



## Animating Jewish-Chinese Relations *A story of lasting friendship*

**J**udaism and Israel are hot topics in China. Over ten Chinese Universities now offer programs in Judaic Studies, at least one offering a doctoral program. China's state-owned television network, CCTV, recently aired a documentary titled "Walk into Israel- Land of Milk and Honey", its first series on Israel. The story of the Jews in Shanghai in the first half of the 20th century, a story little known to even most Jews in the world, is suddenly popular in China. The opening of the Israeli Pavilion in Shanghai, along with architect Haim Dotan's own China story, made headlines. And shortly after the May opening of the World Expo in Shanghai, the Chinese government granted the Jewish community in Shanghai, long-awaited permission to again use for worship the Ohel Rachel Synagogue, a historic synagogue built just after the turn of the 20th century.

The growing ties between Chinese and Jews helped set the scene for the release of director Wang Tianyun's animated film, *A Jewish Girl in Shanghai*. It not surprisingly is self-cited as the first Chinese animated film to portray the Holocaust. While some might question whether it really portrays the Holocaust, which largely is just a backdrop for a family drama, for many Chinese the movie will be their first introduction to the destruction of European Jewry. The film's producers also refer to *A Jewish Girl in Shanghai* as the first animated film to express the Chinese- Israeli friendship; an increasingly important relationship for both sides.

*A Jewish Girl in Shanghai* tackles many difficult topics as it tells the story of a Jewish girl named Rena who along with her brother, Mlshalli, seeks refuge in Shanghai after escaping from Europe. While awaiting the arrival of their parents, Rena meets a young Chinese boy, A-gen, and immediately the two forge a friendship. They share their cultures with one another and help one another to ease their burdens of everyday living in a war-torn world where poverty, loss and conflict are their shared realities.

The screenplay is based on a graphic novel, also titled *A Jewish Girl in Shanghai*, published by the East China Normal University Press in 2008. Wu Lin, from Shanghai himself, wrote both the graphic novel and the screenplay. Wu says the book was a huge success, selling 4,000 copies in the first half year since its release. The book, published in China, has a somewhat limited market, as it was only published in English though the film version is in Chinese and subtitled in English. A Hebrew edition of the book, Wu said in the interview with *AJL*, is in the pipeline. A year after the book's publication, he created the screenplay for the animated film version hoping this would allow the story to reach a broader China-based audience.

The film version premiered throughout Shanghai in May and then debuted in Israel at the Jerusalem International Film Festival in July. Wu adds that this was the first Chinese film to be included in the Jerusalem Film Festival and was very well received. It was nominated for an Avner Shalev Yad Vashem Chairman's Award

for Artistic Achievement in Holocaust-related Film.

Wu, sitting at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Macau the week after the Jerusalem premiere, spoke enthusiastically about his affinity for the Jewish people. He adds that events marking the end of the Second World War initially inspired him to tell this story taken from the pages of a history little known to most, Jew and Chinese alike. Wu, who started his entry into the workforce as a history teacher, explains that, "In 2005, for the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the victory of anti-fascism war, many newspapers and magazines in Shanghai published the stories of Jewish refugee in Shanghai during the 1940s." He wanted to learn more and knew that he would somehow develop this into the framework of a novel, "to take a small story and build it up," he explains.

He was moved by the struggle the Jews endured during that time and saw parallels between their struggles and those of the Chinese against Japan and explains that it was a very hard time for both people in the face of fascism.

Within Shanghai, the story of the Hongkou Jewish ghetto is now familiar to many and, he explains, has made an impression on both Chinese and Jews. "It was not forgotten for our people." He talks about the number of former Shanghai Jews who still hold China in a special place in their hearts, a sentiment repeated throughout many recent memoirs and films produced about the Jewish experience in China. Over the years, Wu has met many of these former Jewish Shanghai residents who spent their childhood in the city while on various business trips to the United States. He also had the opportunity to meet other former Jewish resident of Shanghai at the Jerusalem Film Festival.

Their wartime stories of life among Shanghai's Jews and Chinese helped inspire Wu to write his novel. "Mutual help and support during the harsh time illustrates the harmony and friendship between the two races," he says. "Hence I came up with the idea of writing a book to demonstrate this period of history which would also provide more or less positive impetus to the peace of the world."

Further inspiration came from Wu's time living in for several years in Los Angeles, where he worked as a company manager. While in California, Wu made a number of Jewish friends. He says he loosely based the character of the brother Mishalli on Jerry Moses, a friend from Los Angeles whose real Shanghai story is similar to that of Wu's characters. Originally from Breslau (what is today known as Wroclaw, Poland), Moses, like the fictional Rena and Mishalli and approximately 35,000 other Jews, was offered a safe haven in Shanghai's Hongkou district. While living in Los Angeles, Wu explains that he was able to get help on some of the details in the book from Moses and other Jewish friends, especially information on Jewish practices and beliefs. Overall, Wu says the film is "both true and untrue," a composite of collective memory and history fused with some fictionalized elements. "The main characters were all based on real prototypes...I can't promise it's 100% accurate, but I think it fits the background of the time."

To tell the story of the Jews of Shanghai, Wu also includes background information in the film to give viewers a glimpse of the Nazi campaign against the Jews and the war on the Western front. For instance, He includes Kristallnacht and scenes of the bombing and destruction throughout Europe. In one scene, Rena and Mishalli are first prancing through the





idyllic rural countryside of their early childhood only to be torn from it by bombs exploding around them. Later on we learn that their mother was killed by the Nazis and her hair was woven into a rug, giving the children a glimpse of the Germans' incomprehensible evil and cruelty.

At first, Wu thought about making his story for adults but in the end decided to write for children because he hopes that this story will influence the future generation. As Wu explains, although the film is for children, "reality is the first priority that we pursued during the stage of creation. As a famous saying goes, truth is power. Realism does give people power and advantages to pursue a better future. The script was composed by me, which is certainly based on real stories, while the paint of the animation was required to be neat, plain and little bit of Chinese style." The film has hit a chord with young audiences in China and Israel alike, he says, explaining that Chinese children, like Israeli children, both laughed and cried at the screenings. "This is really a China-Israel story,"

Wu says that Chinese have a great interest in learning more about Israel and the Jewish people. After returning from Israel in July, he immediately published three very popular articles on his visit in the Chinese press. One article covered the film festival itself, another on how to market a Chinese film to international audiences and a final one on his impressions of Israel. He says he is most impressed by the Israelis' spirit of environmentalism and careful use of natural resources. He was impressed the moment he stepped off the plane and saw the airport surrounded by greenery rather than the concrete

that characterizes most other international airports. He also laughs and adds that he felt very much at home when at a celebratory dinner in Jerusalem, six dishes were served and everyone finished all the food. This is a cultural reference he explains he can really relate to. He also notes that he, like most Chinese, look up to Jews because "they are very smart people, with so much respect" and he adds, "Marx and Einstein were Jews, you know," a comment made with true admiration.

Overall Wu stresses the affinity and love that he, like other Chinese, feel for the Jewish people and he also adds that he knows that this feeling and love is mutual. This is part of the power of the film, that neither Jews nor Chinese forgot this brief shared history. *A Jewish Girl in Shanghai*, to Wu, is a very meaningful work. He hopes, "that it reflects his admiration and respect for Jews." He cites the introduction to the graphic novel, "benevolence and righteousness are the guide of one's soul," it begins.

For the future Wu reveals that he is planning to write a second animated work in this series that tells Rena's father's untold story, hoping that this too will have the same emotional impact. He explains that he wrote, "the front of the face and now need to write from the back."

*"A Jewish Girl in Shanghai" will have its Macau premiere on November 14 at Macau Jewish Film Festival and its Hong Kong premiere at the Hong Kong Jewish Film Festival on 21 November. Wu will be present at both events. ✎*