

# The Roots of Anti-Semitism in Contemporary China

By Zhouyuan Li

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## ABSTRACT

This article attempts to examine the origin, development and manifestation of anti-semitism on the Chinese internet. It examines relevant historical roots in 19th century Chinese history, the composition of the book Currency Wars, and recent development in Chinese-Israeli and Chinese-US relations. It discusses how anti-semitism in China has its origins in 19th century Chinese history known as the Century of Humiliation, and that anti-semitic opinions and conspiracy theories found in the series currency wars, were encouraged by the fluctuations in Chinese relations with Israel and the US, notably the long history of hostile relationship with the United States which contributed to Chinese Anti-US nationalism and the way the Chinese government handled and explained the Chinese-Israeli relations in the 2010s, and flared due to the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas conflict in 2023. The findings indicate the legacies of colonialism and imperialism on the Chinese mindset, the tendency of the Chinese government to censor and control historical narratives, and call for the dissemination of objective historical knowledge to help shape a proper historical narrative.

*Keywords: International Relations, Currency Wars, Anti-Semitism, Sino-Jewish Relations, Chinese-US relations, History, the Hundred years of Humiliation, Israel-Palestine Conflict*

## INTRODUCTION

If one opens the popular Chinese video App Bilibili and searches the words “Jewish People”, results such as videos about “Why is Israel so inhumane” “How China defeated a Jewish financial power 25 years ago” and “the terrible things Jewish people did” appear on the screen. When one clicks into it, theories by content creators tell how, for the past 2000 years, the Jewish people have deserved the hardship, pain and crimes they have experienced, and how they, along with their allies such as the United States, have aimed to take control of the entire world for themselves.

Such antisemitic messages are not rare. Since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas conflict in October 2023, the Chinese Internet has seen a surge in antisemitic opinions and sentiments, marked by content on influential media sites such as Sohu News and Bilibili. Jin Canrong, a professor in international relations with 2.7 million followers on the Chinese media site Weibo, comments on the issue saying, since “Israel right now is crazed with killing, the U.N. can't be of much use this time”. In the comment section, a response saying “Hitler truly knows the Jews” was the most liked comment of all (Wang, 2023).

Yet, such views take root much earlier on the Internet than many people realize. In 2019, an article appeared on Wangyi News with the title, “Why Jewish people are not worthy of sympathy.” Though it receives relatively little attention, its content, accusing the Jewish people of deception, hypocrisy, drug trades and more (Wangyi, 2019), reflects the long-present opinions of Anti-semitism on the Chinese Internet even before its eruption in the 2020s.

So why does China, a state that seemingly has nothing to do with the long history of Anti-semitism in Western countries with events such as the holocaust, generate such violent outcry in its internal conversations regarding the Jews and Jewish history? The answer lies in the complex web woven by the historical, cultural heritage, recent opinions, publications and China's situation in the ever-changing world of international relations

that dates back into the early 2000s and even the Second World War.

## HISTORY AND GENESIS: THE EMERGENCE OF ANTI-SEMITIC VIEWS IN THE 2000s AND THEIR HISTORICAL ROOTS

### Currency Wars

In 2007, Song Hongbing, a Chinese author living in the US, published his famous yet controversial series “The Currency Wars”. With a reported 200,000 official copies and 400,000 unlicensed copies sold in 2009 circulation (McGregor, 2007). The book received a wide audience in the Chinese populace and was a best seller at the time. The series claims that the world economy, in particular that of the Western Economy, is controlled by a family of Jewish bankers known as the Rothschild Family. This family, according to the book, used methods such as supporting the family with the US federal reserve, secret access to information and manipulation of the financial market to achieve its purposes.

In the first chapter of the book, the author uses a series of gripping, mysterious phrases to describe the actions of the Rothchild family: “Strict family control, rigged operations of utmost secrecy, coordination as precise as that of a clock, earlier access to information than the market, completely cold and rational, a never-ending desire to wealth... made the Rothschild family unstoppable in the cruel maelstrom of the past 200 years of war, finance, and politics, creating the largest financial empire the world has ever seen” (Song, 2007/2021).

In the next chapter, to further reinforce his claim, Song gives an example of the conduct of the Rothschild family. He asserts that Nathan Rothschild, during the Napoleonic wars, was able to exploit the situation of the battle of Waterloo in favor of his own financial gains. According to the author of the book, Nathan Rothschild, despite knowing Duke Wellington's victory a day prior to that of the British public, deliberately let the rumors of Wellington's defeat flood the British stock exchange market, dramatically lowering the price of the British

national debt. Afterward, he started buying up massive quantities of the then extremely low-priced British national debt. The next day, when Wellington's messenger arrived with the news of the British victory, the price of the British national debt rose dramatically. When people searched for the whereabouts of most national debt, they found it in the hands of Nathan Rothschild. The exploitation of such financial and informational opportunity essentially made Rothschild the ruler of the British national bank. Allegedly, in an expression of the by-then-proud Nathan Rothschild, he stated: "Whoever controls the currency supply of Great Britain controls Great Britain, and I am the one who controls the currency supply of Great Britain!" (Song, 2007/2021)

Yet this narrative is not without problems. While it is true that the Rothschild family was able to obtain financial gains using the Napoleonic wars and its legacies, the use of asymmetrical information to obtain financial interest during the aftermath of Waterloo is largely a fiction. Rothschild's first concern on this occasion was not to the potential financial advantage on the market which the knowledge would have given him; he and his courier immediately took the news to the government (Victor and Melaine, 2004). While the Rothschild family was indeed a financial powerhouse at the time, it was not because of rigged operations conducted through secrecy, but rather, clever planning and bold financial moves (Ferguson, 2008, p.78).

With similarly sensational yet problematic and sometimes fictitious accounts, the author alleges how events in recent world history were manipulated by the Rothschild family, including the assassination of US presidents Abraham Lincoln and JFK, the advent of the Lost Decade in Japan, and the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. The overall structure and content of the series give people the impression that the world economy is somehow in total and inescapable control of the Rothschild Family, and advocates for China to keep a vigilant eye on its currency market in defense of external forces including corporations and individuals under Rothschild control. From the perspective

of an uninformed reader, it may seem that the Jewish people, especially the Rothschild Family, are a bunch of cynical, cunning, opportunistic conspirators who would not hesitate to exploit financial loopholes and endanger entire economies in their own interest. However, when one truly seeks to find the basis and evidence supporting the author's web of conspiracy theories, many of the accounts on the Rothschild family's control on financial history, such as the account on the exploitation on the aftermath of Waterloo, are unsupported by evidence.

### **Historical Experiences and Mindset**

So what makes this book, limited in concrete evidence as it is and dazzling with intimidating accounts of a financial powerhouse, come to engender both nationalism and antisemitic sentiments in the 2000s?

The experience of agrarian China and its subsequent experience during what is known as the century of humiliation can provide certain insights to the genesis of the fear in foreign powers, especially relatively unknown ones, thereby creating grounds for the spread of conspiracy theories.

From a psychological perspective, the belief in conspiracy theories can be considered a kind of persecution mania, which is the resulting deviations created in the process of understanding. It typically manifests as an irrational and obsessive feeling or fear that one is the object of collective hostility or ill-treatment on the part of others (Oxford Dictionary, 2024) according to Oxford Languages ("Persecution Mania, N. Meanings, Etymology and More | Oxford English Dictionary", 2024).

The attitude of the traditional Chinese government, especially during the Qing Dynasty, has featured a hostile attitude towards foreign nations and outsiders. Alongside a long history of self-sufficient farming culture, this creates a strong empiricist tradition and defensive mindset towards other nations (Han, 2020). Thoughts such as "those who are not our kin are sure to be of a different heart", and "one should always

guard against the harm others might do” emphasizes such an empiricist approach to knowing the World (Han, 2020). In addition, the Chinese cultural mindset at the time promoted the idea that China was the center of the World, creating in the official Chinese attitude a sense of arrogance towards foreigners.

Yet as the time passed and the Qing Dynasty came toe to toe with the Western powers such as Great Britain and France in the mid-19th century, it found itself under the threat of semi-colonization by imperial powers. In what would come to be known as the Century of Humiliation, China had continuous invasions and the imposition of several unequal treaties such as the first and second opium wars, the Sino Japanese war, the treaty of Peking and the treaty of Shimonoseki. One of the most influential and traumatic events of the time was the invasion of China by the “Eight Nations Alliance” (“Eight-Nation Alliance”, 2021) during the Boxer Rebellion, during which the alliance, after occupying Peking, looted and pillaged becoming, in the words of an American journalist, “the biggest looting expedition since Pizarro” (Lynch, 1901).

At the time, the fear of the Chinese people towards foreign powers peaked. The scars of the fear toward foreign powers and the national humiliation from the unequal treaties were implanted in the minds of the Chinese people. This is a trauma that lives on to this day, as do the monuments and stories of tales of the invasion of the eight-country alliance and the terrible defeat of Chinese soldiers in face of the more disciplined and advanced Japanese soldiers in 1895. It is from such cultural and historical background that the modern Chinese mindset emerges. People believe that while the Western powers are evil, it is the Chinese people’s job to catch up with the West in terms of national power and thereby reducing the risk of Western intervention, control or invasion. It is on the grounds of such a sense of imminent threat and fear that conspiracy theories like that of the Rothschild family emerge and stem from the mind of the Chinese population, catering exactly to the contemporary Chinese belief China needs to urgently rise and that Western Countries are hostile to China (Han, 2020).

## **FROM PHILOSEMITISM TO ANTISEMITISM: THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE-ISRAELI RELATIONSHIP AND THE CHINESE RHETORIC ON THE JEWISH PEOPLE IN THE 2010s**

### **Chinese-Israeli Relationship in the 2010s**

In a counter-intuitive display of socio-political phenomenon, the relationship between Israel and China, and by extension the popular view towards Jewish people, had actually been incredibly positive in the 2010s.

After 2010, exports and trade between China and Israel increased significantly. This was reinforced by the increased political ties between their governments and by the investment of several large Chinese corporations in Israel in sectors such as science and technology. By 2016, overall Chinese investments in Israel totaled US\$16.5 billion (Gordon, 2018). Fast forward to 2017, the amount of money involved in bilateral trade between the two countries was around US\$13 billion, with China having invested more than US\$7 billion in technological innovation in Israel (Zhu2018).

The relationship was strategically beneficial for both sides. While Israel gained access to funds and resources to develop its internal industries, China took a step in making its presence more known in the Middle East. In order to reinforce its decision to cooperate with Israel and increase “soft power” in international relations, the Chinese government began to emphasize its connection with the Jewish people. With rhetoric regarding a mutually friendly relationship manifested in history in ways such as the Shanghai “Haven” for Jews during the Second World War (which will be discussed later). In an official recognition of such relations, the Chinese ambassador to Israel, Zhan Yongxin, frequently referred to a “1,000-year” Chinese-Jewish historical connection in his statements (*The Chinese Embassy Issues the Special Edition Magazine on China-Israel Relations with the Jerusalem Post*, 2018).

The situation was similar in terms of academics. Studies and research projects regarding the history of Chinese-Jewish relations were regarded as important and received support from national institutions. The national social science fund of China funded articles including *The Study of Jews in North-east China* (The Study of Jews in North-east China, 2017) and *Research on Jewish Refugees in China (1933–1945): History, Theory and Model* (Research on Jewish Refugees in China (1933–1945): History, Theory and Model, 2017).

The same phenomenon existed in popular culture. Blogs and Weixin articles at the time tend to feature content that praise Jewish people for their qualities of intelligence and hard work, their attitude and bond toward family (an important similarity with the Chinese culture) and similar philosemitic content emphasizing positive aspects of the Jewish culture. On Sciencenet, an article explains the “hard work and power of the Jews,” (Sciencenet-News, 2024) while similar contents flooded mainstream Chinese Media at the time.

### **The Narrative of the CCP on the “Shanghai Haven of Jews” and CCP’s use of Narratives to Achieve Different Political Goals**

In an attempt to find historical and cultural ties between the Chinese people and the Jewish people, the Chinese government began to construct a historical narrative of Chinese-Jewish Friendship based on the Jewish refugees who hid in Shanghai during the Second World War in fear of Nazi persecution. The CCP stresses that the Jewish people are treated well at the time by local authorities and the local people, and that the Chinese government and people at the time stand alone in the world as one of the only safe places where Jewish people can seek refuge. This was not only a narrative used by the Chinese state but also by the Chinese Internet. In an article from Sciencenet, an article described Shanghai during the Second World War as “Noah’s Ark for Jews” (SciSciencenet-news, 2024). The narrative also saw popular manifestation in ways such as the

TV show series *The Last Visa* (Zhou, 2024), which was broadcasted by both Jiangsu Satellite TV and Beijing Satellite TV in 2017. The narrative of the series centers on the efforts of Chinese diplomats trying to save the lives of Jewish people from Nazi Persecution via approving their stay in Shanghai.

This narrative is not without problems. The presentation of selected parts of the history of the Chinese-Jewish relationship can result in an overly simplified narrative, and can lead to a more emotional, less nuanced way in which people perceive historical information. This generates a cheap sense of nationalist pride, which not only hinders the proper acknowledgement of the complexity of Chinese-Jewish relations, but also makes people more easily subject to propaganda, diluting critical perspectives within the Chinese community.

Furthermore, the official narrative regarding the Shanghai Jewish community is questionable in its objectivity. It ignores the complexity of the situation confronted by the Jewish people in Shanghai during the Second World War. Though it was true that much of the Jewish population took refuge in Shanghai, it was not at the behest of the Chinese state or local authorities. The Jewish refugees themselves and the tiny existing Jewish community in Shanghai faced harsh conditions. Ernest Heppner, a Jewish refugee in Shanghai, described the harsh conditions faced by the Jewish community as “traumatic”. In residences called Heime, with terrible living conditions, seventy residents later reported having lived months without a sufficient meal, while the sharp downturn in their socio-economic conditions prompted many Jews to develop intense, and sometimes suicidal anxieties (Tucker, 2017). This goes against the CCP narrative that Jewish refugees in China at the time received humane treatment in their living conditions and by the Chinese people.

### **Philosemitic and Antisemitic Opinions: A Hand in Hand Relationship**

While attitudes toward the Jewish people are largely positive in the 2010s, certain



aspects of the image such attitudes create can engender an opposite effect and image, regarding the Jewish people. That is, in addition to problems in the Chinese narrative towards Chinese-Jewish history, the Chinese government and Chinese popular opinion convey an antisemitic view rather than a philosemitic one. What the Chinese government has done regarding the history of Chinese-Jewish relations creates more emotionalized and simplified historical narratives, making it easier for them to switch between narratives which fit their goal.

The government can easily convert opinions and emotions such as admiration and curiosity toward the Jewish people into envy or hatred, with the proper fuel. As later developments prove, Jewish intelligence and survival fitness can also transform into notions of negative qualities such as cunningness. Along with the increase in international and national soft power by China in the Chinese-Israeli relationship, it is easier for the Chinese government and its supporters to shift the narrative and viewpoint when necessary. As China is a largely authoritarian country, state controlled flow of information and media messages do not help with the situation, making the risk of a 1984-style shift in narrative very likely.

## **DEVELOPMENT IN RECENT INTERNATIONAL POLITICS AND THE MANIFESTATION OF THE CHINESE STYLE OF ANTI-SEMITISM**

### **The United States**

In order to grasp the reasons for the recent emergence of antisemitic sentiments, it is absolutely imperative to look first at the long-standing tensions and friction between China and the United States, and how the US-Chinese relationship in recent years fuels Western conspiracy theories which in turn involve Israel and the Jews.

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, nationalism - especially nationalist sentiments towards the United States - has been a central focus in Chinese propaganda and international relations. The expression of

nationalism toward the United States has changed over time with the differing needs of different time periods, and the twists and turns of international relations. The hostile attitude held by the general public toward the United States remains a deeply rooted perspective. In the Era of Mao Zedong, the fact that the US supported the nationalist faction in the Chinese Civil War (which ended in 1949), increased ideological opposition, generating anti-US sentiments in China, especially when it came to Chinese leaders. Mao personally stated that the US is a "paper tiger," "monopoly capitalist groups" and "the enemy of the people of the world" (Mao, 1967), phrases which even today, are a part of the mindset of the older Chinese generation. While this state-promoted nationalism existed constantly throughout the latter part of the 20th century, it surged again in the 1990s after the end of the Cold War. This was partly due to a shift in international relations as the end of the Cold War diminished the power of the Soviet Union, which at the time was slowly becoming a mutual enemy of China and the US. But it was also because of the emergence of a "traditional study fever" (Xu, 2001) (the emergence of the study of traditional Chinese culture and history) which was deeply tied to Chinese nationalism. The study of traditional Chinese culture and values, while indeed prompting the development of a sense of cultural confidence among Chinese people, also brought negative consequences, such as reviving anti-western values held by old China. Works such as *The Blood of Human Rights Debt*, *Chinese Woman in Manhattan*, and *A Beijing Man in New York* (Xu, 2001) attempted to denigrate American values and vilify Americans and American society. International incidents further inflamed anti-American sentiments, as in May 1999, NATO forces bombed the Chinese embassy in Yugoslavia, resulting in multiple deaths and injuries (Xu, 2001). While it is unknown to this day whether the act was deliberate, the Chinese people at the time believed that it was, and proceeded to protest against the NATO forces. The US embassy in Beijing was the site of the clash between protestors and police as the protestors smashed cars and windows (Xu, 2001).

This long history of both international relations and tradition promoted hostility, along with the deterioration of the recent Chinese-US relationship during the Trump administration, made the already present nationalist sentiments flourish in the Chinese population. From 2016 to 2022, the Chinese-US relationship experienced numerous turbulences such as the trade wars imposed by the Trump administration, policies promoting the idea of “America First,” (Boylan et al., 2020) the sanction of major Chinese technological firms such as Hua Wei “in an attempt to thwart Chinese theft of intellectual property and espionage,” (Boylan et al., 2020) the name calling of the “Chinese Virus” (Rogers et al., 2020) by President Donald Trump during the COVID 19 pandemic in an attempt to blame the outbreak on China, and Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan.

These issues, when further coupled with the mindset of the general public - never to forget national humiliation and to treat the West with hostility - promoted fierce nationalist domestic responses. During the trade war of the Trump administration, Hu Xijin and Jin Canrong, both public figures with large bases of support, voiced incendiary economic nationalist memes (Boylan et al., 2020).

Meanwhile, the fact that Israel and the US are allies does not help with the already troubled international situation faced by China, and by extension, with popular opinion. The United States was the first country to establish an official diplomatic relationship with Israel (U.S. Embassy in Israel, 2024), and Israel has ever since been one of the most unwavering allies to the United States. This can be seen through numerous instances such as the extent of commitment shown by the United States during the Yom Kippur War and various aid (military, economic and agricultural), making the position of Israel and the Jewish people more vulnerable to attacks stemming from Chinese nationalism.

#### **SYNTHESIS:**

**A CONSPIRACY THEORY, A PROBLEMATIC NARRATIVE, NATIONALISM, AND A CONFLICT TO IGNITE THEM ALL**

In October 2023, the Israel-Hamas conflict broke out. This is one of the most significant armed conflicts in the Middle East since the Yom Kippur war in the 1970s (El Deeb, 2023). During the conflict, both sides committed numerous atrocities to the Israeli and Palestinian people, including acts of attempted genocide, sexual violence, imprisonment of civilians and other violations to human rights. Officially, the Chinese government has always propagated a narrative that places the blame squarely on Israel (*Israel-Hamas War Upends China’s Ambitions in the Middle East but May Serve Beijing in the End*, 2023). The Chinese Internet, exploded in a new wave of anti-semitic fury and pro-Palestinian sentiments.

The long standing bias promoted by the book series, *Currency Wars*, which condemned the Jewish people as a World-controlling conspirator group; the Chinese Internet possessing, in general, a conservative mindset; the soft power gained by the Chinese government through the selective presentation of the Chinese-Jewish relationship; and the fact that the Israel is an ally to the United States; all added up to create a new wave of Chinese anti-semitism currently flowing in the Chinese general public. Condemnation of Jews as a group of evil conspirators, supporting the Holocaust, and endorsing Hitler as the one who “truly knows the Jews,” all started to emerge on the Chinese Internet. While this chaos was unfolding, it was passively supported by the Chinese government who did nothing to censor the racist comments sprouting all over the Internet. While people may perceive Anti-semitism as a novel thing in China, its roots in history, state policy, narrative and international relations suggest a long path of twisted truths, state control and irrational sentiments that in no way appeared overnight.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

**OUR MINDSET, EMOTIONS AND THE WAY WE KNOW HISTORY**

The phenomenon of Anti-semitism has its roots in Chinese history and the Chinese modern experience, but events and cultural phenomena, like *Currency Wars*, the change in Chinese-Israeli relations, and the fluctuation of

Chinese-American relations, are also, intentionally or unintentionally, propelling it forward. By viewing the chain of logic and events through which Anti-semitism occurred in China, we can see how historical narratives can be distorted and used for different goals by the will of the government. The interpretation of history, especially in the case of China, should be more objective and contain fewer opinions and manipulations which, while in the short run benefiting state policy, is by no means a healthy way to educate Chinese people on culture and history. This makes audiences to such presentations and interpretations more emotionally-driven, more extreme and more divided against the rest of the world.

In a striking similarity to the novel 1984 by George Orwell, Chinese culture has changed the narrative regarding Jews, from promotions of philosemitic ideas and history to passively encouraging the trend of anti-semitism. The ridiculous yet remarkable shift in narrative by an entire nation reflects how simply and blatantly stories and narratives regarding people different from us, can be molded to serve as a means to achieve political interest and silence dissent.

While the stories affect our perceptions, so do the mindsets. The hostility towards the West in China is never a new thing. While the difficult international situation faced by China is completely true, this is by any extent no justification for the uncontrolled and irrational hatred some bear toward Westerners. The Chinese experience in the Century of Humiliation is the ugly, traumatic legacy left by Western invaders who brutally entered the Chinese nation and exploited the Chinese people through force, but this is no just reason for certain, extreme minded Internet users to berate foreign products, tell foreign people to get out of China, or to express support for the Holocaust against a group of people whose relationship and history with China has been relatively peaceful. If we, the Chinese people, treat and view innocent people exactly as Westerners once treated us, then we are becoming those whom we despise and hate, thus continuing this vicious cycle, making us drift further and further away from the dream of globalization and healthy international relationships.

In the end, this is a story where nobody is completely exempt from responsibility, be it in the Israel-Hamas wars, the US during the Trump administration or the Chinese government passively promoting antisemitic speech. Yet it is also a story where no side is solely responsible for the harm done. The only legacies are a deteriorating diplomatic situation, an Internet slowly losing its voice of reason, and the suffering of the people of Israel and Palestine during a lasting conflict.

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