

The Japanese Talmud: Antisemitism in East Asia

By Christopher L. Schilling

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The Japanese Talmud: Antisemitism in East Asia by Christopher L. Schilling explores the under-researched topic of antisemitism—and attitudes towards Jews in general—in South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China. In the book’s introduction, Schilling asserts that the foundation of antisemitism in East Asia is ‘profoundly different’ to that of antisemitism in the West. Schilling is interested in what East Asians think of Jews and whether ‘it’s anything Jewish people themselves would recognize’ (3). He notes something novel about East Asia: that antisemitic ideas are fused with philosemitic fetishisation. Schilling argues that this ‘dualistic attitude towards Jews has largely been overlooked by scholars who have focused on Jewish history ... in the region’ (4).

The first chapter looks at South Korea, a country in which a book called ‘The Talmud’—around 40 pages long and containing ‘a collection of rabbinic stories at best’—is sold in almost every bookstore (12-13). Despite a widespread view that South Korea is a ‘philosemitic’ country, Schilling notes that the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) has found South Korea to be one of the most antisemitic countries in the world, with 53 percent of survey respondents in South Korea holding antisemitic views (11). In this chapter, Schilling posits that philosemitism is not necessarily antithetical to antisemitism, in that the stereotypes, fantasies, and myths about Jews that philosemitism espouses are often the same as those that antisemitism does (19). For example, Schilling writes that if a resident of South Korea was to be asked ‘what fascinates you about Judaism?’, the answer would be ‘Jewish success, power, and wealth’; people in South Korea ‘admire the negative stereotype of the Jews as a people who figured out how to get ahead of others’ (20). While there is an admiration of ‘the way Jewish people allegedly practice education’, Schilling argues that people in South Korea ‘are overwhelmingly not interested in Jewish cooking, holidays, or history’. For example, nearly half of the South Korean residents surveyed have not heard of the Holocaust. Alarming, of those who know about the Holocaust, only 28 percent agree that it has been accurately represented by historians, and 32 percent believe that the number of Holocaust victims ‘has been greatly exaggerated by history’ (20).

In Chapter Two, Schilling examines attitudes towards Jews in Japan, highlighting that the 2014 ADL survey found that 23 percent of residents of Japan hold antisemitic views (33). Schilling notes that antisemitism had made its way to Japan through Japanese versions of *The Protocols of the Elders of*



Zion and *The Merchant of Venice*. He explains Tom Brislin's finding that antisemitic books and articles that share conspiracy theories of Jewish control of politics and the economy are 'not uncommon' in Japan (34). However, like in South Korea, there are 'philosemitic ideas that circulate in Japan'. Schilling points to what he calls an 'imagined Jewish-Japanese connection'. For example, Schilling writes, there have been several attempts to promulgate theories that 'trace the Japanese people (or their emperor) to a lost tribe of Israel', noting the book that the Scottish businessman Norman McLeod published in Nagasaki in 1879, called *Japan and the Lost Tribes of Israel* (45-46; McLeod 1879). Another 'imagined Jewish-Japanese connection' originates from the Japanese Christian scholar Saeki Yoshiro, who in 1908 argued that the Uzumasa Shrine in Kyoto enshrines King David. Schilling explains that this theory marks the beginning of the idea of common ancestry between the Japanese and the Jews (46). The way that people in Japan connect with, and even identify with, Holocaust history is also discussed by Schilling. In Japan, Anne Frank's diary sells as well as it does in the United States. Schilling argues that *The Diary of a Young Girl* serves the function of 'helping the Japanese redefine themselves as victims of the Second World War' in that it 'enabled people in Japan to relate to the victims of the Second World War and the Holocaust without feeling guilty about their contribution to it' (48; Frank 1952).

Chapter Three focuses on the case study of Taiwan, where there was a Holocaust-themed restaurant called 'Jail'. The décor of this restaurant 'included photographs of Auschwitz victims on the walls and open pipes and valves in the toilets, which were called "gas chambers"' (54). Schilling recalls presenting this finding at a conference at which a scholar from mainland China suggested the restaurant's guests were 'just expressing their admiration of Jewish culture' (55). Schilling argues that scholars who have addressed antisemitism in Taiwan tend to either minimise or deny the problem. For example, one said 'There have been no reports of antisemitism [in Taiwan]', one puts hostility towards Jews in Taiwan down to ignorance rather than antisemitism (57), and one claims that cases of antisemitism in Taiwan are 'rare' and 'inadvertent'. In this chapter, Schilling argues there is, in fact, an antisemitism problem in Taiwan that is combined with 'instances of a fetishised admiration of imagined Jewish success in business that derives from Japanese "Talmud" publications' (58).

In the fourth chapter, Schilling briefly looks at how Jews are perceived in Hong Kong. While a senior local community activist has claimed that antisemitism has not 'spread' there, Schilling notes that there have been incidents of 'Islamic antisemitism' in Hong Kong. At the same time, there are also 'many publications on "Jewish business" or "Jewish wisdom and success" in bookshops across town' (60). Schilling argues there is a 'disturbing fetishisation' of the Holocaust in Hong Kong, noting that

Holocaust images were ‘omnipresent’ during the 2019 protests, along with the use of the term ‘Chinazi’ (60-61).

Chapter Five covers ‘Jews in the Chinese popular imagination’. Noting that Jews are a miniscule minority that make up just 0.00018 percent of the population of China, and that most people in China would never have met a Jew, Schilling writes of a perception among scholars that people in China have a ‘widespread and genuine’ interest in Judaism and Israel. Yet, this does not mean that China is free of antisemitism; the ADL survey has determined that 20 percent of people in China hold antisemitic views (64). As in other parts of East Asia, Schilling notes, there are ‘many bestsellers in China that deal with how Jews allegedly make money and raise their children’ (65). Stereotypes about Jews in mainland China centre on supposed ‘wealth, political power, and contributions to twentieth-century Western civilisation’ (66).

In Chapters Six, Seven and Eight, Schilling’s work seeks to explain and understand antisemitism in the East Asian context, and demonstrates how it differs to antisemitism in the West. Schilling conceptualises antisemitism as a type of storytelling, and shows the reader how narratives and tropes differ in East Asia and the West, demonstrating the need for a different prism for the study of antisemitism in different cultural contexts. In the case of East Asia, the term ‘bisemitism’, Schilling argues, describes the interplay and simultaneous presence of philo- and antisemitism in the region.

The Japanese Talmud will be a useful resource for those who are interested in Jewish history in East Asia, and those who are interested in East Asian culture and thought in general. Scholars of antisemitism studies will also find this book beneficial reading. With *The Japanese Talmud*, Schilling closes a gap in literature, in that it explores the widely ignored problem of antisemitism—and, correspondingly, ‘philosemitism’—in East Asia. Furthermore, Schilling makes an important contribution to the study of antisemitism more broadly in his conceptualisation of antisemitism as a form of storytelling, rather than the notion that antisemitism is a disease. If we are able to understand antisemitism and its mechanisms better, we will be in a more favourable position to combat it.

Reference list

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