



2. Holocaust Education in China



*The Jewish ghetto of Shanghai during the Second World War:
Jewish refugees transformed a small street in Hongkew
into one reminiscent of Vienna.*

*Photo: Reprint from the publication The Jews in China,
courtesy of Professor Pan Guang, editor.*



Photo: Defang Kong

Professor Xu Xin

Professor Xu Xin serves as a Professor of History of Jewish Culture and Director of the Centre for Jewish Studies at Nanjing University, People's Republic of China. President of the China Judaic Studies Association, Professor Xu Xin is the author of many books and articles on Judaism and anti-Semitism. Amongst other activities to promote the study of Jewish and Holocaust related subjects in China, he initiated many exhibitions, conferences and training workshops on Judaism and the Holocaust, including the first International Conference on Jewish Studies held in China in October 1996, co-sponsored by Tel Aviv University. Professor Xu Xin also organized in China in 2005 the International Symposium on the Holocaust and the Nanjing Massacre during the Second World War, co-sponsored by the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research and the London Jewish Cultural Centre. In addition, Professor Xu Xin has given some 300 lectures as a visiting professor in many countries, including the United States, Great Britain and Israel.

Holocaust Education in China

by Professor Xu Xin

Professor and Director of the Centre of Jewish Studies,
Nanjing University (People's Republic of China)
President of the China Judaic Studies Association

Holocaust education is a uniquely situated programme in China. China is a country without any anti-Semitic tradition and the Holocaust happened in a place thousands of miles away. Is Holocaust education necessary? What is the importance of promoting Holocaust education among the Chinese? Chinese experience tells us that the development of Holocaust education is linked closely to Judaic studies in general, and Holocaust studies in particular, and that it is necessary to encourage advanced studies of the Holocaust in order to promote Holocaust education both in the school system and in the university. This paper attempts to analyse the uniqueness and importance of Holocaust education by providing a background and accounting of some of the major activities in the field of Holocaust studies in China.

1. Background

The relative paucity of direct contact with Jews throughout Chinese history impeded early awareness of our concern about the Holocaust in China. The Japanese invasion of China during the Second World War also ensured that there would be fewer reports in China about the fate of European Jewry between 1933 and 1945 than in

Western nations. Though it is not fair to say that the Chinese were entirely ignorant about the tragedy, as articles and reports on the persecutions did appear in various Chinese magazines and newspapers, the attention given to the issue by the Chinese was not widespread. Only a limited number of Chinese were aware of the Holocaust at the time. After the war, when the atrocities became known around the world, little public attention was drawn to the genocide.

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The reason was not a lack of sympathy or indifference on the part of the Chinese, but rather their own substantial suffering. Immediate attention was almost totally focused on the Chinese fate. The death toll of the Chinese in the Second World War—perhaps exceeding thirty million—was, after all, much greater than that of the Jews.

In the early 1950s, after the Communists assumed power in China, the issue of the Holocaust was barely raised. Rather than entirely dismiss the issue, China followed the former Soviet Union's approach to the Holocaust by depicting the destruction of the Jews as merely a minor part of fascism's racist murder of millions of European civilians. Since fascism was considered the ultimate form of capitalism, capitalism was blamed as the root cause of the massive killings. According to this view, the fate of the Jews was not especially different or special. As a result, the Holocaust lost its uniqueness and became insignificant in the Chinese educational system.

2. A changed situation

A marked change occurred in the 1980s with the deepening of the open-door policy in China and a newfound Chinese interest in Judaic studies. The study of Jewish subjects by Chinese scholars started in the 1980s and accelerated following the normalization of diplomatic relations between China and Israel in 1992. Besides conferences,

exhibitions and courses, a large number of books¹ and articles on various Jewish and Israeli subjects appeared in Chinese. Holocaust studies, which are inseparable from Judaic studies, were conducted in academic circles.

The year 1995 marked a turning point in Holocaust studies in China, with the publication of two books² whose sole focus was on the Shoah. The publications provided the Chinese people with a much fuller and more concrete picture of the Holocaust than any previous books. Though both presented a narrative description rather than a strictly academic analysis of the Holocaust, they played an important role in informing the Chinese about the Holocaust.

Xu Xin's *Anti-Semitism: How and Why*,³ a book aiming to examine the issue of anti-Semitism from a historical perspective, provides a causal analysis of the Holocaust. Regarding the root of the Nazi's anti-Jewish policy, it not only invokes Germany's long tradition of anti-Semitism, the overall Christian tradition of anti-Semitism and the German church's role in generating anti-Semitic beliefs, but also points out that anti-Semitism became a popular platform accepted by almost all political parties in modern Germany both before and during the Nazi era. This might help Chinese readers understand why very few Germans stood up to condemn Hitler's policies against Jews. Perhaps the greatest contribution of *Anti-Semitism: How and Why* is that it provides its readers with an accessible history of anti-Semitism in Europe, a key component of the Holocaust, but one with which the Chinese are least familiar.

Holocaust education appears in Chinese colleges with the deepening of Holocaust studies and the awareness that "the Holocaust

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- 1 More than 60 books were published in Chinese up to 1994. For details, see *Catalog of the Chinese Books about Israel and Jewish Culture*, edited by Xu Xin and Eyal Propper, 1994.
 - 2 Yang Mansu, *Catastrophe for Jews, Records of the Holocaust* (China Social Sciences Publishing House, 1995) and Zhu Jianjing, *The Death of Six Million Jews in Europe* (Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1995).
 - 3 Published by Shanghai Sanlian Shudian, 1996.

fundamentally challenged the foundations of civilization and the unprecedented character of the Holocaust will always hold universal meaning".⁴ Nanjing University has played a leading role in Holocaust education in China. A "learning Jewish culture" project was launched in 1992 to promote the study of Jewish subjects among Chinese college students. Though at the very beginning, the Holocaust occupied only a very small portion of the regular courses on

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Jewish culture, the interest of students in learning more about the Holocaust grew. In eight years, about 1,000 students who took Jewish culture courses learned about the Holocaust. In 2000, a full course on the Holocaust, entitled "The Holocaust through Videos", was offered at the University. More than 70 students took it for college credit. A combination of lectures and videos, the course covers not only the roots of the Holocaust, the process and details of

persecutions and atrocities and post-war consequences, but also lessons of the Shoah for all humanity, its particular implication for the Chinese, and measures for preventing its recurrence.

In order to introduce Holocaust education throughout China, a teacher's training seminar was held at Nanjing University in 2005,⁵ co-sponsored by the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah, and the Institute of Jewish Studies at Nanjing University. Over 80 people from seven countries participated in the seminar, which shared knowledge through a series of lectures, seminars and museum tours. As Chinese scholars learned about the Holocaust and how to teach it, they also shared their expertise

4 See the Declaration of the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust.

5 A second seminar was held at Henan University in July 2006 with more than 100 participants.

on the Second World War Nanjing Massacre with the non-Chinese participants. Parallels were drawn between the two atrocities. The seminar aroused great attention and promoted education about, remembrance of and research on the Holocaust.

Participants took away from the seminar not only the facts but the necessary skills to disseminate their knowledge. To run a seminar on the Holocaust against the background of the Nanjing Massacre proved to be an effective and useful means to present reliable, unprejudiced and accurate knowledge of the Holocaust to Chinese scholars who are either teaching courses on world history or western civilization at colleges, or who are doing research or pursuing Ph.D. degrees. It becomes much easier for the Chinese to see some of the unprecedented characteristics of the Holocaust and makes the Holocaust tangible and concrete. Moreover, it provides a rare opportunity for Chinese scholars to learn about the Holocaust and the sufferings of the Jewish people during the Second World War in a systematic way, without going abroad. It also provides the opportunity to teach the Holocaust in related courses in China.

3. Unique aspects of Holocaust studies/ education in China

Holocaust studies/education have certain distinct features in China. First, it is closely linked to Judaic studies in China. Judaic studies provide a good foundation for the formation of a proper understanding of the Holocaust. If we could summarize the development of Holocaust studies and education in China, we would see the tendency of it: Judaic studies lead to the study of anti-Semitism, which in turn leads to Holocaust studies/education. With the deepening of Judaic studies, Holocaust studies/education will surely expand.

Secondly, Holocaust studies/education becomes a valuable reference for the Chinese, allowing them to re-examine the Nanjing Massacre. Admittedly this is an unspoken purpose of Holocaust studies/education in China: to establish a reference between the

Holocaust and the Nanjing Massacre. It would be going too far to say that the interest in Holocaust studies/education stems from an attempt by the Chinese—as a tactical measure—to highlight their own sufferings at the hands of the Japanese. However, Holocaust studies/education certainly do help the Chinese learn different ways of looking into and remembering the Nanjing Massacre in particular, and Japanese persecution of the Chinese during the Second World War in general.

What happened to the sense of human rights during the Second World War? Holocaust education obviously helps to bring out more human rights discussions among the Chinese.

Thirdly, Holocaust studies/education raises human rights issues in China. What Hitler did is considered as a crime against humanity. It raises a number of questions concerning mankind. For instance, how could a group of human beings (the Nazis) do such evil things to another group (the Jews)? Why did the rest of the world stand by in silence while the Holocaust took place? What is human nature? What happened to the sense of human rights during

the Second World War? Holocaust education obviously helps to bring out more human rights discussions among the Chinese.

Fourthly, Holocaust studies/education provides useful lessons for Chinese to combat Japanese denial of the Nanjing Massacre. Like Holocaust denial in the West, some Japanese historians continue to attack the authenticity and objectivity of evidence and testimony regarding events related to the massacre. For instance, they insist that the evidence and testimonies are fabricated, that insufficient primary source materials exist to substantiate the massacre, and that the massacre was nothing but an “illusion”. Winning the war against Holocaust denial certainly encourages the Chinese to win their own war against denial of the Nanjing Massacre.

Discussion questions

1. Due to China's geographic, social and historical distance from the genocide committed by the Nazi regime, Chinese academic study can provide a unique perspective on the Holocaust. In what ways can examination of an outside perspective help those nations directly affected by the Holocaust learn to better understand their own history?
2. How can learning about the sufferings of individuals and groups far from our own families and societies help us to humanize "the other", and contribute to the possibilities of peace?
3. Can the Holocaust serve as a paradigm through which we might understand other genocides and crimes against humanity?
4. In its resolution 60/7, the United Nations General Assembly "urges Member States to develop educational programmes that will inculcate future generations with the lessons of the Holocaust in order to help to prevent future acts of genocide". What could be the long-term consequences of educational initiatives such as those taking place in China?
5. According to Professor Xu Xin, why is the study of the Holocaust important to all societies and to the Chinese in particular?