

ABSTRACT

Between 1938 and 1941, while the world closed its doors to desperate European Jewish refugees, nearly 20,000 of them fled to Shanghai; the great majority survived World War Two. This dissertation examines the story of the “Shanghai Jews” from the Chinese and Japanese perspectives and in so doing sheds new light on the complicated relationships among China, Japan, Germany, and the United States before and during the war.

When the European Jews first arrived in Shanghai in the summer of 1938, the Chinese were desperately combating the invading Japanese. Both the Chinese government and Japanese occupation authorities thought carefully about the Jews and attempted to use them to attract capital from the international Jewish community in order to fund their war with each another.

In early 1939, the Nationalist Government adopted Sun Ke’s plan to establish a Jewish settlement for the refugees in Southwestern China. At the same time, Chinese leaders hoped to attract financial support from world, especially American, Jewry, so that they could continue, and eventually prevail in, their resistance against Japan. However, China was still nominally an ally of Germany at the time and had to be aware of Berlin’s reaction to this plan. Nevertheless, after American Jewish leaders enthusiastically embraced the settlement plan and promised to convince the Roosevelt administration to support China financially, Chinese officials gradually abandoned their concerns about Germany.

The Japanese, on the other hand, instead of adopting Nazi Germany’s policy of eliminating the Jews, attempted to exploit their purported financial and political power in

the service of Japan's war in East Asia. With the Shanghai Jews under their control, the Japanese believed that the international Jewish community would not be able to involve itself in anti-Japanese activities, and American Jewish leaders would work to pressure the Roosevelt administration on Japan's behalf. However, after the conclusion of the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy in September 1940, pro-German elements in the military and government gained power and demanded that Japan's policy change toward the Shanghai Jewish refugees. After the Pearl Harbor attack, the Shanghai Jews lost any remaining value they may have had to the Japanese.