

## **Collaborating and Conflicted: Being Jewish in Secular and Multicultural Hong Kong**

Zhou Xun, University of Essex<sup>1</sup>

Hong Kong's Jewish Film Festival (HKJFF) is Asia's only Jewish festival. Its current trailer begins with an image tracking a man wearing Djellabas style long dress and hat across the desert. On his journey he is first met by a Chinese girl and then a black man wearing kippah joins them. An Indian woman as well as a Caucasian looking male joins them later. The trailer ends with all of them dancing together. This trailer is based on a story by HKJFF's founder Howard Elias, a Toronto-born Jew who is now the warden of the Hong Kong Jewish cemetery. It sets out to capture the Jewish experience in Hong Kong, and is a reflection of the multifarious natures of the Hong Kong Jewish communities, as well as Hong Kong society in general. Today there are between six to ten thousand Jews living in this densely populated cosmopolitan city. While the beautiful Edwardian free-baroque style Ohel Leah Synagogue is hailed as one of Asia's oldest synagogues, Hong Kong is now arguably the center for Jewish life in Asia and the Jewish Community Centre (JCC), in a tall luxury modern apartment tower in

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central Hong Kong, is its focal point. This essay examines the conflicts and collaborations amongst different Jewish groups in Hong Kong from the second half of the nineteenth century to the years following Hong Kong's "Handover" to the Communist China in 1997. In examining this former British Colony and now a "Special Administrative Region of People's Republic of China" (SAR), this essay thus adds a new dimension to the parallel discussions of intra-communal Jewish life in Europe and North America.

### **A Short History**

Depicted as "diverse, welcoming and interesting", Hong Kong's Jewish community consists of members from all over the world: India, South Africa, the United States, Canada, Britain, Germany, Israel, Iraq, and many other lands. Some of them have been in Hong Kong since its founding in the second half of the nineteenth century, and they along side the Chinese population in Hong Kong, as well as the Indians, the Muslims, the Parsees and the British, have helped to transform this small *outpost* on the Eastern periphery of the British Empire into a cosmopolitan city and the financial center of Asia.

The first group of Jews arrived in Hong Kong in 1842 after the First Sino-British War—better known as the First Opium War. Most of them came via the then British Bombay and Calcutta. A number of them had already been trading in nearby Canton, or Guangzhou as it is now called in Mandarin Chinese. Initially, almost all the Jewish traders in Hong Kong were involved in the opium trade, though the Jewish Community has always tried to underplay this

fact. After making a fair amount of money in the opium trade, Jacob Phillips, the son of Rabbi Isaiah Phillips of Birmingham, decided to abandon this diseased jungle (as Hong Kong was known at the time) and returned to Britain to take up a profession in public service. Others, all of them Sephardi merchants who had previously been living in British India, stayed and some became the richest men in the Far East. As the history of modern China is inextricably entwined with that of opium, those Jewish traders in Hong Kong—including the Sassoons and the Kadoories, who had made much of their money through opium—were part of the making of that history.

The Sephardi textile merchant David Sassoon (1792-1864), originally from Baghdad, had already been selling opium to the Chinese for a number of years prior to the Opium War. During the Opium War, with the support of the British army, he sent his oldest son Elias David Sassoon to Hong Kong to cash in on the opium trade. In the aftermath of the Opium War, the Treaty of Nanking in 1842 forced China to open five ports to foreign trade. Three years later in 1845 the Sassoons opened a branch of their commercial operations in Shanghai, one of the five treaty ports. As the anti-opium campaign intensified in China and the international pressure to stop the opium trade increased, the opium trade became highly contested but even more lucrative. When the Chinese government imposed a ban on opium, the Sassoons' and other opium traders, many of them Jewish, seized the opportunity and began to control the price of opium. By 1870, David Sassoons, Son & Co. was indisputably the largest opium importer in China (British Parliament 1880, 215). The firm dominated more than one third of the total Indian opium trade to China (British Parliament 1870, 21). Besides Shanghai and

Hong Kong, the Sassoons opened another branch in Zhejiang province in eastern China and later in the nearby Anhui province. In the meantime the outbreak of the Civil War in the United States in 1861 caused a serious shortage of cotton supply to the Lancashire mills in Britain, forced the British to look for alternative suppliers in the other part of the British Empire (Arnold, The History of the Cotton Famine) This created a real opportunity for the Sassoons in Bombay. As opium brought them greater capital, they quickly overtook the Parses to dominate the British textile trade. Together opium and cotton created the massive fortune of the Sassoons.

With the money their forefathers had made on opium, the younger generation of the Sassoons, as well as other Jewish merchants such as the Kadoories and Silas Haroon, were able to widen their business interests into shipping, banking and land speculation in Hong Kong as well as in Shanghai. Together with the Scotsman Thomas Southerland, Arthur, the fifth son of David Sassoon took the lead to form a provisional committee of Hong Kong Shanghai Bank Cooperation (HSBC). The idea was to provide a full banking service to meet the needs of the local business community as the prosperity of trade with China and India had attracted an increasing numbers of British investors. The bank also sought to combine banking with the tremendous business opportunities in shipping and trade between Hong Kong and Shanghai (Ji 2003, 45-49). The cooperation was formally incorporated in spring 1865 in Hong Kong and Shanghai, and Arthur Sassoon was one of its eight board members. In the meantime the Sassoons continued in the opium business. It was only in the beginning of the 20th century, after the British government had imposed stricter control over the trading of

opium, that the younger generation of the Sassoons began to detach themselves from the opium trade.

In its earliest days, most members of the Hong Kong Jewish community were Sephardi merchants. As the number of Jews increased gradually over the years, a formal Jewish life began to establish itself. In 1855, a Jewish cemetery was laid out behind the Chinese village Wong Nei Chong [in today's Happy Valley], and two years later the first Jew was buried here at the same time as the Crown Lease was granted. By the 1860s more Jews moved to Hong Kong as employees or partners of David Sassoon, Sons & Co and its rival firm, E. D. Sassoon & Co. The latter was an enterprise of Elias David Sassoon, the second son of David Sassoon.

As the Jewish population grew, it also became necessary to have a regular place of worship for the ever expanding Jewish community. From 1867 the community began to lease a premise on Hollywood Road in central Hong Kong Island. This was the earliest synagogue in Hong Kong. Fourteen years later, it was relocated to the north side of Staunton Street, not far from its former location.

As the Jewish community grew in size tensions within the community grew also. According to Carl T. Smith, in the end of nineteenth century, "class as well as religious division had become a feature of the community" (Smith 1996, 400). In the 1880s and '90s pogroms brought an influx of Jewish refugees from Russia and Balkans. Unlike their Sephardi counterparts, these Ashkenazi Jews from Europe were mostly poor. They found employment in badly paid jobs as barmen, inn keepers, cleaners, and so on. A number of women resorted to prostitution. There were also regular police reports showing some Ashkenazis were involved

in street brawls, assaults, and using indecent language. These caused a great embarrassment to the well-established and fairly wealthy Sephardi community. These newcomers were of different social, cultural, language, religious, and economic background. They did not find it easy to adjust to the Sephardi tradition of the Hong Kong Jewish life, and were not willing to be identified with the Sephardis. This conflict within Jewish groups is however not unique to the Jews of Hong Kong. In New York at exactly the same moment the established and wealthy German-Jewish community of the Guggenheims and the Schiffs were dealing with the influx of Eastern European Jews, with much the same anxiety and antipathy. In Hong Kong some of these so-called "German" Jews hired a hall and formed a temporary congregation of their own. The Ashkenazi congregation mostly met on Jewish Holidays such as the New Year and Yom Kippur. According to Emmanuel Raphael Belilios, another successful Jewish opium trader from Calcutta and then a senior member of the Jewish community, when the Ashkenazi could not form a *Minyan* (the 10 male Jews necessary for communal prayer) amongst themselves, they did join with the Sephardis.

Being the oldest member of the Sephardi synagogue, E. R. Belilios took an active part in its management. Venetian by origin, he did not always see eye to eye with other Sephardis who had originally come from the Arab lands and for whom Arabic was their *lingua franca*. (Until 1925 Arabic remained the main language spoken by majority of Sephardis in Hong Kong, and these Sephardi merchants were sometimes referred to as "merchants from Arab land"). One major conflict was over the building of the new synagogue. Belilios wanted the new synagogue to welcome their Ashkenazi brothers from Europe. But even the location he had

chosen was not acceptable to other members of the Jewish community. Desperately wanting to be identified with the British elites, Belilios had bought a lot on the prestigious Kennedy Road with the intention to build a residence for himself. He proposed to sell the remaining portion to the synagogue trustees. But when Belilios presented his proposal to Jacob Elias Sassoon in Bombay, he refused to go along with it. In the meantime, other members of the Jewish community in Hong Kong also opposed Belilios' proposal arguing that the Kennedy Road location was inappropriate as the shabby appearance of the poor Jews from Europe would disgrace the community in this wealthy neighborhood (Smith 1996, 400-401). Failing to win support, Belilios resigned as one of the managers of the funds for a new synagogue and devoted his time and energy to the social and political life of Hong Kong.

With all its internal conflicts and multifaceted character, the Hong Kong Jewish community remained close knit, and over the next century the community flourished. As the employer of some 40 Sephardis, the younger Sassoons became the natural leaders of the Hong Kong Jewish Community. In 1881, David Sassoon's grandsons Jacob, Edward and Meyer donated a section of the Sassoon estate between the Caine Road and Robinson Road, above the city center, to the Jewish community. Prior to that, the Sassoon brothers leased the property to the British Colony government to house the British troops (British Parliament 1866, 355). In addition to the land, they also gave money for the building of the new synagogue. In return they requested the synagogue be named in memory of their mother, Leah Gubbay, the late wife of Elias David Sassoon. The foundation stone was laid in May 1901 and Leigh & Orange, a Hong Kong based international architect practice, won the task of building the

synagogue. While the interior followed Sephardi style, the exterior of the synagogue was built in the Edwardian free baroque style that was fashionable at the time. The establishment of the Ohel Leah Synagogue marked an end and a beginning of an era for the Hong Kong Jewish community: it gave the community a sense of permanence and an established institutional life. Alongside the Sassoons, Elly Kadoorie, a former employee of the David Sassoon, Son & Co., and his brother Ellis Kadoorie also took up an active role in leading the Hong Kong Jewish life.

The Hong Kong Jewish Recreational Club (JRC) first started in 1905 as a modest association. Initially a one-bedroom building was put up by means of debenture issue. Elly Kadoorie turned it into a Victorian club fit for the Hong Kong colonial life. Married in England to Laura Mocatta, a Sephardi from England, Elly Kadoorie was attracted to the Victorian English life, and he wanted to introduce the English club to Hong Kong Jewish life. He gave money to expand the JRC on the condition the debenture was dropped. The new club building opened in 1909 and it became the focus of Jewish social life in Hong Kong for the greater part of the twentieth century. In 1920, Israel Cohen, a British Jew and a Communist travelling through Hong Kong, remarked that the JRC was “the finest Jewish institution” and was “equipped with something of the comfort characteristic of a social or political club in the West End of London. There was a large and tastefully furnished room with a grand piano, . . . a reading room . . . ; a billiard-room that was seldom neglected, and a bar presided over by a white-jacketed Chinese mixer who could dispense you any cocktail that you chose” (*Bulletin* 2010, 88-89). Besides a billiard room, the JRC also brought tennis, bowling and croquet—other Victorian games—to the Hong Kong Jewish community. (Wilson and Swan 2008).



Under Lawrence Kadoorie's leadership, a major innovation was introduced to Ohel Leah Synagogue. At the New Year Services in 1938, a certain number of prayers were read out in English as well as in Hebrew despite oppositions from some members of the synagogue. The movement of Hong Kong Jewry into the world of British Jewry became inscribed on the *minhag* (liturgy) as well as the social practices of the Jews of Hong Kong.

### **Jews as builders of Hong Kong**

Despite of it being closely knit, the relatively small Hong Kong Jewish community for the most part of the twentieth century, as noted by Israel Cohen during his journey there in the 1920s, was "nevertheless strong and creative enough to impose upon an impression of their own" (*Bulletin* 2010, 88). By the turn of the twentieth century, the Kadoories and Sassoons were amongst some of the most prominent families in Hong Kong's economic and civic culture. Even until today, their names are enshrined in streets, buildings and institutions across the territory. While the Ohel Leah Synagogue has become a part of Hong Kong's historical and cultural heritage, the Kadoories are the names behind one of Hong Kong's most famous landmarks, Peninsula Hotel. As the founders of China and Light, the Kadoories have also been responsible for illuminating the streets of Hong Kong and supplying electricity for 80 percent of the territory's population. The company's Castle Peak Power Station, first built in the 1980s, was and still is one of the largest and most modern coal fired power stations in the world.

Alongside the Kadoories, Sir Matthew Nathan (1862-1939), a British Jew, was one of Hong Kong's most able governors under the British and a key player instrumental to Hong Kong's future development. It was Nathan who initiated Hong Kong's urban planning and the city's infrastructure. During his tenure, the construction of Kowloon-Canton Railway, Hong Kong's most important railway and the only railway during the entire British rule, began. And Nathan Road, Kowloon's major and most famous road also known as Hong Kong's Golden Mile, was named after him to honor his monumental achievements and contribution to Hong Kong. During his tenure his superior at the Colonial Office Sir Reginald Antrabus praised him as a "first rate official".(Antrabus 1906) Despite his achievements, however, being a bachelor and Jewish, as well as lacking university education and bureaucratic experience, Nathan remained an outsider. He was loathed by the British ruling class in Hong Kong and was not a welcome figure at their regular Victorian tea parties and charity balls. One of his faults was that as the governor he was the titular head of St. John's Cathedral but, being a professing Jew, did not attend the Church of England Sunday services. It was real relief to him when he was spared laying the foundation stone for an Anglican cathedral in Hong Kong, but this event further diminished his popularity amongst the Hong Kong British society (Haydon 1976, 109). He also became a constant target for gossip because he was a bachelor in an age that had grown more and more anxious about homosexuality after the Oscar Wilde trials in the 1890s. Given the hostile social atmosphere, he was forced to leave Hong Kong after three years and moved to South Africa as the Governor General of Natal where his career of public service continued. In 1911, Asquith moved him to the Board of Inland Revenue and then in 1914,

appointed him Under Secretary of Ireland. Nathan had recovered from the setback he experienced earlier in Hong Kong.

Being key players of the city, the Jews, in particularly the Kadoories, were famous for their philanthropic works amongst the non-Jewish population of Hong Kong, and left lasting legacies. In the 1910s, the Kadoories opened a school for the Chinese and another for the Hindus, as well as Helena May, a home for English working girls in Hong Kong. In 1890, after he withdrew from being an active member of the Jewish community, E. R. Belilios, who later became the chairman of HSBC, donated much of his energy to strengthen his social and political position in Hong Kong. After a number of failed attempts to establish a tie with the British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, Belilios gave money to the Hong Kong Colonial Government to build the Central School for Girls. The School was later renamed Belilios Public School (BPS) in honor of him, and is still standing today. In 1879, Belilios gave £1000 to the British Governor of Hong Kong to erect a statue of Disraeli in Hong Kong, but his offer was rejected by Disraeli himself. Instead Belilio used the money to set up a Medical Scholarship fund named after him and also helped to establish the Alice Memorial Hospital (Eitel 1895, 563-564). The hospital served as one of the major teaching hospitals for students of the Hong Kong College of Medicine for Chinese, the earlier incarnation of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Hong Kong, today one of the most prestigious medical schools in the world. Dr. Sun Yatsen, the 'Father of Chinese Nation' was one of the first graduates of the college. Belilios was also famous for his philanthropy work to promote the welfare and education of Chinese girls who were driven to crime and prostitution by poverty, and he set up a fund to

build a probation home for girls. In 1893, he was made a Companion of St. Michael and St. George for his significant contribution to the Hong Kong Society, and became the first Hong Kong resident to receive this honor (*a Times* 1893 qtd. in Choa 2000, 58). Between 1881 and 1900, Belilios also served on Legislative Council.

Yet with all its accomplishments and some of its prominent members' efforts -to become Anglicized, the Hong Kong Jews were never wholly accepted by the British elites in Hong Kong. Their not being 'British enough' in a way helped them to maintain their Jewish identity in this multicultural British colony (as it did in their British "homeland"). Matthew Nathan, Hong Kong's only Jewish Governor (1903-1907) was an example. During his tenure, he took active part in Hong Kong Jewish life and helped the community to secure the lease to extend the Jewish cemetery. Although being Jewish contributed to his downfall in Hong Kong, in a way it strengthened his Jewish identity. After Hong Kong, he did toy briefly with the Anglican faith, but in the end he rejected it. During his assignments in South Africa and Ireland, he made an effort to attend the Anglican Church regularly, but remained absent from all Easter services. Throughout the rest of his life, he remained a professing Jew (Chasin 2008, 47).

### **Jews living in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Hong Kong**

Hong Kong's Jewish community, like the Chinese, the Muslim and other communities in Hong Kong, has been inevitably influenced by the political and historical environment. The Sino-Japanese War of the 1930s and '40s cast a shadow on the life of Hong Kong, and it

impacted the Hong Kong Jewish life. In some ways one could argue that the war brought the Hong Kong Jewish community closer to their fellow Jews from other parts of the world, including those refugees from Europe, and Jewish charitable organizations in the United States.

On Christmas Day 1941, the Japanese army marched into Hong Kong and occupied this thriving British Colony. Those civilian nationals of those countries that were at war with Japan were kept in POW camps. As many Hong Kong Jews had acquired the British nationality, they did not escape the fate. After occupying Hong Kong, the Japanese authority [implemented the policy aiming](#) to restore “Asia value” in Hong Kong and return the city to the East Asians. In the process of eradicating “the poisonous remains of British cultural leftovers”, the Victorian style JRC was badly damaged (Hong Kong Broadcasting Office 1942, 107-108). Apart from a plaque at Ohel Leah Synagogue documenting the Jews who died trying to defend Hong Kong, we also learnt from the documents housed at the Hong Kong Heritage Project—commissioned by Michael Kadoorie—that Jewish Recreational Club provided entertainment to the British force that were fighting the Japanese in Hong Kong. Lawrence Kadoorie also instigated to form the Jewish Ladies’ Committee with the intention to provide entertainment for those “soldiers with Jewish persuasion.” In the meantime, on the issue of helping the Jewish refugees, the Hong Kong Jewish community once again stood together with a common goal.

The Jewish refugees escaping the war in Europe began to pass through Hong Kong as early as 1938 after China entered the war with Japan. The long established Jewish Benevolent Society was the first to take up the responsibility of taking care of them. As the Jewish

Community leader, Lawrence Kadoorie appealed to Hong Kong Jews to unite together and lend their hands to help these refugees: "Today more than ever is it the duty of every Jew to realize his responsibilities." But in fear of increased anti-Semitism, he warned the community that "In trying to those of our people who have lost their all, we must remember that to take work from others in order to fulfill this object will cause that very anti-Semitism that we must try at all costs to avoid" (Kadoorie 1939)

As soon as the war ended in 1945, life and social structure in Hong Kong returned more or less to normal as it was before the war. Many of those who had escaped during the war returned as soon as the war ended. By 1947 the population in Hong Kong grew to 1,750,000. Refugees crowded into Hong Kong, and many of them were Jewish refugees from Europe who found refuge in China and were now waiting for their passage to Palestine, North America or Australia. Many of them however lacked the necessary paperwork to stop in Hong Kong, which had returned to British rule. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) was then sponsoring and coordinating the transportation for these refugees. During the war years, they had already worked closely with Horace Kadoorie to provide relief work for the Jewish refugees in Shanghai. Once again, they coordinated with Lawrence, Horace's brother, in Hong Kong, using the Kadoories' British connections to try to obtain the proper authorization for the refugees to stay in Hong Kong while in transit. The Kadoories regularly visited the Hong Kong Immigration Department to ensure those Jewish refugees due to arrive had their necessary visas ready for resettlement to Israel, North America, Europe and Australia. As Hong Kong was already crammed with displaced persons as well as the British being repatriated, there

was a concern that the influx of Jewish refugees would compete for the city's limited resources. This meant even transit visas were difficult to obtain. The Kadoories wrote thousands of letters to governments, NGOs, and individuals to guarantee successful repatriation. The Kadoories, as the guarantors of the Jewish refugees, housed them in the grand Peninsula hotel—owned by the Kadoorie family—as they waited for the next ship. This was the Kadoories' effort to assure the Colonial government that these Jews would not be a burden to Hong Kong and to avoid anti-Semitism as he put it. There was even an attempt to build a Jewish hostel for the refugees. But it was, according to Lawrence Kadoorie, a difficult task. The decision was taken by JDC not to send any more refugees via Hong Kong “except on definite shipping facilities, because we realize the difficulties which will be created by such people having to remain in Hong Kong for indefinite periods of time . . .” (Hong Kong Heritage Project Archive).<sup>2</sup>

For those who did secure their transit visa to go through Hong Kong while waiting for the ship to take them away to their future destination, the grand Peninsula hotel served only but temporary shelter. In July 1946, some two hundred and fifty Jewish refugees arrived at Hong Kong on their way to Australia. To accommodate them, the ballroom at the Peninsula

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<sup>2</sup>[Jewish refugees and re-settlers 3, 1946-1947, in Hong Kong Heritage Project Archive, Hong Kong Heritage Project Archive, reference code: SEK-8D-003, location code: E02/01](#)

was turned into a huge dormitory. For these refugees, life at the Peninsula was by no means luxurious. It was like being back in the refugee camp all over again with very strict routines. In addition to the Kadoories, the Hong Kong Jewish community, while still readjusting to postwar life after returned from Japanese war camps, worked closely alongside the National Jewish Welfare Board in helping their fellow Jews in transit. [Just as Primo Levi, the Italian Sephardi, embraced Yiddish as the language for Jews after his experience in the concentration camp \(Gilman 1991, 293–316\)](#) One could argue that after a half century of conflicting interests, World War II brought the Sephardi and the Ashkenazi Jewish groups in Hong Kong together. Their common effort during and after the war marked the beginning of their on-going collaboration. Many individuals from the existing Jewish community offered their hospitality and friendship to their refugee brothers. A make shift synagogue was set up at the Peninsula, and the Hong Kong Jewish Women's Association, a larger reincarnation of the earlier the Jewish Ladies Committee, was formed to help distribute goods to the refugees.

As more and more refugees departed Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Jewish community began to devote its energy to rebuilding Jewish life in this British colony. In 1949 the Kadoorie family once again made a generous financial contribution to the reconstruction of a new Jewish Recreational Club. Besides those older Sephardi members, a growing number of Ashkenazi Jews began to take an active role in the Club and in Hong Kong Jewish life as whole. But the community's post-war effort to rebuild their Jewish life was soon interrupted. In 1966 and 1967, when China was experiencing the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution, Hong Kong was also in chaos. Anti-British riots were a regular feature. Extreme leftists, many of them



Communist supporters and closely linked to the PRC, were bombing cars, killing people and engaging in all kinds of destructive activities. These riots also caused tremendous financial damage to Hong Kong. According to estimates, the damage caused by the 1966 riot alone was HK\$20 million. These events affected Hong Kong's Jewish community as well as individuals within the community. Some four months after Michael Kadoorie was appointed to the Board of China Light & Power Co., Ltd (CLP), another leftist riot took place that intended to immobilize Hong Kong's industry in order to deprive the Hong Kong government of its sources of revenue and eventually get rid of the British rule (Cheung 2009, 63). About 70 per cent of employees at CLP went on strike. Joining with many other prominent businessmen, Michael Kadoorie stood firmly on the side of the British and sacked many of CLP employees and employees of other Kadoorie owned enterprises that had joined the strike. At the height of the riot, Michael's father Lawrence Kadoorie, deliberately "instituted night-shifts for the construction crews working on his projects, their flood-lights demonstrating Hong Kong's defiance of the mainland's threats and his own faith in the future" (*Independent* 1993). A few years later he was knighted by the Queen for his contribution to the British Empire. As the leaders of the Hong Kong Jewish community were preoccupied by the political events taking place at the time, Hong Kong's communal Jewish life was very much neglected. David Buxbaum, a Jewish student living in Singapore visited Hong Kong at the time. He noted that the Hong Kong Jews were "a community without much Jewishness. Having come from Singapore, we were surprise at the lack of school, a shochet, a kosher mikva, a rabbi, or a regular minyan service." And according

to him, even the much-lauded JRC was poorly maintained (Buxbaum qtd. in *Jewish Asia Times* 2010).<sup>3</sup>

Things began to pick up as Hong Kong entered the 1970s and individuals grew wealthier. Members of Jewish community felt a need to bring Jewish culture and religion back to Hong Kong Jewish life. To provide Jewish children their Jewish education became a pressing topic for the Hong Kong Jewish community. Prior to the World War II, the community used to send their children to Jewish schools in Mainland China. As the majority of Jews left China after the war and with the Communist seizure of power in 1949, all Jewish schools in China ceased to exist. (All religions were banned and the Jews were not one of the ethnic groups recognized by the new Communist state.) In 1969, a Hebrew school finally opened its doors to promote Jewish education in Hong Kong. Some three years later, Judy Diestel, an active member of the Jewish community who had lived in Shanghai during the World War II, became the principal of the school. Under her leadership, school attendance grew and it quickly became a focal point of the community. Here, children of Sephardi and Ashkenazi families and their parents met. The latter worked together to support the school in many of its activities. As Diestel put it, “the community evolved around the school, sharing in its spirit, its events and in the mutual need for a Jewish environment”.<sup>3</sup>

Towards the end of 1970s, Hong Kong, by then the world’s third largest financial center became more cosmopolitan. This cosmopolitanism also became a characteristic of the Hong

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<sup>3</sup> [A History of the Jewish Community in Hong Kong](#), p. 25

Kong Jewish community. Prior to 1997, the Ohel Leah congregation changed from a primarily Sephardi congregation to consist of some 200 families who came from the United States, Israel, the Netherlands, and 14 other countries. This demographic change was partly due to the gradual opening of PRC which was aimed at economically to engaging the rest of the world. Hong Kong, being so close, became a regular and most popular stopping point for those wishing to do business with or in China. Jewish business people from all over the world flocked Hong Kong. In the 1990s as Israel became China's second biggest trading partner, Israelis also flooded into Hong Kong. Besides bankers and businessmen, there were also a number of journalists and students. Some were long-term residents, and many more were on temporary assignments. This is markedly different from the older Sephardi community most of which were permanent residents of Hong Kong. These "new" Jews added new dimensions and challenges to the existing Hong Kong Jewish life. Faced with these changes, the Jewish community in Hong Kong adopted "cosmopolitanism" as their "new" identity in line with the rest of the Hong Kong population. Services at Ohel Leah synagogue, for example, began to follow the Ashkenazi form. A student from an Orthodox Ashkenazi Yeshiva was appointed the Rabbi of the synagogue in 1986, and a couple of years later he went on to open the first Chabad house in Hong Kong. Around the same time, the United Jewish Congregation was formed catering to the needs of the Reform-Liberal group. Being relatively small in size yet very diverse, the Hong Kong Jewish community has developed some unique arrangements: Ohel Leah and the Jewish Community Centre are maintained by an Orthodox trust, which also sponsors the

United Jewish Congregation—the only example in the world of a Reform congregation being funded by an Orthodox one.

The religious restrictions imposed by the Communist government on the mainland presented further opportunities for the Hong Kong Jewish community, especially as the 1984 Draft Agreement between Britain and China over Hong Kong's handover guaranteed Hong Kong the freedom of "religious belief". For a while Hong Kong's Jewish Community Centre (JCC) and Ohel Leah synagogue provided material and educational support for Jewish communities on the mainland. For instance, until very recently, Jewish communities in China went to Hong Kong for Passover supplies, as result Hong Kong acquired the role as the center for Jewish life in Asia.

### **Being Jewish in Post-1997 Hong Kong**

In 1997 the British handed over Hong Kong to the Communist government in China, and Hong Kong became a special Administered Region of China. This event profoundly affected Hong Kong society. It in turn impacted on the Jews of Hong Kong. Prior to the handover, Hong Kong residents, including Jews, wondered to what degree the Communist Party would want to control Hong Kong as the 1984 Draft Agreement between Britain and China made no specific provisions for how Hong Kong's social and economic systems would be preserved or how the transition to Chinese rule would be made. At the time only three percent of Hong Kong residents were ethnically non-Chinese, and the Jews were among this

small minority. There were then only about 2,500 Jewish residents in Hong Kong. A few of the elder generation who came to Hong Kong in 1949 after the Communists took over China, were troubled by the uncertain future. Some saw “bedlam in Shanghai (in 1949) and it could happen here.” “The Age of Pacific is upon uss”, but “things could turn sour.” While many of the younger Jews had foreign passports, quite a few elderly members of the Jewish community did not. This was another factor they worried about. “I have never felt isolated or rootless as a Jew in Hong Kong”, lamented one elder member of the Jewish community. “For years there has been a vital Jewish community here and elsewhere in Asia, and I pray there always will be” (Tarnpol 1986, 35).

Wealthy and middle class ethnic Chinese flooded Canada and Australia to purchase properties at very high prices with the hope of gaining a foreign citizenship, those expatriates with foreign passports stayed in Hong Kong to wait and see what would happen. The Diestels were among them. Having moved to Hong Kong from Shanghai after the World War II, they were by then the leaders of Jewish community. Lived in the same luxury apartment block with Hong Kong's new chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa, the Diestels were full of optimism. A number of well-to-do Jews in Hong Kong shared the Diestels's optimism. It is said that money was and is the religion of Hong Kong. Five years prior to the Handover, the trustees of the Hong Kong Jewish community leased half of its property on Robinson Road in the Mid-Levels district, originally owned by the Sassoon brothers, to Hong Kong's biggest property developer. This deal made the Hong Kong Jewish community one of wealthiest Jewish communities per capita in the world. This wealth was seen by many as a guarantee of the community's future.

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In addition, the “Eisenberg connection” added another layer of warranty for the community. Shoul Eisenberg, a World War II Jewish refugee from Europe who lived briefly in Shanghai, was one of the most influential China brokers for world trade since the 1950s. He was also instrumental in re-establishing the diplomatic and trading relation between China and Israel in the early 1990s. At the time of the Handover, his protégé Avishay Hamburger was in charge of the local Israel Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong. With Eisenberg behind them, many members of the Jewish community were certain that Beijing would be unlikely to do anything drastic to harm the ever-thriving China-Jewish tie.

By 2000, the Communist government did very little to change Hong Kong except to turn it into an even greater money making machine. As the wealth of Hong Kong SAR grew, many Hong Kong Chinese who had fled before 1997 returned Hong Kong. Joining them were thousands of expatriates from other ethnic backgrounds, including Jews. Although the SARS crisis in 2003 initially hit this expansion of Hong Kong, it quickly recovered and there followed an even greater sense of optimism. As result its economy grew at a remarkable rate. This optimism that nothing can beat Hong Kong continued during the 2008 worldwide economic recession, and many more Jewish businessmen, bankers and young entrepreneurs seeking opportunities and employment moved to this financial center of Asia as Asia came to represent the future in this gloomy time. In 2010, Hong Kong’s Jewish population grew to 5,000, literally doubling from the time of 1997. Though it remains small compared to those in Europe and North America, this small Jewish community is remarkably active and diverse. There are Jews “from everywhere, even from countries where I didn’t know there were Jews,

like Zaire”, said Asher Oser, Ohel Leah’s newly appointed rabbi remarked (DeWolf 2010). This multiculturalism is matched by five congregations: in addition to the Ohel Leah synagogue, there is now a United Jewish Congregation on Hong Kong Island, three Chabad Houses covering all of Hong Kong, two Sephardi Orthodox congregations covering Kowloon and Hong Kong Island. While Jews from different backgrounds and region have choices to go to different congregations, they are also brought together by the Jewish Community Centre, a Jewish Day School, a Jewish newspaper and magazine, and Asia’s one and only Jewish film festival. The Hong Kong Jewish Film festival was first launched in 2001 by the Canadian businessman Howard Elias and his friend as a small screening party. Over the years it grew to become one of highest rated film festivals in Hong Kong. In an interview with CNN, Elias claims the festival to be “non-partisan.”

Even if someone is not active in the Jewish community, they come to the festival, which is great. There’s no religion to it, except the fact that we’re kosher. It’s just a big party.

We’re the only Jewish film festival in Asia—there’s nothing else between Jerusalem and Sydney. We’ve had people come from Shanghai and Beijing, and the Israeli ambassador to Myanmar came a couple years ago.

In addition the festival is also reported to have become a very Hong Kong affair rather than solely a Jewish one. In 2009, according to Elias, about a third of its audience was local Chinese, and they “absolutely loved the festival” (DeWolf 2009).

While the Hong Kong Jewish film festival is becoming largely secular, many other secular aspects of Hong Kong life have proved problematic for observant Jews. One problem

is Jewish dietary restrictions that prohibit the consumption of pork, shellfish and other popular Hong Kong foods that have not been judged kosher by a rabbi. For years the Jewish community remained largely an “almost secular community”, according Michael Green, the committee chair of the Jewish Historical Society. For many years, the community lacked a permanent rabbi and the restaurant inside the Jewish Club was only ‘kosher-style’ until the late 1990s (DeWolf 2010). In 1995, the new Jewish Community Centre (JCC) replaced the former Jewish Recreational Club. Besides provide recreational facilities to the Hong Kong Jewish Community, the center also houses a Dairy restaurant, a meat restaurant and more recently a kosher mart catering to observant Jews. The kosher products served or sold are all imported. Those from the USA and Canada bear printed hasgachot while products from Australia and England are listed in Kashrut Guides. Besides the JCC, there are now a number of kosher restaurants throughout Hong Kong, and now one can even find kosher products in Hong Kong’s major supermarket. Today a number of the larger hotels in Hong Kong, such as the Langham Hotel in Kowloon, also began to serve Passover dinners. Langham Hotel’s Main Street Deli was one of the first to start the trend. It has been importing kosher food from the United States since 2005. Keeping Kosher is no longer a problem in Hong Kong.

Another issue many Jewish families faced is their children’s education: specifically, findings ways to give their children a Jewish education but at the same time maintain a highly competitive international standard. Carmel School’s Elsa High School, Hong Kong’s first Jewish high school, tries to bridge these two different requirements. Its curriculum combines the best elements of religious and secular education with a firm foundation in an internationally



recognized syllabus. While Jewish students love the Jewish experience they get in Elsa High, students from other religious or secular backgrounds enroll in the school because it extends their awareness and understanding of various economic, political, historical, and geographical perspectives (DeWolf 2010).

~~While Jewish schools like~~ Elsa High offers a Jewish perspective to non-Jewish students in Hong Kong, Hong Kong Jewish residents also ~~benefit from found find~~ the multi-cultural experience of living in Hong Kong ~~enriching~~. The South African born Judy Green is the chairwomen of Hong Kong Jewish Historical Society. She recalls that during her many visits to the Hong Kong Jewish cemetery, being right behind a Buddhist monastery, that ‘you can hear the nuns chanting. It’s very peaceful.’

For Rabbi Asher Oser, the current Rabbi of Ohel Leah Synagogues, being Jewish in secular and multicultural Hong Kong is what Jewish life is about because Judaism tries to make sense of those contradictions. In a way this secular and multicultural nature of Hong Kong life does help to moderate many of the conflicts within the Jewish community. Rabbi Oser predicts that there will eventually be “Asianization of Judaism,” but he does not quite know what that would entail. Like many other members of the Hong Kong Jewish community, Rabbi Oser was born in Australia, educated in Canada, and most recently served as the rabbi for a congregation in Providence, Rhode Island. “There are few Jews here, and it’s a transient place, yet there are deep roots,” he says. Being rooted in this transient place summons up not only Hong Kong Jewish life, but life in Hong Kong in general. For the Hong Kong Jewish

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community, their deep roots are their shared Jewish identity no matter where they are from originally.

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