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To cite this article: Rotem Kowner, Mary J. Ainslie & Guy Podoler (2023) When antisemitism and philosemitism go hand in hand: attitudes to Jews in contemporary East Asia, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 57:3, 175-201, DOI: [10.1080/0031322X.2023.2287877](https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2023.2287877)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2023.2287877>



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Published online: 18 Apr 2024.



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When antisemitism and philosemitism go hand in hand: attitudes to Jews in contemporary East Asia

ROTEM KOWNER , MARY J. AINSLIE  AND
GUY PODOLER 

ABSTRACT Despite their number in East Asia never exceeding 36,000 (currently around 10,000), Jews there are the subject of both distinctly strong positive and negative views. The presence of these attitudes is astounding not only because most of those who hold them have never come across a Jew, but also because the region misses most of the ‘classical’ motives for either philosemitism or antisemitism. An analysis of contemporary attitudes towards Jews in China, Japan and South Korea, including reactions to the still ongoing Israel–Hamas war, reveals that the distinctions between antisemitism and philosemitism are more blurred and nuanced than is often acknowledged. In East Asia, these two attitudes tend to reflect similar functions, and people often express both views without being aware of their historical and religious context elsewhere. Accordingly, this study by Kowner, Ainslie and Podoler calls for a reassessment of antisemitism beyond the Christian and Islamic spheres, to address this new and changing world.

KEYWORDS 2023 Israel–Hamas war, antisemitism, China, East Asia, ethnic attitudes, Japan, Jews, philosemitism, prejudice, South Korea

HISTORY received 12 September 2022; accepted 27 October 2023

Jews have never had a significant presence in East Asia. Being largely a modern phenomenon, their sparse communities have constituted a mere fraction of the population in this part of the Asian continent.¹ Incredibly, at its peak during the Second World War, the number of Jews in this region was around 36,000, no more than the population of a small town. Today, and similar to most of our modern times, East Asia hosts around 10,000 Jewish individuals, many of them expatriates.² This figure is

The authors are grateful to several anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and to Barbara Rosenbaum for her extended support.

- 1 The only documented permanent premodern Jewish community in the region resided in Kaifeng, Henan province, China. By the mid-nineteenth century, the small community dispersed and ceased to exist.
- 2 While these figures are not derived from an official census or national statistics, community sources suggest the following estimates for the Jewish population: around 600–1,100 individuals in the entire region c. 1850, a range of 1,300–2,300 by 1900,

extremely small in relation to both the region's overall population (less than 0.001 per cent) and to the world's total number of Jews (less than 0.1 per cent). Numbers apart, the economic, political and social impact of Jews in East Asia has never been consequential either.

Despite their virtual absence at present, Jews are the subject of both unmistakably positive and negative views in East Asia. In fact, in recent years, interest in Jews has been increasing rapidly. Various sources, ranging from media reports and academic analyses to personal impressions, suggest avid and wide-ranging interest in Jews alongside firm attitudes towards them in all the major countries of the region. The most important recent source is found in a worldwide survey across 101 countries conducted recently by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). The survey, which is discussed in detail below, revealed that, among respondents in China, Japan and South Korea, no less than 20, 23 and 53 per cent, respectively, could be regarded as holding antisemitic views.

Taken as a whole, the region's average index score is higher than the world average.³ The gap between the insignificant presence of Jews in East Asia and the strong and unambiguous attitudes towards them, either negative or positive, is staggering. These attitudes are an astounding phenomenon not only because most of those who hold them have never come across a Jew, but also because the region misses most of the 'classical' motives for either antisemitism or philosemitism. Among other things, East Asia has never witnessed a religious conflict with Judaism or any social and economic competition with Jews. Likewise, none of the aforementioned countries have had any special relations with Jews as a group, with Israel or with any Jewish organization.

While insightful and welcome, research on contemporary attitudes to Jews has remained for the most part within the Euro-American and Arab context. Strongly reflecting the Christian and Islamic worlds, this research is somewhat detached from the wider significant developments that are occurring around the world today, particularly those that influence the construction of race and religion in Asian societies beyond the Middle East. Constructions of Jews have become part of this changing context in nations such as China, Japan and South Korea, East Asia's three largest countries that together make up about 97 per cent of the region's population and about 20 per cent of the

approximately 28,500–32,000 around 1945, followed by a decline to 2,500–4,500 around 1990. In 2020, on the eve of the Covid-19 pandemic, the estimated Jewish population ranged from 6,800–11,100. For Jewish demography in modern and contemporary Asia, see Rotem Kowner, 'Jewish communities in modern Asia: underlying commonalities, demographic features and distinctive characteristics', in Rotem Kowner (ed.), *Jewish Communities in Modern Asia: Their Rise, Demise and Resurgence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2023), 315–49 (326–33).

- 3 See ADL Global 100, 'About the survey methodology', available at <http://global100.adl.org/about> (viewed 6 March 2024). The average score for Mongolia, the fourth East Asian country to be surveyed, was 26 per cent. Due to its limited population size (about three million inhabitants) and non-urban structure (about 30 per cent are nomadic), it was not examined in this work.

world's population. Thus, understanding the historical and contemporary attitudes towards, and constructions of, Jews across East Asia offers a window on the complex incarnations of not only antisemitism, but also the varying forms of racial and national politics across the world today.

The nexus between antisemitism and philosemitism

Among their various facets, constructions of Jews in contemporary East Asia seem to highlight the nexus between antisemitism and philosemitism. On the face of it, these two attitudes are radically different. Receiving assiduous attention in modern times, antisemitism is defined as hostility and prejudice against Jews that deteriorates occasionally to discrimination and even violence. Having roots in the ancient world, it has prevailed in almost every place a substantial Jewish community lived and culminated in the Holocaust in German-occupied Europe.⁴ Philosemitism, by contrast, is the positive attitude to Jews, ranging from appreciation, admiration, defence and love. Although it has not received as much attention, philosemitism can be found in various countries throughout history.⁵ These two attitudes can appear to be diametrically opposed: antisemitism is negative and heinous whereas philosemitism is constructed as positive and enlightened. However, this does not mean the two attitudes are totally distinct or, at least, that they cannot be manifested at the same time.

Indeed, the ties between antisemitism and philosemitism are closer than the differences suggest. First, these two attitudes are linked dialectically and so are disposed to cause and effect relations. In the late eighteenth century, for example, antisemitic persecution led, in part, to a sense of injustice over the treatment and subsequent emancipation of Jews under Napoleon's rule, which, in turn, brought about a wave of antisemitism several decades later.⁶ Second, both attitudes are the outcome of the same cognitive processes, such as generalization and stereotyping. As a result, more than a few observers have noted, somewhat cynically, that philosemites tend to be antisemites in disguise, as both treat the Jews as Others, a construction often based on an imagined set of traits that supposedly characterizes

4 The literature on antisemitism is vast. For major works, see Robert Wistrich, *A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to Global Jihad* (New York: Random House 2010); and David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton 2013).

5 See, for example, Alan Edelstein, *An Unacknowledged Harmony: Philo-Semitism and the Survival of European Jewry* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press 1982); Phyllis Lassner and Lara Trubowitz (eds), *Antisemitism and Philosemitism in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries: Representing Jews, Jewishness, and Modern Culture* (Newark: University of Delaware Press 2008); and Maurice Samuels, 'Philosemitism', in Sol Goldberg, Scott Ury and Kalman Weiser (eds), *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism and Racism* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan 2021), 201–14.

6 Samuels, 'Philosemitism', 202.

this entire group of people.⁷ Likewise, both antisemites and philosemites tend to exploit Jews and their image, either positively or negatively, as a means of highlighting their own identity or the traits of a third group.

Likewise, antisemitism and philosemitism are often conflated, a practice that becomes more prevalent in specific circumstances, cultures and societies. Historical evidence indicates that the degrees to which either antisemitism or philosemitism manifests can vary greatly, with no fixed balance between the two attitudes. In some societies, manifestations of antisemitism are much more frequent and widespread, while in others, philosemitism prevails. One may argue that both constructions are the outcome of close contact with Jews. Negative attitudes may result from frictions and competition and may be more common in a period of tension and internal or external conflict. Positive attitudes, on the other hand, may stem from prosperity and association of Jews with favourable elements in the society. In view of the more recent history and prevalence of attitudes towards Jews in East Asia, this article will outline the relations between antisemitism and philosemitism in East Asia.

We postulate that due to the virtual absence of real Jews from its public sphere, as well as the lack of historical ties with them, attitudes towards Jews are characterized by the following features:

- The differences between antisemitism and philosemitism are not as marked as in the West and Arab countries.
- Antisemitism and philosemitism tend to reflect similar functions, and do so more prominently than elsewhere.
- People interested in Jews often express both antisemitic and philosemitic views without being aware of their historical and social context elsewhere.

To confirm these hypotheses, we investigate the modern history and contemporary state of attitudes towards Jews in three key East Asian nations—China, Japan and South Korea—and review recent surveys that have examined perceptions of Jews and related topics in these countries.

A country survey: the prevalence of attitudes towards Jews in modern East Asia

China

The historical Jewish presence in China is the longest and most complex in East Asia, with evidence of trading communities existing since the

⁷ See, for example, nineteenth-century philosemites who viewed only Jewish women positively in Nadia Valman, *The Jewess in Nineteenth-Century Literary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007).

tenth century.⁸ The Jewish presence in China, while complex, is generally simplified into three historical stages and situations: the early Persian/Indian-originating Kaifeng community of the medieval age; the growth of largely Russian-originating Jewish communities in major cities such as Harbin at the end of the second opium war and after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution; and finally the Shanghai European refugee community formed during the Second World War. These notable historical communities, particularly the latter Shanghai community, are often used as a 'platform' by Chinese authorities from which to build stronger political-economic links between contemporary China and Israel.⁹

Modern Chinese discourse on Jews, and to a lesser extent also on Israel, is strongly philosemitic. Such admiration can be traced to the arrival of Jewish traders and investors in China in the nineteenth century, many of whom became successful in wealthy business ventures. Sun Yat-sen, the Chinese statesman known as the 'Father of the Nation', expressed both admiration and support for Zionism as a movement, while some prominent Jews in Shanghai cultivated close links with Communist authorities.¹⁰ Throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, western intellectuals of Jewish heritage, such as Einstein, Marx and Freud, have consistently garnered widespread admiration and recognition, with their Jewish identity also heavily entwined.

Prior to the twenty-first century however, neither antisemitic nor philosemitic beliefs and discourses were prominent in Chinese history.¹¹ One reason for this absence was China's lack of relations with and interest in Israel, which began in earnest only during the 1990s. While Israel was the first country in the Middle East to recognize the newly founded People's Republic of China in 1950, China joined the Non-Aligned Movement, maintained a rigid anti-United States stance, and supported the Palestinian cause. It was not until after 2010 that China's civilian-economic relations with Israel largely replaced the previously quiet military-based cooperation that had dominated this relationship since 1992.¹² Since then,

8 Anson H. Laytner and Jordan Paper, *The Chinese Jews of Kaifeng: A Millennium of Adaptation and Endurance* (Lanham, MD, Boulder, CO, New York and London: Lexington Books 2017).

9 Avrum M. Ehrlich, *Jews and Judaism in Modern China* (London and New York: Routledge 2010), 87.

10 Ibid., 87. Maisie Meyer, 'Baghdadi Jewish merchants in Shanghai and the opium trade', *Jewish Culture and History*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1999, 58–71; Meron Medzini, 'China, the Holocaust, and the birth of the Jewish state', *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2013, 135–45; Aron Shai, *China and Israel: Chinese, Jews, Beijing, Jerusalem (1890–2018)* (Boston: Academic Studies Press 2019).

11 See, for example, Song Lihong, 'Reflections on Chinese Jewish Studies: a comparative perspective', in Song Lihong and James R. Ross (eds), *The Image of Jews in Contemporary China* (Boston: Academic Studies Press 2016), 206–34 (206).

12 P. R. Kumaraswamy, 'China, Israel and the US: the problematic triangle', *China Report*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2013, 143–59; Yoram Evron, 'The economic dimension of China-Israel

Israel became (and remains) significant to the Chinese overseas investment scheme known as the Belt and Road initiative, and bilateral trade (and tourism) increased significantly between these two countries.¹³

Despite the importance of the recently developed China–Israel relationship, the phenomenon of philosemitic idealization of Jews in China is not new. It has been part of a wider process of constructing social identity and should be related to wider contextual developments in this society.¹⁴ In contemporary China, these stereotypes provide an important model of imagined modernization during a period of rapid economic and technical advancement.¹⁵ Analysis posits that constructions of Chinese and Jewish traditions offer similar models of ‘cultural identity’, particularly when grappling with issues of reform and modernization in the rapidly changing contemporary age. For China, Jews and Israel have been regarded as a model of western-associated economic and social success, a position very much in contrast to the Euro-American positioning of Jews as an Other.¹⁶

Off the back of both the earlier philosemitic discourses of the twentieth century and the heavy promotion of positive China–Israel relations since 2010, philosemitism is evident and influential in online reports, popular blogs and *WeChat* articles as well as in Chinese academia and published works. In China this image has been associated with heightened intelligence, wealth and a strong focus on the family, while Israel is represented as ‘brave and innovative’.¹⁷ There is significant interest in the Talmud, which appears to operate largely as a manual from which to derive business advice for material prosperity. Chinese translations are available through online shopping websites such as *Taobao*, sitting alongside recommendations for self-help business books and wealth-achieving manuals. Likewise, Jewish and Chinese scholars highlight affinities between Confucian-influenced societies and Judaism, stressing the mutual emphasis on education, family unity and respect for elders.¹⁸

relations: political implications, roles and limitations’, *Israel Affairs*, vol. 23, no. 5, 2017, 828–47.

- 13 For an analysis of recent Sino-Israeli relations, see Yoram Evron, ‘Relationship under a glass ceiling: a framework for China–Israel relations’, in Yoram Evron and Rotem Kowner (eds), *Israel–Asia Relations in the Twenty-First Century: The Search for Partners in a Changing World* (London and New York: Routledge 2023), 29–49; Mary J. Ainslie, ‘Chinese philosemitism and historical statecraft: incorporating Jews and Israel into contemporary Chinese civilizationism’, *China Quarterly*, vol. 245, 2021, 208–26.
- 14 Jonathan Judaken, ‘Between philosemitism and antisemitism: the Frankfurt School’s anti-antisemitism’, in Lassner and Trubowitz (eds), *Antisemitism and Philosemitism in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, 23–46.
- 15 Lihong, ‘Reflections on Chinese Jewish Studies’, 207.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 209.
- 17 Avrum M. Ehrlich, ‘Overview of the Jewish presence in contemporary China’, in Avrum M. Ehrlich (ed.), *The Jewish–Chinese Nexus: A Meeting of Civilizations* (London and New York: Routledge 2008), 3–15 (8); Ehrlich, *Jews and Judaism in Modern China*, 21.
- 18 Galia Patt-Shamir and Yoav Rapoport, ‘Crossing boundaries between Confucianism and Judaism’, in Ehrlich (ed.), *The Jewish–Chinese Nexus*, 49–60; Galia Patt-Shamir,

These philosemitic beliefs tend to be celebrated as a positive phenomenon alongside claims of a complete absence of Chinese antisemitism from both (Israeli and Chinese) politicians and academics.¹⁹ China is regularly referred to as a 'land without antisemitism', with the long historical presence of Jews in China, the 'rescuing' of the Shanghai Jews, and the lack of any doctrinal basis for this form of racism all cited as factors.²⁰ These statements, however, are inaccurate, as antisemitic stereotypes were present in China in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even though some of them originated in western and Japanese sources.²¹ Moving into the twenty-first century, scholars note the introduction of antisemitic conspiracy theories into Chinese cyberspace in the early 2000s.²²

Antisemitic discourses are also becoming much more pertinent in China (both online and offline) at state and popular levels. While social discourses of xenophilia are generally preceded by (and so a result of) xenophobia, in a reverse of the cycle seen in contemporary Europe it appears that antisemitism is emerging in contemporary China largely after the cultivation of philosemitism.²³ Chinese antisemitism can largely be characterized as an inversion of previous philosemitic stereotypes that become negative and threatening when they no longer contribute to a desired narrative of Chinese global superiority and centrality. Such changes are brought about by a strong suspicion of globalization and are realized in the presence of significant anti-western xenophobia. This complex mix of philosemitism, racial politics and nationalism adheres to a wider growing xenophobia towards other nations and races. It seeks to position China as globally central in the contemporary era while portraying the West, especially the United States, as attempting to thwart Chinese success.

For example, notions of Jewish financial prowess are inverted to depict Jewish people as dangerously influential due to their conspiratorial control of global finances. The year 2007 marked the publication of Song Hongbing's *Huobi ZhanZheng* (Currency Wars), a highly successful work that singles out Jews when advancing theories of conspiratorial global banking controls against China.²⁴ A quote from another *Zhihu* article claims that US money

'Confucianism and Judaism: a dialogue in spite of differences', in Ehrlich (ed.), *The Jewish-Chinese Nexus*, 61–71.

19 Ilan Maor, 'Sino-Israel relations at the start of the second decade: a view from Shanghai and Jerusalem', in Ehrlich (ed.), *The Jewish-Chinese Nexus*, 239–52; Ehrlich, *Jews and Judaism in Modern China*.

20 Patt-Shamir and Rapoport, 'Crossing boundaries between Confucianism and Judaism'.

21 Ehrlich, *Jews and Judaism in Modern China*.

22 Zhang Ping, 'Israel and the Jewish people in Chinese cyberspace since 2002', in Ehrlich (ed.), *The Jewish-Chinese Nexus*, 103–17.

23 See Thomas Altfelix, 'The "post-Holocaust Jew" and the instrumentalization of philosemitism', *Patterns of Prejudice*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2000, 41–56.

24 Song Hongbing, *Huobi ZhanZheng* (Beijing: CITIC Publishing House 2007).

is 'in the pocket of Jews',²⁵ while an article on *Sohu* claims that the wealth of Russia, Britain, France and Germany is all controlled by Jews.²⁶ An article in *Sohu* purports to explain how Jews became rich, giving business strategies that are supposedly unique to the global 'control' of this ethnic group, before then giving a warning that 'when the five Jews come together, they can control the gold market of the whole human race'.²⁷

Philosemitic notions of heightened Jewish intelligence and global domination also begin to feed into recognized antisemitic discourses of Jewish cunning, sneakiness and dishonesty. An online Chinese-language video on the QQ website claims that the Chinese and the Jews are the most intelligent peoples in the world. However, it then references the cancelled 2001 Phalcon deal (the sale of the Israeli-made advanced airborne early-warning capability to China), alleging that Israel betrayed and disrupted Chinese interests and failed to pay adequate compensation.²⁸ The video then also refers to the mistreatment of Chinese workers in Israel, who, the author claims, are 'bullied' by the authorities. Such ideas have then become a catalyst for other forms of antisemitic discourse, such as Holocaust denial and Jewish culpability for the Holocaust. Furthermore, two *Sohu* articles have attributed, in a manner unprecedented, the quality of heightened Jewish intelligence as the means to allow Jewish 'manipulation' of Second World War history.²⁹

The global discourse of the alt-right is now firmly embedded in Chinese cyberspace, and the recent rise in antisemitic discourse fits well within that context. This ideology persistently promotes conspiracy theories about a western threat to destabilize China and usurp Chinese interests. These theories encompass a range of topics, from the Covid-19 pandemic to the

25 'Zai youtairen de koudai li', in 'wei shi me you tai ren zhe me fu you, zhe pian wen zhang kan liao, jiang rang ni shou yi yi sheng!' [Why are Jews so rich, read this article, it will benefit you for a lifetime!], *Zhihu*, 6 May 2018, available at <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/36487475> (viewed 10 April 2024). All translations from Asian languages, unless otherwise stated, are by the authors.

26 'jie mi: you tai ren wei shi me hui cheng wei quan qiu zui fu you di min zu' [Secret: Why did Jews become the richest nation in the world?], *Sohu*, 9 August 2017, available at www.sohu.com/a/190596119_801260 (viewed 17 August 2019).

27 'yi ge gu shi gao su ni you tai ren ru he cheng wei you qian ren' [The story of how the Jews became rich people], *Sohu*, 2 October 2016, available at www.sohu.com/a/115420092_498258 (viewed 10 April 2024).

28 'shi jie gong ren liang da zui cong ming di min zu, yi ge shi zhong guo, ling yi ge jiu shi zhe guo jia' [The world recognizes two of the most intelligent peoples, one is China and the other is this country], QQ, 18 August 2017, available at <https://v.qq.com/x/page/o0538pbdyhx.html> (viewed 28 August 2019). For the Phalcon deal, see Evron, 'Relationship under a glass ceiling', 32–3.

29 '600 Wan youtairen bei tusha, zhenxiang rang ren chu hu yiliao' [Six million Jews were slaughtered, the truth is surprising], *Sohu*, 13 December 2016, available at www.sohu.com/a/121478090_545223 (viewed 10 July 2019); 'Erzhan shi xitelei weisheme yao fengkuang tusha youtairen?' [Why did Hitler kill the Jews in madness during World War II?], *Sohu*, 8 January 2017, available at www.sohu.com/a/123718088_395602 (viewed 2 June 2019).

current Russia–Ukraine conflict, both framed as United States-instigated conspiracies against China. Such nationalism also involves increasingly hardening forms of ethnonationalism, all of which (in contrast to much of the western alt-right) includes calling upon the state to intervene and limit the powers of liberal ideologies and domestic minority groups.³⁰ This concern around minority groups is evident in the treatment of the Kaifeng Jewish descendants. The group is now subject to growing authoritarian suspicion and suppression due to the potential undermining of Chinese nationalism by this alternative form of (internal Jewish, as opposed to diasporic Jewish) Chinese identity.³¹

Given the inclusion of, and appeal to, the state by the Chinese alt-right, antisemitic discourses have recently become intertwined with state discourse and are increasingly employed by state actors. For example, the state-run China Global Television Network has recently started referring to the notion of a ‘Jewish lobby’ and Jewish control of the US media when highlighting reports that criticize China.³² Antisemitism has also found its way into certain Chinese intellectual circles, with some prominent academics assessing the Ukraine–Russia situation through an alleged Jewish colonization of the region, purportedly acting as a proxy for US interests.³³ Influential wealthy Chinese political commentators closely connected with the ruling party also peddle antisemitic conspiracy theories generally associated with United States-based white supremacist organizations and websites. Lu Kewen, a wealthy Chinese social media influencer, prominent spokesperson and purveyor of online news is a clear example of someone plugging such conspiracy clickbait. Posts are sensationalist, hyperbolic, hyper-nationalist and represent both an inversion of previous philosemitic tropes fused with older European antisemitic beliefs.³⁴

When the still ongoing Israel– Hamas war further divided the world into West (with the United States playing a dominant role) and East, China sought officially to retain its neutral stance as a mediator and proponent of

30 Yang Tian and Fang Kecheng, ‘How dark corners collude: a study on an online Chinese alt-right community’, *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2023, 441–58.

31 Moshe Bernstein, *Globalization, Translation and Transmission: Sino-Judaic Cultural Identity in Kaifeng, China* (Bern and New York: Peter Lang 2017); Chris Buckley, ‘Chinese Jews of ancient lineage huddle under pressure’, *New York Times*, 24 September 2016, available at www.nytimes.com/2016/09/25/world/asia/china-kaifeng-jews.html (viewed 6 March 2024).

32 See ‘Israel accuses China state TV of “blatant anti-Semitism”’, *France24*, 19 May 2021, available at www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210519-israel-accuses-china-state-tv-of-blatant-anti-semitism (viewed 6 March 2024).

33 See Glenn Timmermans, ‘Antisemitism by proxy’, *ISGAP International*, 10 March 2022, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=RzEjRxrkAj4 (viewed 6 March 2024).

34 See Tuvia Gering, ‘Antisemitism with Chinese characteristics’, *ISGAP International*, 16 June 2022, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbUqQonUfLg (viewed 6 March 2024).

a two-state solution.³⁵ However, this positioning could not prevent international attention from remarking on the significant increase in blatant antisemitism in Chinese cyberspace. Indeed, many western news reports expressed shock at the surge in such sentiments, which were particularly vehement in tone and strongly anti-western in nature.³⁶ Comments and features that surfaced on Chinese platforms like *WeChat* and *Weibo*, some of the country's largest social media sites, prompted foreign journalists to question why they were not removed given China's tight internet control. Indeed, the absence of Chinese state intervention in, or refutation of, such online discourse does suggest tacit approval of these views. This likely ties to the anti-western and nationalist tenor of most comments, which align with and serve the ruling party's interests. In the Chinese context, Jewish conspiratorial control and antisemitic tropes are used to discredit the West and specifically the United States, while standard antisemitic tropes of distrusted and manipulative Jews become a means to explain the supposed anti-Chinese nature of the western media.

Despite the country's long history of Jews, both philosemitism and antisemitism appear to be largely a modern phenomenon in China, with the latter potentially a much more recent development and one that has recently dramatically increased in visibility during the Israel–Hamas War. The stereotypes propagated are very much grounded in constructions of West versus East, switching between positive and negative constructions depending on China's domestic politics and international agenda. Indeed, since China's heavy investment in the Sino-centric Belt and Road Initiative, as well as growing domestic xenophobia towards Others, there is much more evidence of antisemitic discourse. Given the almost entirely philosemitic origins of this discourse in China, this recent trend demonstrates the heavy conflation of xenophobia and xenophilia in this context.

35 Erupting on 7 October 2023, the war began when Hamas, the Palestinian Sunni Islamist organization ruling the Gaza Strip, launched a surprise attack on Israeli civilian communities and military bases. On that day, Hamas militants massacred approximately a thousand non-combatants, including toddlers, children, women and the elderly, and abducted another 250 Israelis. Israel's subsequent military retaliation was significant in scale, catalysing global protests predominantly against Israel, accompanied by various expressions of antisemitic and Islamophobic sentiments. See, for example, Maya Yang, 'Islamophobia and antisemitism on rise in US amid Israel-Hamas war', *Guardian*, 10 November 2023, available at www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/nov/10/us-islamophobia-antisemitism-hate-speech-israel-hamas-war-gaza (viewed 6 March 2024).

36 See, for example, Yaqiu Wang, 'Chinese social media platforms are now awash with antisemitism', *The Diplomat*, 23 October 2023, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2023/10/chinese-social-media-platforms-are-now-awash-with-antisemitism/>; and Liyan Qi, 'Antisemitic comments increase across Chinese social media', *Wall Street Journal*, 29 October 2023, available at www.wsj.com/world/china/antisemitic-comments-increase-across-chinese-social-media-6e73cf5c (both viewed 6 March 2024).

Japan

Japanese contacts with Jews and awareness of their existence are a modern phenomenon. They began in the late nineteenth century, when Japan became the first East Asian country to have undergone thorough modernization. Since then, very few Jews have ever lived in Japan. Apart from a period of less than one year during the early 1940s, the local Jewish community has never consisted of more than around 1,000 members, who were indistinguishable from other Westerners living in the country. Moreover, only a handful of Japanese has converted to Judaism and very few have ever lived in Jewish neighbourhoods in cities overseas. Consequently, during much of the period since the opening of Japan, members of the two groups have had very limited contact and, for the most part, scant knowledge of each other. Collectively, Jews had little or no impact on Japan's modernization and have played at best a very minor role in the history of modern Japan, just as Japan has had a negligible impact on modern Jewish history.³⁷

Japanese interest in Jews began slowly and almost fortuitously. It emerged due to the forced opening of Japan, its modernization and especially its massive exposure to the West during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan embraced many of the currents, ideologies and technologies that were in vogue at the time in the West. Among other things, the Japanese became aware of European notions of race and traditional Others. Given their non-existent historical contacts, limited mutual familiarity and absence of any conflict, it might be presumed that the Japanese would not develop any substantial attitude, negative or positive, let alone an outright racist one, towards the Jews. This, however, was not the case. During the early decades of the twentieth century, Japan witnessed the emergence of both relatively benign antisemitic and philosemitic views, which, by the 1920s, led to increased polarization.³⁸

Initially, the most important source of antisemitic attitudes was Russia, and notably White Russians. Between 1918 and 1922, shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution, Japanese 'intervention' forces controlled parts of eastern Siberia and were in close contact with White forces, in an attempt to halt Communist infiltration southwards and expand Japanese territories northwards. Initially under Russian instigation, some Japanese accepted the notion that the Bolshevik Revolution was a Jewish plot and identified Jews with the

37 See Rotem Kowner and William Gervase Clarence Smith, 'Jews in Japan: the winding road of a business community', in Kowner (ed.), *Jewish Communities in Modern Asia*, 270–92.

38 The following historical overview is based on David G. Goodman and Miyazawa Masanori, *Jews in the Japanese Mind: The History and Uses of a Cultural Stereotype* (New York: Free Press 1995); Rotem Kowner, 'The imitation game? Japanese attitudes towards Jews in modern times', in Jonathan Adams and Cordelia Heß (eds), *The Medieval Roots of Antisemitism: Continuities and Discontinuities from the Middle Ages to the Present Day* (London and New York: Routledge 2018), 73–94.

menace of communism. In 1919, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a fabricated antisemitic text claiming a Jewish plan for global domination, was translated into Japanese for the first time.³⁹ During the same time, a small number of Japanese displayed avid interest in Judaism and even began to theorize that they shared common origin with Jews. They mostly belonged to merging Christian sects and felt that their interest in ancient Judaism enhanced the Asian roots of their own Christianity.⁴⁰

During the late 1930s, Nazi Germany, soon to be Japan's wartime ally, turned into the predominant source of antisemitic attitudes.⁴¹ The outbreak of the Pacific War (1941–5) was followed by an immediate outburst of anti-western, anti-Christian and also anti-Jewish propaganda campaigns. Japan's mission, argued a number of local thinkers, was not only to liberate Asia from white colonialism, but also to free humankind of the Jews. By then, philosemitic or academic writings on Jews were reduced to a trickle. The government's role in inciting this wave remained indirect and while it helped manipulate the image of Jews when evoking ultra-nationalism, anti-semitism was never an official ideology. A lack of governmental directives, however, did not prevent official initiatives from taking root locally. From 1943 onwards, blatant antisemitic propaganda was promulgated in some of Japan's newly occupied territories, most notably in Indonesia.⁴²

The treatment of Shanghai's Jewish community, the largest of its kind in the territories occupied by Japan, set the standard. On 18 February 1943, the Shanghai occupation authorities announced their intention to establish a 'designated zone' (in Japanese, *shitei chiku*, often referred to by non-Japanese as a 'ghetto') for 'stateless refugees' in the ward of Hongkou and soon incarcerated within it some 20,000 Jews.⁴³ While German pressure appears to have played a role in the deterioration of attitudes towards Jews in the Japanese wartime empire in Asia, it was not the sole determining factor, and the Japanese government did not obediently adhere to it in every detail. Even more significant was the Japanese emulation of pre-war foreign, negative perspectives on Jews and their inclination to attribute responsibility for the nation's

39 Jacob Kovalio, *The Russian Protocols of Zion in Japan: Yudayaka/Jewish Peril Propaganda and Debates in the 1920s* (New York: Peter Lang 2009); Takao Chizuko, 'World War I, the Siberian intervention, and antisemitism: the reception of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion in Japan', in David Wolff, Shinji Yokote and Willard Sunderland (eds), *Russia's Great War and the Revolution in the Far East: Re-Imagining the Northeast Asian Theatre, 1914–1922* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica 2018), 125–52.

40 Goodman and Miyazawa, *Jews in the Japanese Mind*.

41 Rotem Kowner, 'When strategy, economics, and racial ideology meet: inter-axis connections in the wartime Indian Ocean', *Journal of Global History*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2017, 228–50.

42 Rotem Kowner, 'The Japanese internment of Jews in wartime Indonesia and its causes', *Indonesia and the Malay World*, vol. 38, no. 112, 2010, 349–71.

43 Gao Bei, *Shanghai Sanctuary: Chinese and Japanese Policy toward European Jewish Refugees during World War II* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012).

escalating turmoil to them, predominantly from White Russian and Nazi sources.⁴⁴

Japan's surrender in August 1945 signalled a notable decline in interest in Jews. During this period, the nation's primary focus was on survival, and the monumental challenges of reconstructing its ravaged cities, repatriating its soldiers and civilians from the lost empire, and adjusting to US reforms that would fundamentally reshape its social and political landscape. In this context, the Jewish question seemed trivial, if not meaningless, despite the fact that, in 1952, Israel became the first Asian country to establish diplomatic relations with it. The interest in Jews resurged during the 1970s as part of a popular endeavour to redefine the nation's identity. The harbinger of the renewed interest was a single book entitled *Nihonjin to Yudayajin* (The Japanese and the Jews).⁴⁵ Sold in more than one million copies and becoming the best seller of 1970, the book was neither particularly antisemitic nor philosemitic, but its main message was that Jews constitute the extreme opposite of Japanese.

During the latter half of the 1980s, this 'Jewish wave' in Japan's literary scene reached its peak. By then, nearly 100 books with the word 'Jew' in their titles were in circulation, and large bookstores displayed them in a special 'Jewish corner'.⁴⁶ A considerable number of publications discussed Jewish domination of the world's economy and politics, and a few even denied the Holocaust.⁴⁷ Although this wave subsided gradually, the cumulative impact of a decade of anti-Jewish writings, and possibly of an earlier legacy, has lingered and tends to resurrect in time of crisis. For instance, in November 2014, three years after the appalling Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, a series of advertisements for a new book published in the national daily *Sankei Shimbun* asserted that the United States is a 'Jewish dictatorship', whose agents deliberately detonated a nuclear warhead off the coast of Japan to trigger an earthquake and tsunami.⁴⁸

At present, many Japanese tend to equate Jews with extraordinary financial power, if not with an arcane image of global domination. A legacy of

44 For Japan's wartime attitudes, see Kowner, 'The Japanese internment of Jews in wartime Indonesia and its causes'.

45 The most notable book in this endeavour was Isaiah Ben-Dasan [Yamamoto Shichihei], *Nihonjin to Yudayajin* (Tokyo: Yamamoto Shoten 1970).

46 The two most successful books in this genre were published in 1986 and set the tone for later publications. Expressing overtly antisemitic views, their sales exceeded one million copies. See Uno Masami, *Yudaya ga waku to Nihon ga mietekuru* [If you comprehend the Jews, you will understand Japan] (Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten 1986); and Uno Masami, *Yudaya ga waku to sekai ga mietekuru* [If you comprehend the Jews, you will understand the world] (Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten 1986).

47 Rotem Kowner, 'Tokyo recognizes Auschwitz: the rise and fall of Holocaust-denial in Japan, 1989–1999', *Journal of Genocide Research*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2001, 257–72.

48 Julian Ryall, 'Japanese paper apologises for anti-Semitic advert: Simon Wiesenthal Centre condemns books that claims March 2011 earthquake and tsunami were a Jewish conspiracy', *Telegraph*, 8 December 2014.

the Jewish financier Jacob Schiff, who facilitated loans for Japan during the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5), and repeated translations of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the prevailing attitudes can be positive or negative depending on the observer's outlook. Some see the supposed Jewish economic power as a threat to humanity and to Japan, whereas others offer ways to learn from it. Many Japanese are also aware of major Jewish figures and their scientific and cultural contribution.⁴⁹ In recent years, Japan has also witnessed a surge in interest in Jewish suffering during the Holocaust in conjunction with wartime visa-granting by Japanese diplomats.⁵⁰ Intriguingly, the existence of the state of Israel and the status of Israeli–Japanese relations seem to have little to do with unfavourable images of Jews in Japan. The Japanese left, as well as many liberals and intellectuals, followed European trends and increasingly began to view Israel critically and then negatively after the Six-Day War of 1967.

A few Japanese individuals have participated in a limited BDS (boycott, divestment and sanctions) campaign in recent years. Nevertheless, its link to antisemitism remains unclear.⁵¹ The Japanese government, for its part, does not support these or any antisemitic activities, but has done little to quell them either. If anything, its diplomatic history with Israel since its establishment, and the Middle East in general, suggests it does not harbour concerns about 'Jewish power', or makes any concessions due to it. In fact, following the Yom Kippur War in 1973 and the ensuing oil crisis, the Japanese government significantly scaled back its economic relations with Israel, primarily due to concerns regarding its energy supply from the Middle East.⁵² Tokens of philosemitism are less common and typically include an interest in, sometime even a fascination with, Jewish tradition, history and learning, occasionally leading to speculative theories of shared ancestry.⁵³ Curiously, these tokens are more commonly found among

49 Rotem Kowner, *On Ignorance, Respect, and Suspicion: Current Japanese Attitudes towards Jews*, Analysis of Current Trends in Antisemitism, no. 11 (Jerusalem: Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, Hebrew University 1997).

50 See Rotem Kowner, 'A Holocaust paragon of virtue's rise to fame: the transnational commemoration of the Japanese diplomat Sugihara Chiune and its divergent national motives', *American Historical Review*, vol. 128, no. 1, 2023, 31–63; and Rotem Kowner and Ran Zwigenberg, 'Japan and the Holocaust: domesticating others' horror', in Mark Celinscak and Mehnaz M. Afridi (eds), *International Approaches to the Holocaust* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 2024).

51 Michal Zelcer-Lavid and Yoram Evron, 'East-West Asia relations: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and civil society in South Korea and Japan', *Israel Affairs*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2021, 181–201.

52 For an historical analysis of the relations, see Rotem Kowner, 'Israel–Japan relations: a recent promise that has yet to materialize', in Evron and Kowner (eds), *Israel–Asia Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, 105–28.

53 See Christopher L. Schilling, 'On symbolic philosemitism in Japan', *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3, 2020, 297–313. For the recent discourse of common ancestry in Japan, see Takigawa Yoshito, 'Kodai Nihon ni Yudayajin tōrai?' [Did Jewish people arrive in ancient Japan?], *Myrtos*, October 2023, 22–5.

either nationalists or Christians, as both groups leverage Jewish narratives to bolster their own beliefs. However, it is clear that during periods of escalating conflict and identity crises, as observed during the wartime era and, to a lesser extent, in the late 1980s, the delicate *modus vivendi* between antisemitism and philosemitism becomes strained. In such instances, Jews turn into ideological scapegoats and are blamed for Japan's misfortune and difficulties with the West.

Similar to China, the present Israel– Hamas war has marked a turning point in Japan, in which antisemitism and philosemitism have collided, blurring the distinction between these attitudes and views towards Israel. While the Japanese government, aligning with other G7 nations, stepped up its support for Israel's military responses, Japanese media outlets maintained their customary stance of scrutiny and criticism in relation to Israeli actions.⁵⁴ Focusing on the suffering of Gaza's residents, newspaper articles and TV reports have often overlooked the immediate causes of this specific cycle of violence, as well as the ordeal of the abducted Israelis and their families. A day after the 85th anniversary of Kristallnacht, the notorious pogrom against Jews by the Nazi Party's paramilitary forces, a well-known column in the left-leaning major daily *Asahi Shimbun* underscored the current ambiguity in Japan between anti-Israeli sentiment and antisemitism. The article lamented that Jews, once victims in 1938, have become present-day perpetrators putting the Palestinians 'in a grave danger of genocide'.⁵⁵ Two days later, members of two small Japanese Christian sects that often exhibit a philosemitic attitude united for a large demonstration in Tokyo in support of Israel's cause.

South Korea

Among the East Asian countries that the ADL has surveyed, South Korea had by far the highest index score, one that came close to the pattern of response found in Iran.⁵⁶ This index is so high that if it is taken at face value, more than

54 See Rotem Kowner, 'Yapan nimne'a shanim mimeoravut bamizrach hatichon' [Japan avoided involvement in the Middle East. The war forced it to reconsider its path], *Haaretz*, 5 November 2023, available at www.haaretz.co.il/news/world/asia/2023-11-04/ty-article/premium/0000018b-9a97-db71-a7df-ffd549b0000 (viewed 7 March 2024).

55 'Tensei Jingo', *Asahi Shimbun*, 10 November 2023; an English translation ('Vox populi: history warns Israel that even victims can turn into aggressors') is available at www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/15053323 (viewed 7 March 2024). For an analysis of the symbolic transformation of Jews into Nazis, entrenched in anti-Israel rhetoric outside Japan, see, for example, Wistrich, *A Lethal Obsession*, 934–5.

56 Iran was surveyed twice. Its average score in 2014 was 56 per cent, whereas in 2015 it was 60 per cent, available on the ADL Global 100 website at <https://global100.adl.org/country/iran/2014> and <https://global100.adl.org/country/iran/2015>, respectively (viewed 8 March 2024).

half of the South Korean adults display antisemitic attitudes. With a local Jewish community consisting of somewhere between 100 to perhaps a few hundred members (if we include US military personnel and representatives of companies from Israel and other parts of the world), this figure is indeed remarkable. It is unclear when Koreans first became acquainted with Judaism. According to one suggestion, this occurred in the late eighteenth century, when Christian missionaries arrived in the peninsula with the Old Testament.⁵⁷ Later, in the late nineteenth century, Christianity in Korea began to thrive both because the authorities showed more tolerance towards the foreign religion and as a result of the arrival of a new wave of missionaries. During the first decades of the twentieth century, the city of Pyongyang even developed into what was known as the 'Jerusalem of the East'.⁵⁸

A crucial aspect of Christianity's growth was its connection with Korean nationalism, which was rising and developing against the backdrop of the nation's gradual loss of sovereignty and eventual colonization by Japan in 1910. Many noted Korean activists were Christian, and in postcolonial South Korea the patriotism of figures such as An Chung-gŭn (1879–1910), Ryu Kwan-sun (1902–20) and Kim Ku (1876–1949) often revolves around the notion of martyrdom.⁵⁹ Most importantly, at the time, 'the most popular justification of Christian nationalism', as Kenneth Wells argued, was 'the symbolic identification of the Korean race with ancient Israel and the Protestant church with the remnant community that brings about restoration'.⁶⁰ An Ch'angho (1878–1938) too was an important Korean intellectual and independence activist. Against the background of his country falling into the hands of the Japanese, An wrote this in a Korean newspaper in 1907: 'Christ told the Jews that it was because they were full of evil deeds and devoid of all goodness that God took their rights from them and handed them over to others, and this surely applies to Korea today.'⁶¹ Such conflicting images of the Jews became apparent in the works of prominent Korean intellectuals, some of whom were devout Christians, during the first half of the twentieth century. While some hailed the Jews as 'great', others saw them as dangerous people conspiring to conquer the world.⁶² Besides the religious factor, ideological and political inclinations also affected those

57 Cherie S. Lewis, *Koreans and Jews* (New York: American Jewish Committee 1994), 2.

58 Bernhard Seliger, 'North Korean migration to China: economic, political and humanitarian aspects of a forgotten tragedy', *Harvard Asia Quarterly*, vol. 8, no. 3, 2004, 26–34 (31).

59 See Guy Podoler, *Monuments, Memory, and Identity: Constructing the Colonial Past in South Korea* (Bern: Peter Lang 2011), 190–228.

60 Kenneth M. Wells, *New God, New Nation: Protestants and Self-Reconstruction Nationalism in Korea 1896–1937* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press 1990), 96.

61 Quoted in *ibid.*, 41.

62 See Choi Chang-mo, 'Han'guk sahoe ūi Yudaein imiji pyŏnch'ŏnsa sogo' [Historical changes of Jewish images in the Korean mind], *Han'guk Isŭllam Hakhoe Nonch'ng*, vol. 18, no. 1, 2008, 113–38.

images, and they became more prominent with the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, and of South Korea that same year.

The two countries established formal relations in 1962. Throughout the years, South Korean governments and people became impressed by Israel's military success, and their attraction to Israel and the Jews were further influenced by the growing volume of Christian pilgrimages to Israel and by South Koreans' own 'education craze'.⁶³ In addition, a 'commonalities narrative' is normally exchanged among diplomats, businesspeople, academics and others from both sides when they meet. The narrative highlights that the two states were established in the same year, that the two peoples have an exceptionally long history and one that has been particularly turbulent, that both cultures highly value education, that both states are democracies, and that both face the same challenges in terms of external threats and the lack of natural resources.⁶⁴ At the same time, South Korea's approach towards Israel has usually been cordial yet cautious, given its economic and diplomatic interests in the Arab world, especially in the oil-producing nations.⁶⁵ It was only as late as 1993 that South Korea opened an embassy in Tel Aviv. Since then, cooperation in various areas has steadily grown, though relations with the Arab world remains a crucial factor in determining South Korea's cautious approach.⁶⁶

Several opinion polls carried out in South Korea shed light on the complicated Jewish–Israeli image. BBC World Service polls conducted between 2006/2007 and 2014 show that the percentage of South Koreans who view Israel's influence in the world as 'mainly negative' was high, although it decreased in that period from 62 per cent to 50 per cent.⁶⁷ The percentage of those who said influence as 'mainly positive' remained low, but increased from 22 per cent to 29 per cent. Another poll, conducted in 2017 by Gallup International Association, examined agreement with President Trump's

63 Ibid.

64 See, for example, interview with South Korea's ambassador to Israel in Zofia Hirschfeld, 'Shnei Koreanim ochazim' (Two Koreans hold), *YNET*, 24 March 2011, available at www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4046985,00.html (viewed 8 March 2024).

65 See Alon Levkowitz, 'Korea and the Middle East turmoil: a reassessment of South Korea–Middle East relations', *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2012, 225–38; Alon Levkowitz, *South Korea's Middle East Policy*, *Mideast Security and Policy Studies* no. 106 (Ramat Gan: BESA, Bar-Ilan University 2013).

66 For analysis of the relations during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, see Guy Podoler, 'Israel and the two Koreas: between sentiment and pragmatism', in Evron and Kowner (eds), *Israel–Asia Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, 129–45.

67 See, for example, 'Israel and Iran share most negative ratings in global poll', *BBC News* (online), 6 March 2007, available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/06_03_07_perceptions.pdf; 'Global views of United States improve while other countries decline', *BBC News* (online), 18 April 2010, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/160410bbcwspoll.pdf>; and 'Negative views of Russia on the rise: global poll', *BBC News* (online), 3 June 2014, available at <https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/country-rating-poll.pdf> (all viewed 8 March 2024).

decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and, accordingly, to move the US Embassy there. Among South Koreans, no less than 46 per cent of the respondents disagreed with the decision, whereas a mere 9 per cent agreed. Incredibly, only countries that are Arab and/or heavily dominated by a Muslim population showed lower support rates.⁶⁸ This does not necessarily mean, however, that the South Korean public is ideologically anti-Israeli. Polls have shown that South Koreans are also highly critical towards the Palestinians, the Arab counties and Iran.⁶⁹

Furthermore, the critical stance towards Israel notwithstanding, when it comes to prevalent perceptions of Jews, many South Koreans associate them with unique financial abilities and dominance. For example, books exploring this perceived connection are commonly found in Seoul's bookstores. As in China, Jews are also considered exceptionally intelligent, and the oft-mentioned high percentage of Jews among Noble Prize laureates constitutes a component of the South Korean obsession with this prize. In this regard, again similar to China, the Talmud has drawn much interest. The book, or more accurately, its many Korean versions, has become a bestseller in the country. Different versions are framed in different ways, from books of Jewish wisdom to educational children's books and self-help guides.⁷⁰ Intriguingly, as Sarit Kattan Gribetz and Claire Kim show, recent editions of the Korean Talmud have become a *Christian* text aimed at guiding believers to a more authentic version of the religion.⁷¹ At the same time, notions of the Jews' exceptional abilities are also expressed occasionally in a negative way, laden with strong antisemitic overtones. According to Choi Chang-mo, antisemitic beliefs in South Korea spread during the 1980s in connection with the emergence of anti-Americanism, and, interestingly, were further established when a trend of 'trying to understand Islam better' grew following the September 11th attacks in 2001.⁷²

One noted incident that raised alarm bells among Jewish organizations concerned the publication of a bestselling comic series titled *Mönnara iutnara* (Distant countries, neighboring countries). Authored in 2007 by the cartoonist and professor Rhie Won-bok, one of the books contained several caricatures with accompanying texts presenting the Jews as controlling US

68 See Gallup International Association, 'Attitudes towards the recognition of Jerusalem as Israeli capital', 12 May 2017, available at www.gallup-international.com/survey-results-and-news/survey-result/attitudes-towards-the-recognition-of-jerusalem-as-israeli-capital (viewed 8 March 2024). At the same time, polls have shown that South Koreans are also highly critical of the Palestinians, the Arab counties and Iran. See Guy Podoler, 'A South Korean progressive outlook on the Middle East conflict: contextualizing Hankyoreh's coverage of the Gaza war', *Korea Observer*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2013, 223–47 (238–9).

69 Podoler, 'A South Korean progressive outlook on the Middle East conflict', 238–9.

70 Sarit Kattan Gribetz and Claire Kim, 'The *Talmud* in Korea: a study in the reception of rabbinic literature', *AJS Review*, vol. 42, 2018, 315–50.

71 Ibid.

72 Choi, 'Han'guk sahoe üi Yudaein imiji pyöñch'önsa sogo', 125–9, 136.

money and media, and using them as a weapon to get what they want. It was even insinuated that this led to the September 11th attacks.⁷³ Upon learning about the publication, the Simon Wiesenthal Center vehemently condemned the book and initiated discussions with the publisher, Gimm-Young. Subsequently, a meeting was convened in Seoul, bringing together Rabbi Abraham Cooper, the Center's associate dean, the CEO of Gimm-Young and the author.

As a result of this meeting, the publisher issued a formal apology and committed to recalling all remaining copies of the book, as well as ensuring the removal of the controversial images in future editions. Notably, while the publisher pledged to take these remedial actions, Rabbi Cooper expressed dissatisfaction with Professor Rhie's responses, deeming them 'inadequate' and stating: 'The net effect of what he's done here is a disaster and he just doesn't get it.'⁷⁴ Another noted case involving strong antisemitic overtones occurred in 2015 when a US hedge fund was acting to prevent a merger between two Samsung affiliates. In an attack on the hedge fund's position, South Korean critics, which included a former ambassador and several media outlets, picked up on the Jewish background of the hedge fund's CEO, Paul Singer. Accusations were made that Jews formed an alliance that controlled the markets and that their money 'has long been known to be ruthless and merciless'.⁷⁵

Since the early 2000s, a few other incidents took place in South Korea that drew strong reactions. Some of these involved the use of Nazi or Nazi-like insignia and were connected to entertainment facilities such as The Third Reich bar in Seoul, the Hitler Techno Bar and Cocktail Show in Pusan and the Gestapo pool hall in Taegu. In the 2010s it was the world of K-Pop that supplied several such controversies, including the performance in 'Nazi-like' costumes by rookie girl group Pritz in 2014, the photos of BTS member RM wearing a hat bearing the SS Death's Head symbol that were publicized in 2018, and the photos that Sowon, from the girl group GFriend, posted of herself posing with a mannequin in Nazi clothing in 2021. The dynamics of these episodes—from the comic book and the

73 See report by the Simon Wiesenthal Center, 'Wiesenthal Center denounces Nazi-like depiction of Jews by prolific and popular Korean author', 8 February 2007, available at www.wiesenthal.com/about/news/wiesenthal-center-denounces-29.html (viewed 8 March 2024).

74 Jerusalem Post Staff, 'Anti-Semitic South Korean book pulled', *Jerusalem Post*, 15 March 2007, available at www.jpost.com/international/anti-semitic-south-korean-book-pulled (viewed 8 March 2024).

75 Quoted in John Power, 'South Korean media's anti-Semitism problem: the response to a U.S. hedge fund's stance on a merger reveals a deeper problem with how Korea's media approaches race', *The Diplomat*, 17 July 2015, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2015/07/south-korean-medias-anti-semitism-problem>. See also JTA, 'Samsung removes cartoons mocking Jewish hedge-fund founder', *The Times of Israel*, 16 July 2015, available at www.timesofisrael.com/samsung-removes-cartoons-mocking-jewish-hedge-fund-founder (both viewed 8 March 2024).

Singer cases, and through to those of the Nazi-related symbols—are usually the same. They started when the first to notice the offensive acts were foreigners, who then brought them to the attention of bodies such as embassies or the Wiesenthal Center; following some of sort of intervention, the people involved then issued an apology. Most episodes have been interpreted, whether rightfully or not, as stemming from a pervasive lack of awareness in South Korean society regarding the relevant historical context.

The delineation between anti-Israel sentiment and antisemitism can become the subject of intense debate in South Korea, vividly illustrated by the responses to the present Israel– Hamas war. In Seoul, the demonstrators’ chant, ‘K’aibarū K’aibarū ya Yahudū’ (Khaybar, Khaybar, oh Jews), captured significant attention for its historical connotations and its implications in the contemporary context. This slogan harks back to seventh-century conflicts between Mohammedan and Jewish tribes, which the ADL suggests inappropriately reframes the modern Israeli–Palestinian issue as an age-old religious clash, and potentially ‘can be perceived as a threat of armed violence or forcible expulsion against Jews today’.⁷⁶ The Israeli Embassy in Seoul condemned it as an antisemitic call to massacre Jews. In response, protesters urged the Embassy to ‘stop labelling criticism of Israel as antisemitic’, insisting the slogan was simply a call for a Palestinian victory.⁷⁷

Overall, public attitudes to Jews in contemporary South Korea are intriguing. Developed against the background of a historically short and limited acquaintance with Jews, antisemitic beliefs and offensive expressions in South Korea have been shaped by one or more of the following factors: dominant tendencies for racial divisions and Othering; complex perceptions of the Jews among the Christian community; a connection with anti-Americanism; a critical stance towards Israel (though it is important to reiterate that a critical position towards Israel’s adversaries exists as well); and ignorance.

Discussion: the conflation of antisemitism and philosemitism in East Asia

China, Japan and South Korea—East Asia’s three largest nations—seem to share a similar history of exposure to Jews and a similar pattern of attitudes towards them. The regional outlook and the relatively high level of antisemitism it contains are invariably the outcome of relatively brief and very limited contacts with Jewish populations. Likewise, they do not stem from a conflict

76 For the ADL’s background to the chant, see ‘Chant: Khaybar, Khaybar, oh Jews, the army of Mohammed will return’, 27 July 2022, available at www.adl.org/resources/backgrounder/chant-khaybar-khaybar-oh-jews-army-mohammed-will-return (viewed 8 March 2024).

77 See Chŏng Kang-san, ‘Chadaga pongch’ang tudŭri nŭn Yisŭrael . . . P’allesŭt’ain yŏndae siwiga “panYudaejuŭi” rago?’, *Minplusnews*, 13 October 2023, available at www.minplusnews.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=14174 (viewed 8 March 2024).

with Judaism, let alone with the state of Israel. At first glance, the East Asian views of Jews and attitudes towards them seem somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, these countries display widespread admiration of Jewish wisdom, business acumen and traditional education, much of which can be defined as philosemitism. On the other hand, many of the same people who show interest in and even attraction to Jewish thought and success also manifest a certain unease about Jews, at times even a disdain and fear that borders on antisemitism. In short, one may find in these three countries many tokens of antisemitism conflated with philosemitism. These attitudes confound conventional understanding of either antisemitism or philosemitism.

The fact that both philosemitism and antisemitism do not require the presence of Jews or even minimal familiarity with them, as the East Asian case demonstrates, is fascinating. Actually, it is probably the lack of close familiarity with Jews that makes these two ostensibly opposing attitudes even more compatible. Dan Sneider has recently suggested that the ‘line between “Jews, aren’t they incredible” and “Jews, aren’t they somehow dangerous and sinister” can be pretty thin’, and this appears to be especially the case in East Asia.⁷⁸ Indeed, this East Asian unfamiliarity with Jews, in as much as the line between fear and admiration is often thin, seems to be enhanced by the absence of antisemitic tradition in the region. In this sense, the deep-rooted antisemitism found in Europe, while painful, at least makes the differences between liking and hating sharper. Evidently, the fact that Judaism has never threatened or come into theological conflict with any of the region’s leading religious traditions, and that East Asian antisemitism has never gained full governmental support, nor did it ever become a national ideology, makes little difference to East Asians.

The findings of the ADL survey, we argue, stand as a striking testimony to the conflation between antisemitic and philosemitic views in East Asia, and it is in this light that they should be assessed. Conducted during 2013–14, the survey was (and remains) an unprecedented project. Using national samples of 500 or more respondents, who were selected randomly and interviewed by telephone or face to face, the survey provides the only real concrete figures for the state of antisemitism in East Asia and allows us also to compare the findings with the situation elsewhere. However, the methodology the survey employed is somewhat questionable, especially in a non-western or non-Arab context. The ADL relied on an ‘anti-Semitism index’, which is based on a mere eleven questions, and was originally developed by researchers at the University of California to provide an analytical tool for identifying respondents who harbour antisemitic attitudes.⁷⁹ Yet

78 Quoted in Rose Arbes, ‘How the Talmud became a best-seller in South Korea’, *New Yorker*, 23 June 2015, available at www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/how-the-talmud-became-a-best-seller-in-south-korea (viewed 8 March 2024).

79 See ADL Global 100, ‘About the survey methodology’.

no study has examined whether the items are understood in the same manner across cultures and/or whether such questions and values are also valid for non-American respondents.⁸⁰

We suggest that, within the East Asian context, some of the questions employed in the ADL's 'anti-Semitism index' are not fully valid, or are at least highly problematic. It is unclear whether the respondents see all of the questions as antisemitic, and, worse, it is possible, in fact, that they might regard some of them as philosemitic. This is particularly evident in questions dealing with Jewish power. Items such as 'Jews have too much power in international financial markets', 'Jews have too much control over global affairs', 'Jews have too much control over the global media', 'Jews have too much power in the business world' and 'Jews have too much control over the United States government', could be regarded as simply reflecting Jewish power.⁸¹ In East Asia, where there is no legacy of traditional antisemitism, Jewish 'control' is something to admire and covet, but also to fear. The respondents are not necessarily aware of the thin line between having 'much control' (a positive aspect) to having 'too much control' (a negative aspect) and, consequently, this tool might not measure what it claims to measure.

Evidently, there exist distinct national and individual variations in attitudes towards Jews within East Asia. Religion, for instance, does play a role in shaping these attitudes in the region, although it appears that not every religion is equally influential in this regard. In South Korea, the ADL survey highlighted a notable correlation between Christianity and a higher prevalence of antisemitic attitudes, whereas Buddhism was linked to a lower prevalence of such attitudes. Statistically, the average index of antisemitism in this country's score stood at 53 per cent, but it reached as high as 60 per cent among Christian respondents, in contrast to 51 per cent among non-affiliated/atheists and 45 per cent among Buddhists.⁸² Japan, on the other hand, has two tiny Christian sects that express explicit Zionist and philosemitic views: the Makuya (Japanese: *Kurisuto no Makuya*) and the Holy Ecclesia of Jesus (*Sei Iesu Kai*). Founded after the Second World War, each by a single charismatic leader, they both regard the establishment of the state of Israel as foretelling the coming of the Messiah. While their impact on the Japanese public is infinitesimal, it would be fascinating to scrutinize the response

80 Validity refers to how accurately a method measures what it is intended to measure, whereas cross-cultural validation refers to whether measures generated originally in one culture are applicable, meaningful and therefore equivalent in another culture. See Wendy Y. Huang and Stephen H. Wong, 'Cross-cultural validation', in Alex C. Michalos (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research* (Dordrecht, Heidelberg, New York and London: Springer 2014), 1369–71.

81 For the questions (nos 2, 3, 5, 7, 10), see ADL Global 100, 'About the survey methodology'.

82 Also, 68 per cent of Christians believed 'Jews think they are better than other people', compared with 50 per cent of Buddhists and 61 per cent of non-affiliated/atheists.

patterns of their members to the ADL survey or a similar study, particularly given their extensive exposure to Jewish history and the Holocaust. Much more influential was the Japanese doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo (*Oumu Shinrikyō*), which had adopted antisemitic rhetoric prior to its 1995 sarin gas attack in Tokyo.⁸³

The way Others are commonly constructed seems also to affect the perceptions of Jews in the region. In both South Korea and Japan, ethnic homogeneity is a dominant belief in the country, and ethnonationalism, at times even racial nationalism, characterizes both Korean-ness and Japaneseness.⁸⁴ Although not as homogeneous, contemporary China too displays a strong sense of racial nationalism and xenophobia, especially against Westerners —with whom Jews are often associated—discourses that seem to be growing in the contemporary context.⁸⁵ Still, due to its extremely high score in the ADL survey, South Korea poses the greatest challenge to our understanding of both antisemitism and philosemitism in East Asia. In assessing their status vis-à-vis Others, two important standards Koreans commonly employ are hierarchies based on skin colour and on the level of development of the Other's country of origin (that is, economic hierarchy).⁸⁶ Contributing to this process of Othering is what Olga Fedorenko calls *emotional particularism*: 'representations of emotional experiences that over-stress their uniqueness and incommensurability'.⁸⁷ Emotional particularism, as Fedorenko shows, served, for example, to establish South Korean Us–Other hierarchies in Lotte Confectionery's advertising campaigns for its

83 For the cult's antisemitism, see Rotem Kowner, 'On symbolic antisemitism: motives for the success of the *Protocols* in Japan and its consequences', *Posen Papers in Contemporary Antisemitism*, no. 3 (Jerusalem: Vidal Sassoon International Center for the Study of Antisemitism, Hebrew University of Jerusalem 2006), 12–15.

84 See, for example, Seonok Lee, 'The Making of a Global Racial Hierarchy: Racial Formation of South and Southeast Asian Migrants in South Korea', Ph.D. dissertation, University of British Columbia, 2019, 59; Gi-Wook Shin, 'Racist South Korea? Diverse but not tolerant of diversity', in Rotem Kowner and Walter Demel (eds), *Race and Racism in Modern East Asia: Western and Eastern Constructions* (Leiden and Boston: Brill 2013), 369–90; and Rotem Kowner and Harumi Befu, 'Ethnic nationalism in postwar Japan: *Nihonjinron* and its racial facets', in Rotem Kowner and Walter Demel (eds), *Race and Racism in Modern East Asia: Interactions, Nationalism, Gender and Lineage* (Leiden and Boston: Brill 2015), 389–412.

85 See Frank Dikötter, 'The discourse of race in twentieth-century China', in Kowner and Demel (eds), *Race and Racism in Modern East Asia: Western and Eastern Constructions*, 351–68 (366–7); and Yinghong Cheng, 'Gangtai patriotic songs and racialized Chinese nationalism', in Kowner and Demel (eds), *Race and Racism in Modern East Asia: Interactions, Nationalism, Gender and Lineage*, 342–67.

86 Lee, 'The Making of a Global Racial Hierarchy'.

87 Olga Fedorenko, 'Globalization and affective economy of Othering in South Korea emotional particularism in Orion Choco Pie advertisements', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2023, 174–91 (175). Fedorenko mentions Japanese *amae* and Korean *han* and *chōng* as examples.

choco pies, one of the country's all-time most popular and successful snacks.⁸⁸ All things considered, then, antisemitic attitudes are 'in line with findings on the presence of xenophobia more generally in South Korea', as Christopher Schilling has argued.⁸⁹

The origins and social background of the East Asian views of Jews and the ways they were construed are relevant to the complex picture we see today. While the current views of Jews in the region are the product of the modern era, they are not necessarily an imported product. True, they were imported initially *en bloc*, like many other ideologies, fashions and technologies that the region willingly adopted from the West during the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, these views have been modified gradually to fit traditional cultural conventions, to suit the changing needs of each state and to help reshape national discourses on identity primarily directed at the West. Within the region, Japan served as a harbinger of a certain strain of the current views of Jews. Until 1945, it spread mostly negative images of Jews within its expanding colonial empire and beyond using its dominant position and prestige.⁹⁰ Likewise, by inspiring notions and conceptions about nationalism and modernization, Japanese colonialism also indirectly contributed to the Korean views of and attitudes towards Jews noted here.

The Japanese cultural influence in this regard did not disappear after the collapse of its continental empire in 1945. Ever since, the country has turned increasingly to soft power, bringing into play its popular culture and huge book industry. In retrospect, Japan is certainly not the only source for images of Jews in the region, and not necessarily even the principal one, but its century-long impact has been consequential. This, alongside the shared historical, religious and cultural background, may explain why contemporary attitudes towards Jews in East Asia show a peculiar similarity, despite the ostensible national variance. All things considered, attitudes towards Jews in contemporary East Asia are a hybrid product that reflects an interaction between foreign, regional and national views and influences. As a result, they blend antisemitic and philosemitic traditions in a perpetual form that is difficult to eradicate. While the conflation between philosemitism and antisemitism in East Asia is idiosyncratic and merits attention, it is not unique.

The attitude revealed in this study corresponds to the recent notion of 'allo-semitism' (Greek *allo* meaning 'other'). Conceived in the 1980s by the Polish

88 Ibid.

89 Christopher L. Schilling, 'Jewish Seoul: an analysis of philo- and antisemitism in South Korea', *Modern Judaism: A Journal of Jewish Ideas and Experience*, vol. 38, no. 2, 2018, 183–97 (193).

90 See, for example, Harry J. Benda, *The Crescent and the Rising Sun: Indonesian Islam under the Japanese Occupation, 1942–1945* (The Hague and Bandung: W. van Hoeve 1958), 255, 272; and Kowner, 'When strategy, economics, and racial ideology meet', 243–7.

Jewish literary critic Artur Sandauer and popularized by the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, this neologism implies a non-committal and radically ambivalent attitude towards the Other, and, more specifically, 'the practice of setting the Jews apart as a people radically different from all other'.⁹¹ Allo-semitism is probably quite common, since nowhere can antisemitism and philosemitism be neatly separated. Instead, as Jonathan Karp and Adam Sutcliffe specify, allosemitism is

an intricate ambivalence combining elements of admiration and disdain [that] has arguably been by far the most common feature of non-Jewish constructs of Jews and Judaism, while the philosemitism of many Christians has been motivated by a desire for religious conversion ultimately to erase Jewish distinctiveness altogether.⁹²

Nevertheless, in regions like East Asia, where this awareness has only emerged in modern times and genuine familiarity with actual Jewish individuals is exceedingly rare, allosemitism, or a 'radically ambivalent attitude' towards Jews, appears to be the prevailing norm.

More recently, both antisemitism and philosemitism in East Asia seem to increasingly align with political attitudes towards Israel. This development, emerging in the twenty-first century, is certainly not unique to the region, but was also not characteristic of it in earlier times. In the three countries discussed, political views on current international events tend to be tinged with antisemitism. Since the 1930s, antisemitism in the region has also served as a cover for anti-United States sentiment, with allegations that Jews control the US media and manipulate the US public and leaders to achieve their own goals. Currently, widespread reactions across East Asia to the Israel–Hamas war highlight how strong anti-Israel views are often conflated with antisemitism, anti-Americanism and anti-Westernism. In this emerging paradigm, we argue that Israel, in a similar way to how Jews have historically been perceived, has become the quintessential embodiment of evil, bearing the blame for western hegemony and colonialism.⁹³ It is portrayed as the extreme Other, with many, at times even explicitly, denying its right to exist.

91 Zygmunt Bauman, 'Allosemitism: premodern, modern and postmodern', in Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus (eds), *Modernity, Culture and 'The Jew'* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1998), 137–56 (143); Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Oxford: Blackwell 1995), 207–8.


92 Jonathan Karp and Adam Sutcliffe, 'Introduction: a brief history of philosemitism', in Jonathan Karp and Adam Sutcliffe (eds), *Philosemitism in History* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011), 1–26 (3).


93 Various public surveys and polls conducted in Japan over the last two decades suggest that, in terms of 'influence in the world', Israel is one of the most negatively viewed countries, alongside China and North Korea. See Kowner, 'Israel–Japan relations', 119.


Conclusion: the relationship between antisemitism and philosemitism

This study has revealed that the distinctions between antisemitism and philosemitism can be more complex and nuanced than commonly assumed. While this observation is particularly relevant to East Asia, it may also hold significance for other regions where the presence of Jews is limited, and traditional antisemitism is absent, such as South Asia, South East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. In East Asia, as observed in China, Japan and South Korea, there is a notable intertwining of antisemitism and philosemitism, which appears to be more pronounced than in western and Arab nations. These two attitudes often share underlying patterns, and individuals with an interest in Jewish culture frequently exhibit either one or even both, often without a full awareness of the historical and social contexts prevalent in other regions.

While the phenomenon of antisemitism in the absence of a Jewish population can be found in other regions, the East Asian perspective on Jews is particularly unique and fascinating. This uniqueness stems from the fact that it encompasses several neighbouring countries, each with its own distinct history and individual set of relations with the Jewish community. Considering our findings, it becomes essential to analyse both antisemitism and philosemitism as forms of engagement and representations that vividly illustrate the widespread impact of racial politics within this region. Furthermore, they serve as significant aspirational models during a period marked by rapid modernization. In this vein, and recognizing the demand for validated measures of attitudes towards Jews across diverse cultures, this study underscores the necessity for a thorough reconsideration of the concept of antisemitism within the global context. Such a re-evaluation should extend beyond the traditional political and religious boundaries associated with the Christian and Islamic spheres, acknowledging the transformative dynamics of our evolving world.

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