Reflective Statement by Cheuk Him Ryan Sun

Last spring, I approached Professor Doris Bergen, the leading scholar in Holocaust Studies at the university, to request supervision for an independent study into the experiences of Jewish refugees in Hong Kong between 1937 and 1947; she readily accepted and thus followed my enrolment into the HIS498H1 seminar.

Prior to meeting Professor Bergen, I had already gained some background knowledge regarding the situation of Jewish refugees in East Asia. I understood that Shanghai was the main destination due to its status as a visa-free port, but I was curious where Hong Kong, my birthplace, and then-British colony, was situated within the historiography of the Holocaust. I searched the online catalogue of Robarts’ Library using terms such as: ‘Jewish refugee’, ‘immigration’, ‘Shanghai’, and ‘Hong Kong’. For both academic journals and books, I narrowed the results by subject (‘migration’, ‘China’) or by library holdings (Charles Lee Canada-Hong Kong Library). Publication abstracts which seemed to be related were saved. I also consulted with Pearce Carefoote of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library who directed me to Barry Walfish, the Judaica expert and a multi-volume work about Jews in China. Additionally, I emailed a number of prominent East Asian/Jewish history professors for works concerning refugee movements prior to and during the Second World War. Altogether, my secondary sources covered a broad geographic scope between the early to mid-20th century. Yet, none of the works talked about my topic, only regarding it.

Searching the internet for my topic connected me to a vast array of online resources such as blogs, newspapers, and Wikipedia articles. The main issue with internet sources were their unreliability and lack of peer-review: anyone could post online. For this reason, I made sure to only consider sources if the website was academically renowned and if the author’s name was present. I also used Google Scholar to ensure that the authors had academic credentials or were cited in reputable publications.

This method connected me to a research blog ran by Amelia Allsop, a PhD. Candidate at King’s College London focusing on European refugees in Hong Kong. She was also the research manager for the Hong Kong Heritage Project (HKHP), a local archive dedicated to preserving Hong Kong’s colonial past – which included an immense trove of primary documents pertaining to the colony’s Jewish community. These included the personal correspondences of Lawrence Kadoorie, a noted philanthropist and local leader, and documents related to the Jewish Refugee Society, the only Jewish aid organization in Hong Kong.

In the summer, I was lucky enough to visit Hong Kong to conduct actual archival research. The experience left me with a greater appreciation for the role of archives and archivists in preserving history. Clement Cheung, the archives’ manager, was helpful not only in allowing me to access primary documents, but also provided verified photographs taken of Jewish refugees in Hong Kong. This added visual element enhanced my honours’ thesis by providing another avenue of examination when discussing the livelihood of refugees. However, during my work with the primary documents, I encountered a challenge: a majority of documents
were dated after 1946 with only a few dated between 1938 and 1941; none during Hong Kong’s occupation between 1942 and 1945. I decided to step back and look at other sources that were concurrent: newspapers and government documents.

Online archives are vital and easily accessible sources of information throughout my research process. In my case, digitalized documents from the *Hong Kong Government Reports Online (1842-1941)*, the *Old Hong Kong Newspapers*, and *Shoah Foundation* interviews were crucial in shedding light into the areas that the HKHP lacked. For government documents, they provided the official stance onto the issues of aid, immigration, and refugees, but more importantly the epistemological process to their actions. How did they justify supporting refugees, if any? English-language newspapers provided an alternative look into colonial society, reflecting local attitudes that may differ from the official stance.

In order to avoid biases, I used both Chinese-language sources and survivor testimonies. For Chinese-language newspapers, the most time consuming aspect of searching for articles was the abbreviation of terms. The word ‘猶太難民’ (Jewish refugee) was generally shortened using the first characters of the two words to ‘猶難’. For survivor testimonies, the *Shoah Foundation* was an invaluable resource suggested by Professor Bergen; and indeed there were two survivors, Grete Appel and Marcel Singer, who left Europe for the Far East.

With these potential sources gathered, I began to sort and organize my sources. They were separated into two categories: information regarding different aspects of Hong Kong as a British colony, and information on refugees and their movements. In determining which sources would remain, I carefully considered their publication dates and their relevancy to the essay’s overall framework. In some cases, I removed sources because they dealt with the topic in a roundabout way; in others, the changed scope of the essay made the source less relevant. For example, I originally chose to use both Grete Appel and Marcel Singer’s testimonies in my essay. However, Appel’s interview was stronger than Singer’s because the former had a direct connection to Hong Kong whereas the latter didn’t.

Ultimately the framework of my essay was reflective of the sources and Professor Bergen’s input. Instead of focusing solely on the Jewish refugee experience in Hong Kong, my essay examined Hong Kong as a site of refugee convergence with an emphasis on Jewish refugees. It associated the term ‘entrepot’ – trading port – with the experiences of the three refugee groups that transited Hong Kong: British, Chinese, and Jewish. It compared their experience with one another and their relationship with the government, concluding with an analysis of Jewish refugees as an ambiguous group on the peripheries of the colonial hierarchy.

Word Count: 958