanghai. Hearing this news, 30,000 Jews who had intended to go to America and Canada went to Shanghai one after another, settling down at the relatively cheap roads of Zhoushan and Huoshan, opening up bakeries, cafés, barbershops, grocery stores, pharmacies, and even transforming dilapidated houses alongside the roads into European styled architectures. Therefore, a romantic “Little Vienna” was born.<sup>27</sup>

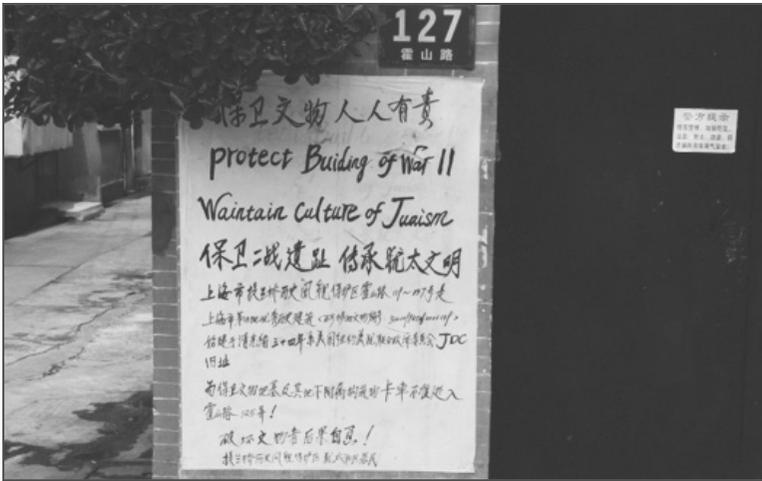
Compared to the earlier blog post, this travel diary, written on August 15, 2007, is less influenced by the narrative of the state. Yet the blogger’s understanding of history is exaggerated, fragmentary, and vague, influenced by the representations of Shanghai-landers and

<sup>27</sup> Da feng ge, “Zhoushan lu: Shanghai de ‘xiao Weiyena” (Zhoushan Road: the ‘Little Vienne’ in Shanghai), *163 Blog*, July 27, 2005, accessed November 30, 2016, [http://blog.163.com/typhoon\\_ke/blog/static/1739734200771594613378](http://blog.163.com/typhoon_ke/blog/static/1739734200771594613378).

images of Tilanqiao in popular culture. In this diary, “Little Vienna” was imagined as a part of the colonial, oriental, Shanghai, which was “open” and “innocent,” where everyday life was a mixture of European and local styles. If “Shanghai Ark” is a masculine discourse that designates the Chinese people as the rescuer, “Little Vienna” imagined within this discourse is a feminine one, representing a delicate European culture in crisis, helplessly waiting to be protected. While one may expect the tension between the ideological interpretation of the history (“Shanghai Ark”) and the commercial (“Little Vienna”) to counterbalance each other and open up a new space of interpretation, this has not happened. Instead, the two themes complement and mutually reinforce each other.

The key factor that contributes to the successful subjugating power of the Museum is the absence of the Jewish people in domestic memories. That virtually all of the Jewish refugees left China before 1949 rendered a blank page in primary collective memories of the domestic population, filled only by national narratives. The nationalist transformation of the country since Chinese president Xi Jinping came into power in 2014 has caused a significant increase in patriotism and in the dominance of the official voice. In this context, “Shanghai Ark” and “Little Vienna” supplement each other, dialectically leading to an all-encompassing fantasy that satisfies all parties involved, from the Shanghai-landers to domestic tourists. At the present, the comprehensive version of the myth is as follows: the generosity of Shanghai and its people opened up a space for Jews to employ their talents, optimism, and diligence and enabled them to revive their European-Jewish culture, which became part of Shanghai and enriched the Shanghai culture.

Ever since the discourse of “Shanghai Ark” became popular, local residents in Tilanqiao have utilized this official discourse for immediate interests and practical purposes, mimicking the official languages without embracing whole-heartedly the grand history itself. For example, a *dazibao* (literally “big character poster”) found outside the wall of 127 Huoshan Road, Tilanqiao reads:



Wang Gong. *Untitled*. Digital Image. 163 Blog. 10 August 2011. Web. 30 November 2016.

**Everyone has the responsibility to protect historical relics**  
**Protect Building of World War II**  
**Waintain [sic.] Cultural of Judaism**  
**Protecting Relics of WORLD WAR II, Inheriting**  
**Jewish Civilization**

119-137 Huoshan Road, The Shanghai City-Level Protected District of Historic and Cultural Scene of Tilanqiao

The Outstanding Historical Architecture (The number for irremovable historical relics: 310109145089992139)

Originally constructed in the 34th year of Qing Guangxu period; old location of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) during World War II

In order to protect the foundation of the cultural relics and the architectures affiliated to it, no TRUCK is allowed into 125 Huoshan road!

Those who destruct the cultural relics will pay for it!  
 Residents of Tilanqiao Protected Historical Jewish District<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Wang Gong. *Untitled*. Digital Image. 163 Blog. 10 Aug. 2011. Web. 30 Nov. 2016.

Written in big characters and pasted on walls, the *dazibao* was a form of public advocacy in the 1950s to the 1970s. As a particular genre, it exposed improper social phenomena or individual behavior. The language of a *dazibao* was usually fragmentary, spontaneous, and violent, seen as conveying the authentic voices and spontaneous thoughts of the people. This *dazibao*, found in Huoshan road, pieces together grand narratives of the Jewish rescuers, World War II, and government recognition, and fully reveals the post-colonial strategy of mimicry. The information on this poster is either exaggerated or inaccurate, betraying the fact that the residents of this building had a limited understanding of the history and did not care about the accuracy of their account of it. For example, the “Shanghai City-Level Protected District of Historic and Cultural Scene of Tilanqiao” is an invented concept. The Shanghai local government did honor Tilanqiao as a “Historic and Cultural Scene,” but “city-level” and “protected district” appear to be terms fabricated by these authors to add weight to the building. By performing the official version of the history through the *dazibao*, the residents in 125 Huoshan Road tried to persuade the audience that the building was a historic site protected by the government. If domestic tourists witnessed the Museum as a mirror of subjugation, the local residents witnessed the Museum as a mirror of negotiation of everyday trivialities. Here, grand narratives and patriotism are means rather than ends.

### Conclusion

This article looked into the myth of “Shanghai Ark” in official Chinese culture as a case of an ahistorical re-imagination of the Shanghai Jewish community during World War Two. It argued that the myth and its externalization in the Shanghai Jewish Refugee Museum served to facilitate external policy and internal nationalism on the one hand, and to prompt tourism and economic investment on the other. The instrumental functions

of the Museum changed over time. At first, it served the antagonism between China and the Japan. Subsequently, it mediated China-Israel tensions regarding the conflicts in the Middle East. After 2010, while the ideological functions continued, the economic function of the Museum became more pronounced, with the need to attract tourism and investment. The agency of former Jewish refugees in Shanghai was revealed in the early period of the Museum, when the Museum appealed to the Jewish refugees for testimonies, items, and documents. The agency of Chinese civilians was revealed in their indifference to a national discourse, mimicking the grand national narrative of Jewish refugees on behalf of their own banal everyday convenience.

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