



## Book Review

**Christopher L. Schilling:** *The Japanese Talmud: Antisemitism in East Asia*. London: Hurst Publishers, 2023, 144 pp.

Does antisemitism exist in East Asia? Flagrant antisemitism is marginal in the region, yet Jewish prejudice coexists alongside positive perceptions and even high degrees of admiration for Jews. In his latest book Christopher Schilling propounds the term ‘bisemitism’ – a state of mind in which one harbours both antisemitic and philosemitic attitudes – as a way of characterizing East Asians in their regard of Jews. Schilling contends that what often appears as ‘love of the Jew’ in East Asia may actually be an insidious form of one of the world’s oldest hatreds.

The opening five chapters provide rich primary and secondary source research on antisemitism and philosemitism in South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China, while the concluding three chapters contain Schilling’s sociological perspectives on the development of storytelling in East Asian and Western cultures. Schilling argues that while East Asia has ‘imported’ some of the West’s propensity for dichotomies in its storytelling – that is, good versus bad characters – East Asians can also view characters more flexibly, making room for bisemitic attitudes.

In the first chapter Schilling cites the most extensive global antisem-

itism poll conducted to date, which found 53 per cent of South Koreans surveyed in 2014 held antisemitic attitudes, in contrast with 23 per cent in Japan and 20 per cent in the People’s Republic of China. South Korea thus holds the position of being the most antisemitic country among the world’s non-Muslim majority nations. Astoundingly, more than 80 per cent of South Koreans are estimated to have read Rabbi Marvin Tokayer’s *Talmud*, a translated and abridged version of Rabbinic Judaism’s central religious volume (though it is arguably a great departure from the original). Tokayer’s *Talmud* is branded in South Korea as a ‘universal book of general wisdom’, with many subsequent adaptations, accruing a variegated readership among Korean students, businessmen, athletes, and even pregnant mothers who ‘believe that reading [prenatal Talmudic publications] will somehow improve their children’s IQ’. Similarly, bestsellers by Rabbi Tokayer abound in Japan, including *Five Thousand Years of Jewish Wisdom: Secrets of the Talmud Scriptures* and *There Is No Education in Japan: The Jewish Secret of Educating Geniuses*.

According to Schilling in the second chapter, ‘the commercialization of the Talmud and Judaism by Tokayer and authors that followed him has further inflamed myths in Japan of the Jews being different from other people’. Yet, of the more than five thousand Japanese titles

authored about Jews, Schilling also addresses a significant body of work theorizing that the Japanese are actually descendants of one of the ten 'lost' tribes of Israel. Identification with the Jewish people not merely serves as a way for Japan to relate to the West on their terms but also to distance themselves psychologically from their contribution to the Second World War. Schilling claims that Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* is widely read throughout Japan for this reason; her story encapsulates Japan's feelings of fear and isolation during the devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Moving further east in the third, fourth, and fifth chapters, Schilling shifts the focus to contemporary Chinese society. Not unlike South Korea and Japan, the fetishization of the Talmud exists in Taiwan, where the 'Talmud Business Hotel' in central Taichung offers occupants copies of the *Talmud Business Success Bible* to 'experience the Talmud way of becoming successful'. Paradoxically, the fetishization of the Holocaust and incidents of Nazi cosplay have also found expression on the island, with links to the transnational flow of Western antisemitic literature into the region. In stark contrast, citizens of Hong Kong seemingly condemned Nazism during the anti-China protests of 2019. However, by equating Nazism with the Chinese Communist Party, Schilling concludes that the misappropriation of Jewish suffering has only led to the trivialization of the Holocaust in Hong Kong society.

In mainland China Schilling turns his attention to Chinese universities with established centres for Jewish Studies, including The Diane and Guilford Guilford Glazer Institute for Jewish and Israel Studies in Nanjing University, Shandong University's Center for Judaic and Inter-Religious Studies, and the Center for Jewish Studies Shanghai. Schilling condemns the production of Jewish studies 'by and for the Chinese' if it presupposes that Jewish academics cannot be objective in the field of Jewish studies. Such a presupposition veils implicit antisemitism, writes Schilling, for it fundamentally assumes that Judaism dominantly influences all Jewish academics, who are 'burdened' by their ethno-religious identity when conducting research.

*The Japanese Talmud* makes a significant contribution to the international study of antisemitism because, first, it establishes that prejudice against Jews can flourish clandestinely even in countries with few Jews. Second, Schilling may be one of the first authors to make a general distinction between the antisemitism of the West and East Asia. The 'three Ds of antisemitism' (delegitimization, demonization, and double standards) that tend to colour Western society represent a different kind of antisemitism to that in Confucian society, which tends to engender misrepresentation, misappropriation, and mythmaking. Schilling is not proposing that the latter is less antisemitic than the former; nor is he saying that Westerners

only exhibit characterizations of the former and East Asians of the latter. Rather, in his penultimate chapter Schilling emphasizes that people, especially East Asians, are more fluid than rigid in their thinking, allowing them to practise varying forms of antisemitism and philosemitism at the same time. The world may thus be more 'bisemitic' than we realize.

It is important to note that this concept is not entirely new. 'Allosemitism,' a neologism coined in the 1980s, has already been adopted in the literature to describe the attitude of ambivalence that some hold toward Jews and Judaism. Zygmunt Bauman went so far as to suggest that allosemitism regards Jews as a radically distinct Other 'needing separate concepts to describe and comprehend them'. Schilling's operationalisation of the word 'bisemitism' appears similar in scope to 'allosemitism', and moving forward, a clear explanation regarding their difference is needed.

Schilling covers extensive ground on the contemporary issues afflicting modern contemporary East Asian societies, including rapid globalization and how it heightens the mutual allure and suspicion of perceived Jewish success. While some information is missing from Schilling's analysis – for example, a clearer expounding on the production of bisemitic narratives by East Asia's Evangelical Christian Zionists – his argument is framed as a 'generalization' and should be treated as such. The initial five chapters at the start of his book can be dizzying

without any guiding premises (it is only when approaching the final three chapters that one grasps the logic to Schilling's inductive reasoning framework), but this monograph remains an excellent starting point for understanding the reconstruction of the Talmud as symbolic of 'exotic Western wisdom' and how Jews have come to be perceived as both intruding 'outsider' and intriguing 'insider'.

East Asia should not remain overlooked in the field of antisemitism studies. Talmudic texts today in this part of the world continue to inspire both the veneration and vilification of Jews in an era of heightened global competition. Should an 'Asian Century' come, as Schilling surmises, views of Jews in East Asia will increasingly permeate and influence the globe.

The cover photo for *The Japanese Talmud* is thus a pertinent one. Featuring a photograph of Jewish refugees in the ghetto of Shanghai living under Japanese occupation, Schilling has indeed shown us a way forward: to overcome age-old anti-Jewish tropes of Jewish power and domination, we must share 'new' untold histories of Jewish vulnerability amid rival imperialisms over the last two millennia.

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