

Being Jewish and cosmopolitan: A Jewish experience in Hong Kong

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Postcolonial theory deals with cosmopolitanism in a somewhat contradictory manner. As the Filipino-American literary theorist E. San Juan Jr. notes:

Based on the orthodox tenets laid out by Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak—the ‘founding fathers’ of this discursive territory, postcolonial theory seeks to explain the ambivalent and hybrid nature of subjects, their thinking and behaviour, in the former colonies of the Western imperial powers, mainly the British Commonwealth societies. It seeks to prove that the colonial enterprise was not just a one-way affair of oppression and exploitation, but a reciprocal or mutual co- or inter-determination of both metropolitan master and ‘third world’ subaltern. Whatever the subtle differences among mainstream postcolonial critics, they all agree that colonialism, for all its terror and barbarism, presents a rhetorical and philosophical anomaly: the postcolonial subject as identical and different from the history textbook’s portrayal of the submissive and silent victim of imperial conquest.¹

Stuart Hall qualifies this by noting that such approaches to the cosmopolitan often are rooted in discrepancies between what he calls the ‘cosmopolitan of the above’, that of ‘global entrepreneurs

following the pathways of corporate power', and the 'cosmopolitan from below', those who have been uprooted from their native lands due to extenuating circumstances and often against their will.² The case of Hong Kong provides a substantial examination of what it means to be a cosmopolitan from above, both historically in terms of real colonial presence and power—that of the British Empire at the height of its pink-flushed world domination—and as a 'model minority' under such circumstances as well as in the postcolonial world of modern Hong Kong. The history of the Jews in Hong Kong illustrates the pitfalls in assuming the view 'from above' is uniform or indeed 'from above'. The confusion of the cosmopolitan with the utopian goals of trans-historical views of mobility with the lived practice of Jews in British and now Chinese Hong Kong is a powerful corrective of this view.

Today there are between six and ten thousand Jews living in this densely populated cosmopolitan city and place of transit. 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 centre of Jewish life in Asia. The Hong Kong Jewish Community Centre (popularly known as the JCC), located in a tall modern luxury apartment tower in central Hong Kong, is its focal point. In this essay, I will examine how in different historical periods, from under the British rule for the most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the years following Hong Kong's handover to the Communist China in 1997, the various Jewish groups in Hong Kong have adopted and re-adopted 'cosmopolitanism' as their identity while remaining Jewish. It is a cosmopolitanism of economic mobility and graduated visibility, that of the model minority in a world in which being Jewish has been at best tolerated and at worst a stigma. Focusing on Hong Kong, this former British Colony and now a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China, situated simultaneously at the centre and at the periphery of debates

about the cosmopolitan, this essay will add a new dimension to the parallel discussions of Jewish cosmopolitanism in Europe and North America.

A short history

Today 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, alongside 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*, or diseased jungle, as some called it, on the eastern periphery of the British Empire into a cosmopolitan global city and the financial centre of Asia.

The first group of Jews arrived in Hong Kong in 1842, after the First Anglo-Chinese War — better known as the First Opium War. Most of them came via what were then British Bombay and Calcutta. A number of them had already been trading in nearby Canton for a number of years. The history of modern China is, as pointed out by John King Fairbank, the doyen of Chinese studies, inextricably entwined with that of the opium trade.³ As its prime brokers, the first groups of Jewish traders in Hong Kong were part of the making of that history. After settling down in Hong Kong, as well as in Shanghai from the 1860s onwards, these Jews, although had acquired the British nationality, were however not assimilated to become either British or Chinese. As global entrepreneurs of the 19th century, they adopted cosmopolitanism as their 'new' identity. In this sense they serve fascinating examples of cosmopolitanism from below and not simply assimilated Jews.

Prior to the First Opium War in 1839, the Sephardic textile merchant David Sassoon (1792–1864), originally from Baghdad, had already been selling opium to the Chinese for a number of years.

During the First Opium War, with the support of the British army, he sent his second son, Elias David Sassoon, to Hong Kong to cash in on the opium trade. In the aftermath of the 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 international pressure to stop the opium trade increased, the business became highly contested but even more lucrative. When the Chinese government imposed a ban on opium, the Sassoons and other traders, many of them Jewish, seized the opportunity and began to control its price. By 1870 David Sassoon, Son & Co. was indisputably the largest opium importer in China.⁴ The firm dominated more than one third of the total Indian opium trade to China.⁵ 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 Hardoon, were able to widen their business interests into shipping, banking, and land speculation in Hong Kong as well as in Shanghai.

Silas (Saleh) Aaron Hardoon was the most controversial figure in Baghdadi Jewish circles in the Far East. Born in Baghdad, he moved as a child with his impoverished family to British Bombay, where Hardoon senior established close business ties with the Sassoon family. As an adult, Silas first took employment at David Sassoon, Sons & Co. in Hong Kong and Shanghai. Eventually he became partner and manager of E.D. Sassoon & Co's Shanghai branch— an enterprise of Elias David Sassoon. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Shanghai grew to become Asia's most important cosmopolitan commercial hub. Hardoon took full advantage of this. With the influx of Chinese refugees from surrounding country and town into Shanghai as the result of the Taiping Rebellion in the 1860s, the city grew exponentially. Land became ever more valuable. Opium and land speculation made Hardoon

at one point the richest man in the Far East. He became known as the ‘Rothschild of the East.’ In Shanghai, Hardoon married a Euro-Asian woman who was also an ardent follower of Buddhism. Hardoon also became closely associated with various Chinese social groups in Shanghai. His home, the Aili Garden, was a Chinese-style garden designed by the famous Buddhist revolutionary monk and Chinese patriot Huang Zongyang. Through Huang, Hardoon became acquainted with the founder of the Chinese republic, Sun Yat-sen, and hosted a number of Chinese revolutionary meetings at the Aili Garden. However, throughout his life in Shanghai, Hardoon avoided becoming assimilated to the Chinese way of life or the life of colonialists. While embracing cosmopolitanism as his identity and his involvement with Jewish circles in Asia were minimal, he remained Jewish. Together with his wife, the couple adopted a number of Jewish children as well as White Russian children who had fled to China after the Bolshevik revolution, and brought them up as Jews. The most colourful and controversial episode came after Hardoon’s death. His ‘Jewish’ funeral was conducted by a Jewish rabbi, but during which Buddhist monks and Taoist priests cited *sutra* and performed Taoist rituals. One day later at the memorial service, some Chinese funeral specialists performed elaborate mortuary rites in Confucian style, resembling those carried out during Chinese funerals.⁶

In its earliest days, most members of the Hong Kong Jewish circle were Sephardic 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 of Wong Nei Chong (in today’s Happy Valley), and two years later the first Jew was buried there, at the same time as the Crown Lease was granted. By the 1860s, as the opium trade prospered, more Jews moved to Hong Kong as employees or partners of David Sassoon, Sons & Co. and its rival firm, E. D. Sassoon & Co. As the Jewish population

grew, it also became necessary to have regular places of worship for the ever-expanding Jewish community. From 1867 the community began to lease premises 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, at the end of nineteenth century, ‘class as well as religious division had become a feature of the community.’⁷ In the 1880s and 1890s pogroms brought an influx of Jewish refugees from Russia and the Balkans. Unlike their Sephardic counterparts, these Ashkenazi Jews from Europe were mostly poor. They found employment in badly paid jobs as barmen, innkeepers, cleaners, and so on. A number of women resorted to prostitution. There were also regular police reports showing that some Ashkenazim were involved in street brawls, assaults, and in using indecent language, a particularly British colonial crime. These incidents caused great embarrassment to the well-established and fairly wealthy Sephardic community. These newcomers were of a different social, cultural, linguistic, religious, and economic background. They did not find it easy to adjust to the Sephardic tradition of Hong Kong Jewish life, and were not willing to be identified with the Sephardim. 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 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 Ashkenazim could not form a *minyan* (the ten male Jews necessary for communal prayer) amongst themselves, they did join with the Sephardim.

Belilios is a prime example of the complexity of speaking about a homogenous Jewish sense of identity as colonial subjects in Hong Kong. At the beginning of my essay, I introduced Stuart Hall's distinction a 'cosmopolitan of the above', that of 'global entrepreneurs following the pathways of corporate power', and a 'cosmopolitan from below'. The question of how individuals such as Belilios, as well as Hardoon in Shanghai as mentioned earlier, integrated oneself into both a Jewish community, defined as homogenous in a colonial British setting, shows how the cosmopolitan can become an alternative identity in such conflicted contexts. Venetian by origin, Belilios did not always see eye to eye with other Sephardim 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 the majority of Sephardim in Hong Kong, and these Sephardic merchants were sometimes referred to at the time as 'merchants from Arab lands'). To ease the tension, Belilios devoted his time and energy to strengthening his social and political position in British Hong Kong. It is worth mentioning that, being a British subject, Belilios, as well as many other Sephardim in Hong Kong, desperately wanted to be identified with the British elites but remain Jewish in a cosmopolitan sense.

To being with he played the Jewish card by making attempts to establish ties with the British Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli. This resulted in his building the Beaconsfield Arcade in central Hong Kong named in Disraeli's honor. In 1879 Belilios gave £1,000 to the British governor of Hong Kong to erect a statue of Disraeli there, but his offer was rejected by Disraeli himself. After that Belilios devoted his time and wealth to philanthropy work. Through his engagement in philanthropy, he became a cosmopolitan. He used the money to set up a medical scholarship fund named after Belilios and also helped to establish the Alice Memorial Hospital.⁸ 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. Sun Yat-sen, the ‘father of Chinese nation’, was one of the first graduates of the college.

Subsequently Belilios donated more money to the Hong Kong colonial government to build the Central School for Girls to give ‘an ordinary middle-class English education to the daughters of Chinese, English, and Indian residents of China.’ The school was later renamed Belilios Public School in his honour, and is still standing today. Belilios was also famous for his philanthropic 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 Hong Kong society, and became the first Hong Kong resident to receive this honour.⁹ Between 1881 and 1900 Belilios also served on the Hong Kong Legislative Council.

As Belilios became more involved with the British ruling class in Hong Kong through his philanthropy work, he moved further away from the Sephardic community. One major conflict he had with other Sephardim was over the building of the new synagogue. Belilios wanted the new synagogue to welcome their Ashkenazi brothers from Europe, but the location he had chosen was not acceptable to other members of the Jewish community. Belilios had bought a plot of land on the prestigious Kennedy Road, and he proposed to sell a portion to the synagogue trustees to build the new synagogue. But Jacob Elias Sassoon in Bombay refused to go along with it. In the meantime other members of the Jewish community in Hong Kong also opposed Belilios’s 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 British neighborhood.¹⁰ As a result, Belilios resigned as one of the managers of the fund for the new synagogue. In Hong Kong today, Belilios is remembered as a philanthropist and cosmopolitan, not as a Jew.

Meanwhile the Kadoories emerged as the leading figures in the Jewish community. Like Belilios, the Kadoories were also 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 addition, the Kadoories were amongst some of the most prominent families in Hong Kong's economic and civic culture. Even until today their names are enshrined in the names of streets, buildings, and institutions across the territory. The Peninsula Hotel, one of Hong Kong's most famous landmarks, is but one example. As the founders of China and Light, the Kadoories were also responsible for illuminating the streets of Hong Kong and supplying electricity for eighty per cent of the territory's population.

Married in England to an English Sephardi, Elly Kadoorie was deeply attracted to Victorian English life. With the intention of introducing the concept of the English club to Hong Kong Jewish society, he turned the Hong Kong Jewish Recreational Club into a Victorian club fit for Hong Kong colonial life. In 1920 Israel Cohen, a British Jew and a Communist travelling through Hong Kong, remarked that the Jewish Recreational Club 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.’¹¹ Besides a billiard room, the club also brought tennis, bowling, and croquet — all Victorian games — to the Hong Kong Jewish community. Here we have all the external markers of colonial cosmopolitanism now translated into a Jewish setting.¹²

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 opposition from some members of the synagogue. Ohel Leah was, of course, a Sephardic synagogue. The movement of Hong Kong Jewry into the world of British Jewry is very interesting. By the nineteenth century the original Sephardic community in London, still very much present in congregations such as the seventeenth-century Bevis Marks Synagogue, had been eclipsed by German and Eastern European Ashkenazi Jewry. In Hong Kong, the presence of ‘Baghdadi’ Jews meant that the movement towards ‘reform’ in the *minhag* in London was relatively late coming to Ohel Leah.

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. Not being ‘British enough’ in a way helped them to maintain their Jewish identity in this self-consciously cosmopolitan British colony—cosmopolitan in that it lived off being a transit point for trade and relied on the movement of peoples as well as the movement of goods. While they were major players in the economic as well as in the political life of the city, the ‘Baghdadi’ Jews remained too ‘Oriental’ for the late 19th and early 20th century British. They were cosmopolitan from below in Stuart Hall’s sense. But this marginalization was not limited to Jews from beyond the Empire. Matthew Nathan, one of Hong Kong’s high-achievers as well as the only Jewish governor (1903–1907) is an example. Nathan, who

initiated Hong Kong's urban planning and the city's infrastructure, was instrumental in Hong Kong's future development. During his tenure, the construction of Kowloon–Canton Railway, Hong Kong's first and most important railway, and the only one built 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 honour his monumental achievements and his contribution to Hong Kong. His superior at the Colonial Office, Sir Reginald Antrobus, praised him as a 'first rate official'.¹³ 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 presumed faults was that as the governor he was the nominal head of St. John's Cathedral, but being a professing Jew, he did not attend the Church of England Sunday services. It was a 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 Hong Kong British society.¹⁴ Nathan 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. During this time he took an 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, Nathan made an effort to attend the Anglican Church regularly, but remained absent from all Easter services. By 1858 the extensive debate following Lionel de Rothschild's election to the House of Commons in 1847 had eventually led the House to change the oath

to permit observant Jews to serve in that body. By the end of the century Jewish civil emancipation was not in question, but the social acceptance of Jews in conservative arenas such as Whitehall (the Foreign Service) meant that they could not 'flaunt' their Jewishness. Being present as part of the community at Easter services was considered to be a quasi-official obligation. Throughout the rest of his life, Nathan remained a professing Jew.¹⁵

Jewish Life in twentieth-century Hong Kong

Hong Kong's Jewish community, like other colonial, peripheral but substantial communities, such as the Chinese, the Muslim, and others in Hong Kong, has inevitably been influenced by its political and historical environment. The Sino-Japanese War of the 1930s and 1940s cast a shadow on the life of Hong Kong, and it impacted on 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. Civilian nationals of those countries that were at war with Japan were kept in POW camps. As many Hong Kong Jews had acquired British nationality, they did not escape this treatment. After occupying Hong Kong, the Japanese authority implemented a policy aimed at restoring 'Asia values' in Hong Kong and returning the city to the East Asians. In the process of the Japanese eradication of 'the poisonous remains of British cultural leftovers',¹⁶ the Victorian-style Jewish Recreational Club, which frequently provided entertainment for the British forces that were fighting the Japanese, was badly damaged. With the intention of providing entertainment for those 'soldiers with

Jewish persuasion', Lawrence Kadoorie instigated the formation of the Jewish Ladies' Committee. In the meantime, on the issue of helping the Jewish refugees, the Hong Kong Jewish community 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 had entered the war with Japan and Shanghai was under Japanese occupation. The long-established Jewish Benevolent Society was the first to assume responsibility for taking care of them. As the Jewish community leader, Lawrence Kadoorie appealed to Hong Kong Jews to unite and help these refugees: 'Today more than ever is it the duty of every Jew to realize his responsibilities.'¹⁷

As soon as the war ended in 1945, life and social structure in Hong Kong returned more or less to normal, and many of those who had escaped during the conflict returned. By 1947 the population in Hong Kong had grown to 1,750,000. Refugees crowded into Hong Kong, and many of them were Jewish refugees from Europe who had 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 of these refugees. During the war years, they had already worked closely with Horace Kadoorie to provide relief work for the Jewish refugees in Shanghai. They coordinated with Lawrence Kadoorie, 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 repatriated British, 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 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. Some years earlier, in fear of increased anti-Semitism, Lawrence Kadoorie had warned the community that 'In trying to help 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.'¹⁸

In addition to the Kadoories, the Hong Kong Jewish community, while still readjusting to post-war life after returning 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 of the Jews after his concentration camp experience,¹⁹ one could argue that after a half century of conflicting interests, World War II brought the Sephardic 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 makeshift synagogue was set up at the Peninsula Hotel, and the Hong Kong Jewish Women's Association, a larger reincarnation of the earlier 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 the 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 Sephardic 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 People's Republic of China (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 was 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.²⁰ About seventy per cent of the employees at CLP went on strike. Joining with many other prominent businessmen, the Kadoories stood firmly on the side of the British. A few years later, Lawrence Kadoorie was knighted by the Queen for his contribution to the British Empire.

Whilst the leaders of the Hong Kong Jewish community such as the Kadoories were preoccupied with 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 during this period. He noted that the Hong Kong Jews were 'a community without much Jewishness. Having come from Singapore, we were surprised 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 Jewish Relief Council was poorly maintained.²¹

As the 1970s dawned, things began to pick up in Hong Kong, and individuals grew wealthier. Members of the Jewish community felt a need to bring Jewish culture and religion back to Hong Kong Jewish life. Providing Jewish children with a Jewish education became a pressing topic for the Hong Kong Jewish community. Prior to World War II, the community used to send their children to Jewish schools in Mainland China. As the majority of Jews had left China after the war and with the Communist seizure of power in 1949, all Jewish schools in China had ceased to exist. In 1969 a Hebrew school opened its doors to promote Jewish education in Hong Kong. Under the leadership of Judy Diestel, an active member of the Jewish community who had lived in Shanghai during World War II, school attendance grew, and the school quickly became a focal point of the community. Here, Sephardic and Ashkenazi children 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.’²²

Towards the end of the 1970s Hong Kong, by then the world’s third largest financial centre became more cosmopolitan. This cosmopolitanism also marked the ever-growing Hong Kong Jewish community. Prior to 1997 the Ohel Leah congregation changed from a primarily Sephardic congregation to one consisting of some 200 families who came from the United States, Israel, the Netherlands, and fourteen other countries. This demographic change was partly due to the gradual opening of the PRC, the aim of which was to engage economically with the rest of the world. Hong Kong, being so close, became a regular and popular stopping point for those wishing to do business with or in China. Jewish

businesses, especially many Israeli companies, used Hong Kong as a launch pad into the Mainland market. In addition to 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 was markedly different from members of the older Sephardic community, most of whom 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, being at the economic crossroads of the New Asia, adopted this new cosmopolitanism as their ‘new’ identity as opposed to the old cosmopolitanism of the British Empire. Services at Ohel Leah Synagogue, for example, began to follow the Ashkenazi form as the Baghdadi Jews gave way in their numbers to Jews from Western Europe and North America. 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. The Chabad (Lubavitcher) movement is by definition not only rooted in specific Orthodox practices but also cosmopolitan in that it caters to Jews of any and all definitions, with, of course, the understood notion of proselytizing them. Around the same time, the United Jewish Congregation was formed to cater 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, the Jewish Community Centre 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, and as a result Hong Kong acquired the role as the centre of 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 Administrative Region. This event profoundly affected Hong Kong society and, in turn, impacted on the Jews of Hong Kong. Prior to the handover 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 had 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 per cent 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 older generation who came to Hong Kong in 1949 after the Communists took over China, were troubled by the uncertain future. Some worried that what had happened in Shanghai in 1949 could happen in Hong

Kong. While many of the younger generations of Jews had foreign passports, quite a few elderly members of the Jewish community did not. Being cosmopolitans became a factor they worried about: 'I have never felt isolated or rootless as a Jew in Hong Kong', lamented one older member of the Jewish community. In time of uncertainty, the need to be Jewish grew stronger: 'For years there has been a vital Jewish community here and elsewhere in Asia, and I pray there will always be.'²³ Being Jewish was seen as belonging to a multicultural Hong Kong mix but with a strong religiously rooted component. The echo of the anxiety of Diaspora Jewry about a Jewish community always on the edge of attack and dissolution is paralleled by the cosmopolitan notion of a Jewry always present, no matter what the context.

Ironically, while wealthy and middle-class ethnic Chinese flooded into Canada and Australia to purchase properties at very high prices in the hope of gaining a foreign citizenship, those expatriates with foreign passports, including many Jewish residents, stayed in Hong Kong to wait and see what would happen. The Diestels were among them. Having moved to Hong Kong from Shanghai after World War II, they were by then the leaders of the Jewish community. Living in the same luxury apartment block as Hong Kong's new chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa, the Diestels were full of optimism, which was shared by a number of well-to-do Hong Kong Jews. They embraced the religion of Hong Kong: money. 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 the wealthiest Jewish communities per capita in the world. This wealth was seen by many as a guarantee of the community's future. In addition, the 'Eisenberg connection' added another layer of

warranty for the community. Shoul Eisenberg, another 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 diplomatic and trading relations between China and Israel in 1992. At the time of the handover, his protégé Avishay Hamburger was in charge of the local Israel Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong. By the mid-1990s, Israel had become China's second biggest trading partner, and the Israel Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong played a pivotal role in promoting trade with Israel. 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 ties.

By the year 2000 the Communist government had done 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 home. Joining them were thousands of expatriates from other ethnic backgrounds, including Jews. Although the SARS virus crisis in 2003 initially hit this expansion of Hong Kong, it quickly recovered, and there followed an even greater sense of optimism. As a result, its economy grew at a remarkable rate. The optimistic notion that nothing could beat Hong Kong persisted during the 2008 worldwide economic recession, and many more Jewish businessmen, bankers, and young entrepreneurs seeking opportunities and employment moved to this Asian financial centre as Asia came to represent the future at this gloomy time.

In 2010 Hong Kong's Jewish population grew to 5,000, literally doubling since 1997. Though it remains small compared to those in Europe and North America, this 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',²⁴ Asher Oser, Ohel Leah's newly appointed rabbi, remarked. This new trend is

matched by five congregations: in addition to Ohel Leah Synagogue, there is now a United Jewish Congregation on Hong Kong Island; three Chabad Houses covering all of Hong Kong; and two Sephardic Orthodox congregations covering Kowloon and Hong Kong Island. Yet cosmopolitanism did not disappear completely. While Jews from different backgrounds and regions have a choice of congregations, they are also brought together by the Jewish Community Centre, a Jewish day school, and a Jewish newspaper and magazine.

In 1995 the new Jewish Community Centre (JCC) replaced the former Jewish Recreational Club. Replacing the former Victorian games, the JCC is equipped with modern amenities including a luxury swimming pool. In addition to provide recreational facilities for the Hong Kong Jewish community, the centre also houses a mikvah, a dairy restaurant, a meat restaurant, and, more recently, a kosher shopping centre 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. So keeping kosher is no longer a problem in Hong Kong. At the same time kosher food is becoming an integral part of non-Chinese international 'healthy' cuisine, which can be enjoyed by anyone, not just Jews.

For many years, one major concern for many Jewish families was their children's education: specifically, finding 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, became the answer as it bridges 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 at Elsa High, students from other religious or secular backgrounds enroll in the school because it offers a high-standard British education and extends their awareness and understanding of various economic, political, historical, and geographical perspectives.²⁵ Elsa High offers a Jewish perspective to non-Jewish students in Hong Kong, while Hong Kong Jewish residents also benefit from the cosmopolitan experience of living there. The South African-born Judy Green is the chairwoman of the Hong Kong Jewish Historical Society. She recalls in a discussion with the author that during her many visits to the Hong Kong Jewish cemetery, situated right behind a Buddhist monastery, ‘you can hear the nuns chanting. It’s very peaceful’.

While Green finds Buddhist chanting peaceful, Hong Kong’s international community enjoys 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 has grown to become one of highest-rated film festivals in Hong Kong. In an interview with CNN, Elias claimed 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.²⁶

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’.²⁷

But the question is: Is there a room for Jewishness in this cosmopolitan city? For Rabbi Asher Oser, the current rabbi of Ohel Leah Synagogue, being Jewish in secular and cosmopolitan Hong Kong is what Jewish life is about. ‘What Judaism does is it tries to make sense of those contradictions’, he says. Rabbi Oser predicts that there will eventually be an ‘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 said in an interview with the author Being rooted in this transient place sums up not only Hong Kong Jewish life but also life in Hong Kong in general. For the Hong Kong Jewish community, their deep roots are their shared Jewish identity no matter where they are from originally. The post-colonial world of contemporary Hong Kong allows the notion of a cosmopolitanism from above, to use Stuart Hall’s label, more specifically the cosmopolitanism of the Jewish merchant and the banker to trump the national identity of Jews as Israelis, Americans, or British. Oser’s romantic vision of a ‘Asianization of Judaism’ evokes precisely this cosmopolitan leveling effect but from above, not from below. What the reality will bring with the now radicalized diminution of the promised guarantees of freedom, including freedom of religious assembly, with Hong Kong now being part of the PRC, is at present unclear. This is not solely a Jewish concern. The fear for the future is currently being experienced by the majority population living in Hong Kong. But the new cosmopolitanism of Hong Kong’s Jewish life may decay into a tourist attraction, like the present evocation of an earlier Jewish life in Shanghai or Kaifeng. In this respect, the Jewish experience in Hong Kong will become a monument rather lived experience.

Notes

¹ E. San Juan Jr., “The Limits of Postcolonial Criticism: The Discourse of Edward Said,” *Solidarity* (2005) <http://www.solidarity-us.org/current/node/1781>. (accessed?)

² Stuart Hall in conversation with Pnina Werbner, “Cosmopolitanism, Globalisation and Diaspora,” in *Anthropology and the New Cosmopolitanism: Rooted, Feminist and Vernacular Perspectives*, ed. P. Werbner, ASA Monographs 45 (Oxford: Berg, 2008), 345–60.

³ See Frank Dikötter, Xun Zhou, and Lars Laamann, *Narcotic Culture: A Social History of Drug Consumption in modern China*. (London: Hurst & Co.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 234.

⁴ “Commercial Reports from Her Majesty’s Consuls in China: 1879,” British Parliamentary Papers (Trade Reports) [C.2718] China. No. 3 (1880), 215.

⁵ “Further Memorials Respecting the China Treaty Revision Convention,” British Parliamentary Papers [C.80] China. No. 6 (1870), 21.

⁶ Chiara Betta, ‘Silas Aaron Haroon (1815-1931): Marginality and Adaptation in Shanghai’, PhD Dissertation, University of London, 1997

⁷ Carl T. Smith, *A Sense of History* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Education Publishing, 1996), 400.

⁸ E. J. Eitel, *Europe in China* (London: Luzac & Co.; Hong Kong: Kelly and Walsh, 1895), 563–4.

⁹ *Times*, 1893, quoted in G. H. Choa, *The Life and Times of Sir Kai Ho Kai: A Prominent Figure in Nineteenth-Century Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2000), 58

¹⁰ Smith, *A Sense of History*, 400–1.

¹¹ “The Journal of a Jewish Traveller,” *Bulletin Igud Yotzei Sin* 57, no. 402 (August-September 2010): 88–9.

¹² Cf. Pamela F. Wilson and John M. Swan, *Glenferrie Hill Recreation Club: A Memoir 1907–2001* (J. M. Swan, 2008).

¹³ Colonial Office Papers, Public Record Office, London 446/50. Minutes by Sir Reginald Antrobus, 28 January 1906.

¹⁴ Anthony Haydon, *Sir Matthew Nathan: British Colonial Governor and Civil Servant* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1976).

¹⁵ Stephanie Chasin, *Citizens of Empire: Jews in the Service of the British Empire, 1906–1940* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008), 47.

¹⁶ “Cultural Activities in the New Hong Kong: A Special Article from the Hong Kong Broadcasting Office,” *New East Asia*, September 1942, 107–8.

¹⁷ “Lawrence Kadoorie’s Speech at the Jewish Recreational Club,” February 1939. From the Hong Kong Heritage Project archive.

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¹⁸ Kadoorie, 1939.

¹⁹ Sander L. Gilman, “To Quote Primo Levi: If You Don’t Speak Yiddish, You’re Not a Jew,” in *Inscribing the Other* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 293–316.

²⁰ Gary Ka-wai Cheung, *Hong Kong’s Watershed: The 1967 Riots* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press 2009), 63.

²¹ David Buxbaum, quoted in “A Brief Sojourn in Asia and the Flourishing of Jewish Life,” *Jewish Asia Times* 5, no. 1 (April 2010): 20.

²² Debra Maynard in association with George Ngan, “A History of the Jewish Community in Hong Kong,” in *A Vision Fulfilled* (Hong Kong: The Jewish Community Centre, 1995), 25.

²³ Paula Tarnapol, “Pondering the Future under Chinese Rule,” *Jewish Monthly*, March 1986, 35.

²⁴ Christopher DeWolf, “Keeping Kosher,” *China Daily*, 8 December 2010.

http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hkedition/2010-12/08/content_11666891.htm (accessed 21 February 2014).

²⁵ DeWolf, “Keeping Kosher.”

²⁶ Christopher DeWolf, “Interview: Howard Elias, Founder of Asia's only Jewish Film Festival,” CNN.com, 12 November 2009. <http://travel.cnn.com/hong-kong/play/interview-howard-elias-founder-asias-only-jewish-film-festival-963969> (accessed 12 February 2014).

²⁷ DeWolf, “Interview: Howard Elias.”

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