

Compositing Japanese Imperialism in Two Chinese Animated Features: *A Jewish Girl in Shanghai* and *Xi Bai Po 2: Wang Er Xiao*

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Many years ago, I published an article on Disney's *Mulan* (1998), of which I am frequently reminded by the warblers on UCLA's campus. A mainstay of karaoke events in the residence halls, the music of *Mulan* continues to serve as a reference point for many US-based youth. I overhear excerpts in a variety of contexts, from students singing impromptu in the mailroom to more formal events, such as when Lea Salonga, who sang the title role in the film, came to campus. The cross-dressing in the source material yielded some unexpected cross-cultural identifications: the cast of Asian American stars constituted an Asian American collectivity that supplanted Chinese specificity; the dragon Mushu (a novel albeit bizarre addition voiced by Eddie Murphy) and the vocals of Christina Aguilera suggest attempts to appeal to even wider and more diverse audiences. I still marvel at how a story so invested in filial piety and specific kinship relations transforms into that of a plucky, young heroine whose individual perseverance helps her achieve maturity and selfhood like, well, like so many other Disney princesses do.

Mulan's journey reminds me of two other salient facts. First, it arrived before Internet streaming of video had become normative, so the reception context for the film is markedly different from today. Second, many of the film's antecedents, including Bu Wancang's *Mulan Joins the Army* (*Mulan Cong Jun*, 1939), implied a nationalist perspective—for Bu, one shaped by the contemporary Japanese occupation of China. I continue to ponder the relations among animated narratives largely created for children, politics, and cross-cultural circulation.

This set of concerns leads me to consider two relatively recent features available for streaming on various websites, both produced by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio (which historically owes a debt to Disney's innovations in the field). *A Jewish Girl in Shanghai* (2010) and *Xi Bai Po 2: Wang Er Xiao* (2013) are both set against the backdrop of Japanese occupation. Not unlike Disney's *Mulan*, both also contain scenes of loss; however they also include more graphic scenes of violence than a Disney blockbuster. The films display and, to differing degrees, celebrate children's roles in military conflict and the central role they might play in the assertion of Chinese nationalism.

Based on the graphic novel by Wu Lin, who also wrote the script, *A Jewish Girl in Shanghai* (directors Wang Genfa and Zhang Zhenhui) appeared in the wake of resurgent interest in Shanghai Jewish life following the sixtieth anniversary of WWII. It circulated widely at international film festivals and can now be streamed online for a relatively small fee. The website for the film bills it as “the first animation movie ever . . . expressing the Chinese-Jewish friendship.”¹

Of course, Jews have long resided in China, beginning in Kaifeng over a thousand years ago. Scholar Xin Xu has argued that China adopted relatively liberal policies toward Jews during the history of their presence in China, from the oldest community established in Kaifeng to cities that had, for various periods of time, significant Jewish populations (Shanghai and Harbin, in particular). His brief survey highlights several historical moments when the Chinese government invested in the preservation of Jewish cultural traditions. That said, he also notes the ways in which specifically Kaifeng Jews complicated the efforts of the communist government to classify ethnic minorities in the 1950s; eventually Kaifeng Jews were treated as Han (despite some controversies in the early 1950s and again in the early 1980s).

Shanghai's Jewish community emerged in three overlapping waves of immigrants: the arrival of Baghdadi Jewish merchants in the mid-nineteenth century, the relocation of Russian Jews in early years of the twentieth century, and the influx of refugees during WWII. Chiara Betta traces the Baghdadi, or Iraqi, Jews from Bombay in 1830.² She describes the ventures of Elias David Sassoon, who extended his family business to Hong Kong in 1843 and to Shanghai in 1845. As she notes, "The early social and religious life of the Baghdadi Jewish community in Shanghai rotated around the Sassoon firms," including the establishment in 1887 of the Beth El Synagogue, which was no more than a large room to accommodate the perhaps thirty or forty individuals comprising the community.³ According to Betta, the Sassoons remained the center of Shanghai's Jewish life until the arrival of Russians decades after the Sassoons first set up shop in China.

The initial Jewish community in Shanghai demonstrates the complexities of colonial hierarchies, since they navigated between the British and Ottoman empires.⁴ Betta further argues that the Shanghai Baghdadi traders underwent a gradual process of Anglicization, which involved, among other shifts, the displacement of Judaeo-Arabic language with English.⁵ Heavily invested in the importation of opium into China from India, this group inhabited an important if perhaps marginal niche within the Shanghai British community. Betta concludes her analysis by observing that more research on women and class differences would complicate this historical picture.

The Bolshevik Revolution motivated the growth of the Russian Jewish community in China. As the population grew, so too did the infrastructure to support it; such efforts included construction of the Ohel Moshe synagogue in the 1920s, which reopened in the 1990s and now serves as a focal point of the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum (Shanghai Youtai Nanmin Jinianguan), which opened in 2007. The buildings that now constitute the museum seem to have inspired the design for the image of the synagogue in *A Jewish Girl in Shanghai*. In this manner, the film participates in the visualization of Jewish cultural heritage in Shanghai.

Such memorial efforts have centered for the most part on the Jewish immigration from Europe during WWII, especially the period from 1943-1945 that saw the development of the Shanghai ghetto. For example, in 2016, the museum acquired a statue of Ho Feng-Shan, the Consul General in Vienna from 1938-1940 who issued numerous visas for Jewish refugees to travel to Shanghai and, in so doing, defied his superiors' orders to

limit them. A number of tours of the former Shanghai Jewish Ghetto can also be arranged through the Internet. Such activities coincide with a handful of films that address Jewish life in Shanghai these include Ulrike Ottinger's *Exil Shanghai* (1997), Paul Rosdy and Joan Grossman's *Zuflucht in Shanghai: The Port of Last Resort* (1998), Dana Janklowicz and Amir Mann's *Shanghai Ghetto* (2002), Joan Chen's short, *Shanghai Strangers* (2012), and, recently, *The Memory of Life – The Jews in Shanghai* (2016). In addition, the Shanghai Heng Yuan Xiang Theater Development Company staged in September of 2015 a musical called *Jews in Shanghai*, which then opened the seventeenth China Shanghai International Arts Festival in October.

These cultural projects attend to the new pro-capitalist climate of the post-Mao era, during which Shanghai's growth as a global city and as a media capital have led to a small but noticeable resurgence of interest in Jewish cultural history and contemporary life in Shanghai. For example, when I taught at Fudan in 2014, some of my students did a group project on Shabbat, a day of rest and prayer intended to reaffirm an individual's and a community's relationship to God. Their research included interviewing the Rabbi Shalom D. Greenberg of the Jewish Center in Hongqiao and the founder of the Shanghai Chabad community.⁶ The research team learned that the Jewish community in Shanghai was largely transient, most individuals remaining for approximately three years.⁷ Such findings may correlate with the city's expatriate communities in general, whose residence in the city is frequently dictated by commercial opportunities. Nevertheless, Greenberg asserted that the search for community leads many people to the Jewish Center for socialization, particularly in a context where foreigners often find it difficult to assimilate into China for a variety of reasons. This forging of a Jewish community is not without political implications, given the Chinese government's reluctance to encourage religious practice. The renewed investment from the Chinese government in Jewish recognition may well involve financial interests as much as humanitarian ones.

A Girl in Shanghai centers on its title character, a Jewish teen named Rina, who develops a friendship with a local Chinese boy named Ah-Gen as she waits to hear from her parents, from whom she and her younger brother, Michalli, had been separated in Europe. In the 1930s, of course, the Nazi government encouraged Jewish emigration, but Shanghai was one of the only ports that welcomed this population. The city saw a massive influx of approximately twenty thousand Jewish refugees. To signal this population, the film uses visuals and also a musical soundtrack. The main feature of the soundtrack is a recurrent violin solo. The tune opens the film as the credits begin appearing; it plays again at several key moments, including the scene that introduces Ah-Gen.

A Jewish Girl in Shanghai intertwines this particular music with political action. Within the diegetic narrative, the violin on which Rina plays is one of her few physical possessions gifted by her mother (the others are her coat and her locket). In other words, these material objects suggest a generational continuity in spite of Nazi attempts to annihilate Jewish culture. In the first few minutes of the narrative, when Ah-Gen first appears working for a vendor selling deep-fried pancake (*youbing*), he overhears the music just before running into trouble with a gang of hoodlums under the control of the

occupation government. In a comic twist, Ah-Gen bests them by throwing hot pancakes at and serendipitously spilling hot oil onto his attackers. Much later in the film, Rina gives a solo performance in which she plays the tune instead of the set repertoire requested by the Japanese officials. Now marked as a sign of resistance, the melody recurs when Rina plays for a crowd of onlookers grateful that she stood up to the Japanese imperialists. The narrative then moves to Rina's direct involvement in helping to obtain medical supplies for the New Fourth Army (Xinsi Jun), which was the main branch of Chinese communist forces based in the south; this is an important point, since the guomindang generally controlled Chinese forces in the south during this historical period. Thus, the music becomes a key to anti-fascist resistance.

The film also uses sartorial cues to signify its politics. For the most part, the Japanese characters and Chinese collaborators appear in military uniforms or outfits that match the hues of the military uniforms; in one case they appear in robes and geta. These visuals separate the Chinese and Japanese populations. Rina's traumatic flashbacks as well as the scene depicting a visit from the Axis government all show the Germans in military garb. Most of Rina's, and thus the viewers', sightings of German soldiers involve them shooting and capturing people in an undisclosed European country. As a counter to such imagery, Rina wears a coat throughout most of the film; the spectator eventually sees her mother place the coat on her daughter before luring the Nazis away from her children.

The other, perhaps less overt, political signs are non-human animals. Ah-Gen's dog, Michalli's parrot, and a pet monkey all suggest the ways in which the children respect and care for other species. Such mundane human-animal relations, of course, matter in a world where fascists redefined humanity to mark some populations as expendable and others as procreative. No surprise that the Japanese imperialists kick the dog!

Rina's locket is the visual object that sets the action in motion. Bookended by scenes of Shanghai in 2005, the narrative uses the locket to link Rina not only to her mother but also to Ah-Gen (she offers it as payment for deep-friend pancakes even after he has given them to her for free). The locket connects Rina to the past, both the mother who gave the jewelry to her and to Ah-Gen, to whom she offered the locket for his kindness. It signifies both familial kinship and the possibility for new relationships that emerge across cultural boundaries. It also suggests a story whose temporality includes but also exceeds life in the Shanghai ghetto. Following WWII and through the Maoist era, Jewish immigration largely dissipated because individuals had repatriated to their countries of origin or continued in secondary migrations to new homes; this historical movement explains why the story relies on a frame tale of a former ghetto resident returning to the Chinese metropolis.

The film finally celebrates a sentimental return. In the framing scenes set in 2005, the elder Rina character loses her locket, but it is returned by Ah-Gen soon thereafter when a bird happens to drop it in Ah-Gen's hand. This scene obviously parallels the exchange of the locket in the film's WWII section for purposes of narrative closure. To achieve its narrative arc, the film leaves out historical details that would complicate China's relation to its Jewish populations. Indeed, the unusually pristine images of the Bund and pudong

suggest a kind of synchrony between the commercial activities of the Jewish populations and Shanghai as a global, capitalist city. In this trajectory, the history that matters is one of friendship forged through anti-fascist activities. The more vexed questions of why this tale is relevant in the post-millennial moment and what role religion plays in today's China remain unasked. Moreover, the Shanghai ghetto existed as a result of the contradictions of imperialism—the port remained open to Jews precisely because of policies enacted by colonial administrators as part of the unequal treaties. Perhaps such inquiries are not kids' stuff, but that perspective contests the logic of the film, which ultimately insists that children have important roles to play in political actions.

Like *A Jewish Girl in Shanghai*, *Xi Bai Po 2: Wang Er Xiao* (hereafter *Wang Er Xiao*) commemorates a child's involvement in the resistance to Japanese imperialism.⁸ The narrative follows Wang Er Xiao, a folk hero who lures Japanese soldiers into a trap at the cost of his own life. Its promotion of the folk finds parallels in many communist era films, including Su Li's *Third Sister Liu* (*Liu San Jie*, 1960). I include it here because it offers a contrast to *A Jewish Girl in Shanghai*, which features a cross-cultural encounter at the narrative level. The story of Wang Er Xiao fuses cultural elements at the level of the animation.

My assertion of difference here does not negate the similarities between the films. *Wang Er Xiao* also has an animal companion in the form of a cooperative cow. Although the Japanese commander also has a dog and horse, these animals do not communicate with their owner, so much as serve as an extension of his menace. *Wang Er Xiao* also depicts a Chinese collaborator, who works against the local population. Both films display several scenes of violence, even if such scenes are more graphic in the later film (e.g., the Japanese murder a group of villagers; a sequence of shots shows men, women, and children falling to the ground in a bloody heap before cutting to two Japanese soldiers laughing). Music also plays an important role, although, in *Wang Er Xiao*, it tends to be extradiegetic.

Yuanyuan Chen has argued that traditional Chinese theater aesthetics, including music, have played a significant role in the development of Chinese animation.⁹ Such claims made in relation to classical animation also hold true here. The scene of the defiant grandmother burning at the stake recalls a similar scene of martyrdom from *The Red Detachment of Women*. When Wang recounts the legend of Baoquan spring, the form of the animation shifts to a different style: something like shadow puppets. And, of course, the folk song itself demonstrates the ways in which the film blends various artistic traditions within China.

However, other elements of the animated feature suggest more transnational referents. The compositing in this particular film is so obvious as to recall earlier moments of animated cinema, in which technology did not render the layering of multiple images relatively seamless. The ashen hue of the Japanese antagonists—much darker than the Chinese faces—recalls the visual construction of the villains in Disney's *Mulan*. Even the Japanese dog bears a resemblance to those from the sinister side of Disney: the jackals from Disney's *The Lion King* (1994) or Canis and Lupis from *Hercules* (1997). Such

cartoonish, transnational villainy works to mitigate some of the explicit scenes of historical violence that, to differing degrees, both *Wang Er Xiao* and *A Jewish Girl in Shanghai* forcefully present.

I conclude on a speculative note. What is at stake in the animated aggression that the films repeatedly depict? As ideological vehicles, both films harness diversity of different types in the interest of a Chinese nationalist project. They continue to circulate domestically and internationally as Chinese cultural products in an era when Chinese nationalism would seem to be on the rise. Indeed, I wonder how these films indoctrinate and/or reinforce certain values of a China unified under the current leadership of President Xi Jinping. Given the current moment of increased military posturing in places like the South China Sea, what does it mean to create animated films for children that celebrate participation in soldierly, if unarmed, conflict?

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- ¹ A Jewish Girl in Shanghai Official Website
<<https://web.archive.org/web/20110713104517/http://www.jewishgirlinsh.com/index.php>>, accessed Aug 16, 2017.
- ² Betta, "From Orientals to Imagined Britons," 1001.
- ³ Betta, "From Orientals to Imagined Britons," 1003.
- ⁴ Betta, "From Orientals to Imagined Britons," 1006.
- ⁵ Betta, "From Orientals to Imagined Britons," 1014.
- ⁶ According to Xin Xu, Greenberg arrived from New York in August of 1998. Xu, "Chinese Policy," 91.
- ⁷ I thank the following students for their research: Jacobo Elizondo, Catherine Liu, Hermione Moses-Osorio, Willa Peng, and Adrian von Jagown.
- ⁸ The first film is briefly described in Rolf Giesen, *Chinese Animation: A History and Filmography, 1922-2012* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc., 2015).
- ⁹ Yuanyuan Chen, "Old or New Art: Rethinking Classical Chinese Animation," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 11, no. 2 (2017): 175-188.

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Bio

[Sean Metzger](#) works at the intersections of Asian American, Caribbean, Chinese, film, performance and sexuality studies. His first book, [Chinese Looks: Fashion, Performance, Race](#), was published by Indiana University Press in 2014. From yellow-face performance in the 19th century to Jackie Chan in the 21st century, *Chinese Looks* examines articles of clothing and modes of adornment as a window on how American views of China have changed in the past 150 years. The text provides a cultural history of three iconic objects in theatrical and cinematic performance: the queue, or man's hair braid; the woman's suit known as the qipao; and the Mao suit. Each object emerges at a pivotal moment in U.S.-China relations, indexing shifts in the balance of power between the two nations. Metzger shows how aesthetics,

gender, politics, economics and race are interwoven and argues that close examination of particular forms of dress can help us think anew about gender and modernity. Metzger is currently a Framing the Global fellow with Indiana University and Indiana University Press for which he is working on a second book, tentatively called *The Chinese Atlantic*. This study examines site specific performances and on-location shooting in the Caribbean and beyond where Chinese investments, fiscal and cultural, help us shift understandings of local and national cultures. Prior to his arrival at the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television, Metzger was assistant professor of English, theater studies, and Asian & Middle Eastern studies at Duke University. He was awarded the inaugural Fulbright Research Chair in North American Society and Culture at Concordia University (Montreal) and has also been adjunct faculty at Antioch University, Loyola Marymount University and the USC School of Dramatic Arts. In addition to his academic work, he spent three years in social services at the L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center and as an independent consultant to school districts and other non-profit institutions. He continues consulting work on an ad-hoc basis. A closeted actor and director, Metzger occasionally creeps on or behind stage.