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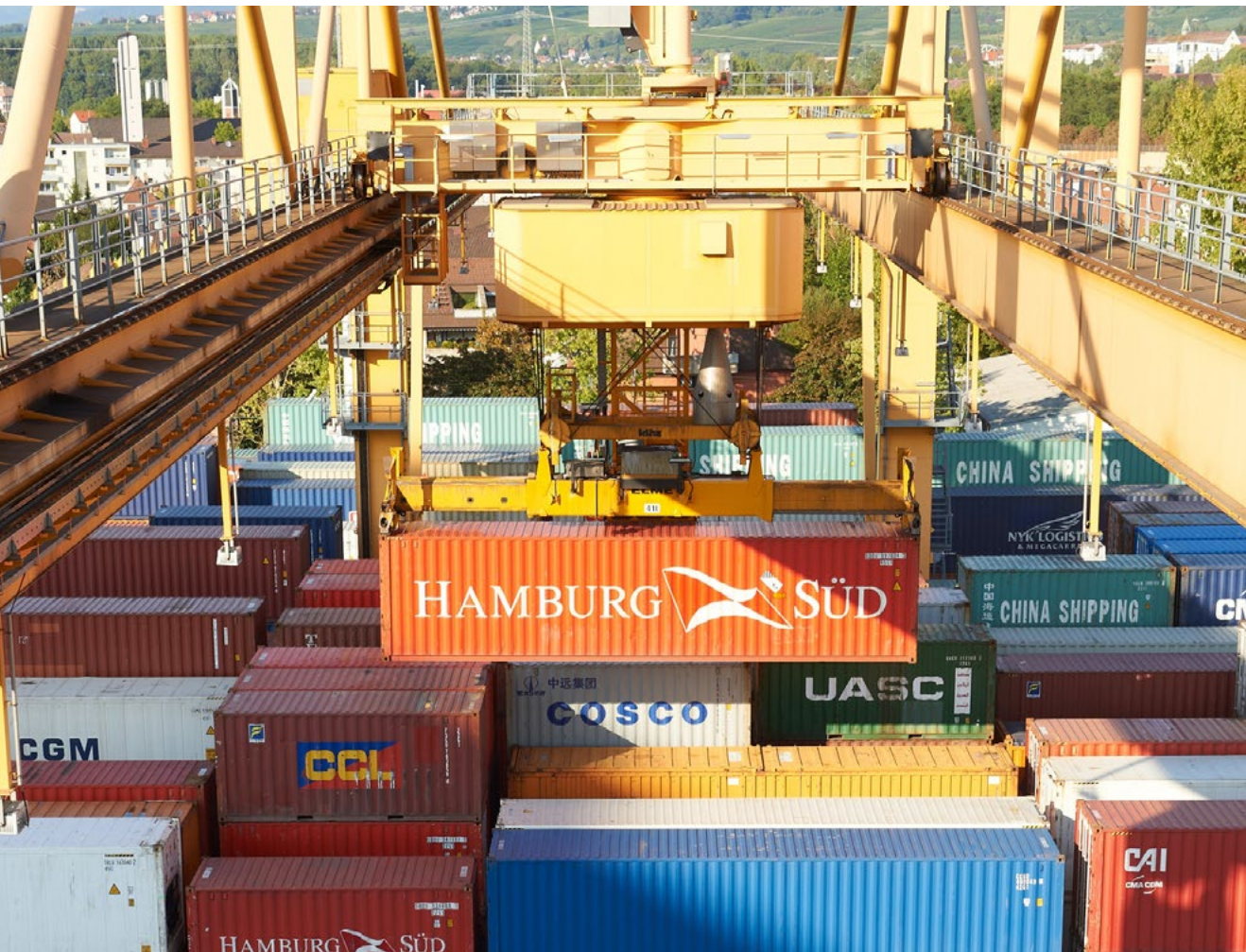


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Ling-ling Lien
**Writing History on their Own:
War, Identity, and the Oral History
of the “Old China Hands”**



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**Writing History on their Own:
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Abstract: This article uses the oral history project of the *Old China Hands* collected by the California State University at Fullerton to illustrate how oral history serves as the vehicle of identity-making. The term *Old China Hands* first referred to long-term British settlers engaged in the commercial, diplomatic and missionary arenas in nineteenth-century China. During the Second World War, citizens of the Allied nations were interned in the Japanese camps, which then became the common memory for foreign settlers in China. Not until the 1980s did those former civilian internees begin to reconnect with each other and share their stories in public; the oral history project of the *Old China Hands* was one such effort. Focusing on the organization, facilitation and contextualization of the oral history project, this article will discuss how the recollection of wartime experience became a process of identity-making.

Key words: Oral History, Old China Hands, Shanghailanders, War Memory

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Human beings never seem to lose their interest in wartime stories, and are particularly fascinated by the tales of heroic battles. Accordingly, war history tends to celebrate brave fighters and fearless martyrs but ignore ordinary people's wartime experiences, particularly those of people displaced far from their homelands for non-military purposes. However, a great number of European civilians were living in Asia by the time Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, and they remained trapped in the Pacific war zones during the Second World War. In fact, more than 130,000 Allied civilians in East and Southeast Asia were interned by the Japanese for the entire duration of the war.¹ These foreigners faced all sorts of devastating conditions including imprisonment, hunger, fear and death to a degree no less than military personnel, but their stories were widely unheard. Not until the 1980s did the former Allied internees in the Pacific region begin to disclose their experiences in the public sphere by way of memoirs, recording oral history, donating wartime mementos to museums, and so on.

I am particularly interested in the oral history project named *Old China Hands* conducted in Southern California between 1990 and 1993. Initiated by a Shanghai-born Jewish lady named Mrs. Rose Horowitz, this project interviewed 46 foreign residents who had lived in China – more specifically mostly Shanghai – during the Second World War. What makes this project unique is that it represents a non-academic endeavor to preserve personal testimony of the war in the university archives for the use of academic research. Evidently Mrs. Horowitz and her interviewees intended that their accounts be included in the future writing of war history.

Significantly, the function of oral history is more than adding new content to war history *per se*. As Lynn Abrams points out:

“The analysis of the process of remembering [...] allows the historian to contextualize the way in which memory works in the interview, to understand how memories can be conflicting, partial, meaningful and purposeful [...]. [W]e can begin to understand the significance of an event or experience to the interviewee from the way in which he or she positions memories within a web of meaning [...]. [O]ral history not only reveals new data but may also offer the narrator some degree of legitimacy or empowerment.”²

1 Van Waterford: *Prisoners of the Japanese in World War II. Statistical History, Personal Narratives and Memorials Concerning POWs in Camps and on Hellships, Civilian Internees, Asian Slave Laborers and Others Captured in the Pacific Theater*. Jefferson, NC 1994, 145.

2 Lynn Abrams: Memory as Both Source and Subject of Study. The Transformations of Oral History, in: Stefan Berger/ Bill Niven (Eds.): *Writing the History of Memory* London 2014, 90–91.

This is indeed how the oral history project of the *Old China Hands* worked for those interviewees: while the narrators hoped to supplement war history with their own experience in the Far East, their individual and shared memory in turn helped them to make sense of the war and their own past in China. In this article, I argue that the oral history project served as a way to shed light on relatively unknown segments of the Second World War as well as to shape a continuum of their long journey from China to the West (particularly North America). Many of the interviewees in this project were born in Shanghai, or lived there for a fairly lengthy period of time. The political and social changes caused by the Second World War interrupted and subsequently shifted the course of their lives. After the end of the war, while some tried to restore their lives to prewar conditions, others decided to leave China. The Chinese Communist party eventually expelled all foreigners, an alleged indication of imperialist presence, from the newly established regime. The desire to establish a new life in their new homes did not permit those expatriates to thoroughly reflect on their years in China, which was a currently hostile country during the years of the Cold War. The oral history project of the *Old China Hands* thus became the opportunity to reconnect their past with those who shared their experience. Focusing on organization, facilitation and contextualization of the oral history project, this article will discuss how oral history became a process of identity-(re)making.

Emergence of the *Old China Hands*

The term *Old China Hands* was often used to refer to the long-term British settlers engaged in the commercial, diplomatic and missionary arenas in nineteenth-century China. The formation of a British community in modern Shanghai was an episode of colonial expansion and global migration in the nineteenth and twentieth century. After the Opium War in 1842, Britain was allowed to establish settlements in the treaty ports under the system of extraterritoriality, providing new opportunities for trade and employment. To secure their investment environment, the British organized the Shanghai Municipal Council and established infrastructure such as road construction, utility provision, public transportation and so on. As a result, a portion of the city (known as the International Settlement) was *de facto* under British administration even though foreigners represented a minority of the Shanghai population. Table 1 shows that the percentage of foreigners in the entire population of the International Settlement never exceeded 4%; Shanghai remained an overwhelmingly Chinese city.

Table 1: Demography in the International Settlement³

Year	Chinese		Foreigners	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
1870	75,047	97.83%	1,666	2.17%
1876	95,662	98.28%	1,673	1.72%
1880	107,812	98.00%	2,197	2.00%
1885	125,665	97.16%	3,673	2.84%
1890	168,129	97.78%	3,821	2.22%
1895	240,995	98.09%	4,684	1.91%
1900	345,276	98.08%	6,774	1.92%
1905	452,716	97.52%	11,497	2.48%
1910	488,005	97.30%	13,536	2.70%
1915	620,401	97.10%	18,519	2.90%
1920	759,839	97.02%	23,307	2.98%
1925	810,279	96.43%	29,997	3.57%
1930	971,397	96.38%	36,471	3.62%
1935	1,120,860	96.64%	38,915	3.36%
1942	1,528,322	96.38%	57,351	3.62%

Despite its small population, in general the foreign community in Shanghai enjoyed a better lifestyle than their Chinese counterparts. According to Robert Bickers, early British settlers in China usually found work in one of three categories of occupations: first, the treaty port service industries such as the Shanghai Municipal Council and maritime customs; second, transnational businesses in international trades, banking, manufacturing; third, Protestant missionaries of various denominations.⁴ With a *self-made* mindset of migration, a less competitive environment than their home country, and certain advantages granted by the political system, these expatriates usually achieved economic success and higher social status. Table 2 also indicates that a higher percentage of foreigners worked in more lucrative and esteemed occupations, such as banking and insurance, medical and legal professions, and managerial personnel in foreign companies and so on. As the Britons constituted the largest group of foreign residents in the International Settlement, these figures roughly represented the British employment condition. Unsurprisingly, foreigners (especially the British) were usually considered the politically and economically privileged class.

³ Yiren Zou: *Jiu Shanghai renkou bianqian de yanjiu. (Study of demographic change in old Shanghai)*. Shanghai 1980, 90–91, 127, 141.

⁴ Robert Bickers: *Britain in China. Community, Culture and Colonialism 1900–1949*. Manchester 1999, 69–71.

Table 2: Residents' Occupations in the International Settlement in 1935⁵

Occupation	Chinese		Foreigners	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Agriculture	1,150	0.10%	14	0.04%
Industry	204,849	18.28%	3,346	8.60%
Commerce	183,328	16.36%	3,848	9.89%
Finance	10,604	0.95%	440	1.13%
Communication	13,521	1.21%	450	1.16%
Profession	14,634	1.31%	1,695	4.36%
Government	7,989	0.71%	2,036	5.23%
Military	410	0.04%	435	1.12%
Clerk	3,627	0.32%	2,153	5.53%
Housekeeping	57,250	5.11%	1,853	4.76%
Artists, athletes	3,706	0.33%	777	2.00%
Others & unemployed	619,790	55.30%	21,868	56.19%
Total	1,120,858	100.00%	38,915	100.00%

Shanghai's British community was unique not only because of its wealth but also due to its *Shanghai* identity. While in the beginning most of the expatriates came to China to seek a quick fortune in the short term without planning to stay long, as they settled down and established families in Shanghai, the temporary haven of the International Settlement became a permanent home for these foreigners. As Robert Bickers points out, *Shanghai* identity was multilayered in the sense that all the national, imperial and local identities were ever-present, though one was more prominent than the others at different times.⁶

Disruption to the *Old China Hands* Community

The Marco Polo Bridge Incident on July 7, 1937 triggered off the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and the arena of conflict soon shifted to Shanghai, the powerhouse of the Nationalist Government. Although the battles mainly occurred in the Chinese district, several bombings in the International Settlement destroyed the foreign community and compelled thousands of foreigners to evacuate. After a bloody fight of three months, the Nationalist troops retreated

⁵ Yiren Zou: *Jiu Shanghai renkou bianqian de yanjiu (Study of demographic change in old Shanghai)*. Shanghai 1980, 107, 143.

⁶ Robert Bickers: *Shanghaiers. The Formation and Identity of the British Settler Community in Shanghai 1843–1937*, in: *Past and Present* 159 (1998), 162.

from Shanghai to the interior in November 1937, leaving the Chinese district under Japanese control. With the consent of the Japanese authorities, the Shanghai Municipal Council retained rule over the International Settlement, restored social order, and gradually enabled those *Shanghaianders* who had fled to return.

If the Battle of Shanghai caused damage to the International Settlement in the short term, the eruption of the Pacific War profoundly changed the fate of the *Old China Hands*. On December 7, 1941 at 7:48 A.M. Japan launched a military strike on Pearl Harbor and declared war against the Allies. A few hours later, Japanese troops marched into the International Settlement and began to take over municipal properties and major British-owned companies. In order to monitor all the "enemy citizens", the Japanese authorities demanded all Allied nationals to register at the Gendarmerie Headquarters and to wear armbands displaying their nationalities in public. To avoid bank runs and reduce the financial risk, the Japanese permitted banks to open two hours a day and each account holder to withdraw 500 Chinese dollars a week.⁷ As many public services and companies were seized and became dysfunctional, their employees lost their jobs and sources of income. Furthermore, the Allied nationals were forbidden to participate in public recreational activities such as visiting the cinema, dancing or horse racing, and were required to bow to Japanese soldiers on the street. Japanese administration not only created enormous inconvenience in everyday life, but also humiliated the previously privileged class.

Of the new policies introduced by the Japanese in order to disadvantage the enemy nationals, the one that affected the *Shanghaiander* community most significantly was civilian internment. On November 5, 1942, the Japanese arrested about three hundred of the enemy nationals, most of whom were thought to have "political, social, economic and religious connections or influence, and could be potential troublemakers for the new regime", including heads of large companies, high-ranking officials at the Shanghai Municipal Council, members of the Shanghai Municipal Police, journalists and missionaries.⁸ In early 1943, the Japanese authorities proceeded to intern all Allied nationals in the so-called "Civil Assembly Center". There were 22 civilian internment camps in China Proper (excluding Hong Kong and Manchuria), of which nine were located in Shanghai (see Table 3).

⁷ Peggy Abkhazi: *A Curious Cage. Life in a Japanese Internment Camp 1943–1945*. Victoria, BC 2002, 25.
Greg Leck: *Captives of Empire. The Japanese Internment of Allied Civilians in China 1941–1945*. Bangor, Philadelphia 2006, 81.

⁸ Leck: *Captives of Empire* (2006), 449.

Table 3: Numbers of Internees in Shanghai Camps⁹

Camps	Opened	Number of Internees			
		British	American	Others	Total
1. Ash Camp	Mar. 1943	425	35	61	521
2. Chapei Camp	Mar. 1943	672	634	229	1,535
3. Great Western Road	Apr. 1943	306	29	51	386
4. Haiphong Road Camp	Nov. 1942	255	69	58	382
5. Lincoln Avenue Camp	Jun. 1944	345	30	40	415
6. Lunghwa Camp	Mar. 1943	1,710	61	215	1,986
7. Pootung Camp	Jan. 1943	1,057	399	83	1,539
8. Yu Yuen Road Camp	Feb. 1943	884	25	63	972
9. Shanghai Religious Centers	Mar. 1943	24	124	141	289

The Japanese did not implement overall civilian internment until one year after the war broke out, revealing that this task was not a priority of their warfare strategy. In fact, there were only 35 Japanese guards in the largest Lunghwa Camp, mainly in charge of supervisory roles such as roll call, letter inspection and distribution of staple foodstuffs, leaving most of the daily chores to the internees themselves. To effectively manage camp life, the internees voluntarily formed various committees to handle all sorts of matters, ranging from work assignment, discipline, entertainment, education, medical care, and so on. In the initial phase of the internment, the food supply was acceptable. As the war persisted, the shortages of food, water, fuel and medicine became apparent, especially after 1944. According to Ruth Hill Barr, who was interned with her family in Lunghwa, the food ration in May 1945 included one ladle of green tea and one oz. of congee for breakfast, one ladle of watery cabbage soup and one oz. potatoes and two oz. beetroot for lunch, and nothing for supper; she indicated that the daily calorie intake was only 300.¹⁰

On August 15, 1945, Japan officially surrendered to the Allies, resulting in the liberation of the civilian internees. Nevertheless, *Shanghaianders* soon realized that they could not restore their lifestyle to prewar conditions. Some of those who had become unemployed before the internment found that their companies no longer existed, and had to start over with their lives. Moreover, the International Settlement that ensured their privileges and local identity disap-

⁹ Leck: *Captives of Empire* (2006), 521–719.

¹⁰ George Wang/Betty Barr: *Shanghai Boy, Shanghai Girl. Lives in Parallel*. Hong Kong 2002 247.

peared, making Shanghai a strange land to the *Shanghaianders*. Thus, many people decided to leave China, both temporarily and permanently. In particular, after the Communists, who often took foreigner's presence as the indicator of imperialist advance, defeated the Nationalists in the civil war and became the new rulers of China, *Shanghaianders* were compelled to abandon the place that used to be their home. Some would return to their fatherland, i.e. United Kingdom, but others migrated to Australia, Canada and the United States to commence their new lives.¹¹

Reunion of the *Old China Hands*

In the 1980s, a group of people reclaimed the identity of *Old China Hands*. At the age of retirement by then, those who were born or spent the prime of their lives in China before the Second World War but left hastily during the postwar chaos began to contemplate what their China experiences meant to them. Particularly in the UK, “nostalgia literature” emerged among which the semi-autobiography *Empire of the Sun* by the British writer J. G. Ballard (1930–2009) achieved great success. Born in Shanghai, Ballard spent his formative years in China until the end of the Second World War. Based on the author's life in the civilian internment camp under Japanese occupation, *Empire of the Sun* won the Guardian Fiction Prize and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, was nominated for the Booker Prize for Fiction, and was later adapted into an Oscar-winning film in 1987. The novel and film provoked collective memory of those who shared wartime experiences and inspired the tradition of the biennial reunion of the *Old China Hands*.

The first reunion of this sort took place in Surrey, England on October 21 to 24, 1988, and its theme, “Once in a Lifetime Reunion of All Civilian Internees”, suggested the first reconnection after their departure from China over four decades earlier. With 359 attendees, made up of 343 former internees and 16 guests, this event meant “not exactly a convention, but hopefully an interesting and enjoyable weekend to celebrate a ‘Once in a Lifetime Reunion’ of all Civilian Allied Nationals who shared a unique experience in China under Japanese Occupation, 1941–1945”. In addition to numerous occasions of old friends catching up, the event organizers arranged various types of entertainment activities such as slide shows on current scenes in Shanghai and other areas of China, impromptu sketches of camp life by a former internee, singing camp songs and other songs of that era, and tours to Windsor Castle, the House of Commons, the

¹¹ Robert Bickers: *Shanghaianders and Others, 1843–1957*, in: Robert Bickers (Ed.): *Settlers and Expatriates. Britons over the Seas*. Oxford 2010, 299.

House of Lords, the Houses of Parliament and the Cabinet of War Rooms.¹² Even without attendees' first-hand accounts, we may imagine nostalgic emotions having lingered during and after the reunion to the extent that the participants were willing to repeat this undertaking.

Two years after the pioneering meeting, the second reunion took place in Anaheim, California, on March 8–11, 1990 with several distinct features. Firstly, this event was relocated from Southeast England to Southern California in the United States – a decision obviously made in order to accommodate the cohorts across the Atlantic. Second, the participants included not only the camp internees during the Pacific War, but also all the former residents in China before and during the war. This event was thus identified as “the first worldwide stateside reunion of *Old China Hands* and former camp inmates” – the first time the term *Old China Hands* was used to characterize such a gathering. As a result, the number of participants in the reunion increased to six hundred, some of whom travelled from as far as Australia. An attendee of this reunion vividly captured the scenes and sentiments of the event:

“Old friends who had lost touch with one another, met again and reminisced days of their youth. Many brought some memorabilia with them, photo albums of family, schools, internment camps, Shanghai and other parts of China. Valuable originals were on display under glass in a locked cabinet. Banners were hung on the walls of the banquet hall. In all respects it was a convention – and a celebration of our roots. Many underwent an experience akin to being born again – Some may have worn masks for many years, lived among people who could never understand our identity and the unique world we came from – But when we all got together at the OCH Reunion, we found out who we were – the ‘Third Culture Kids’ so to speak. The Shanghai Municipal Banner was our common flag – that’s where our roots were. Not in the country of our parents – nor in the country of our birth (China), but that of a unique cosmopolitan municipality. And we were quite proud of ourselves and our origin. We left with a greater understanding and self-respect of who we were. A therapeutic experience for many of us.”¹³

According to this passage, the group of the *Old China Hands* shared a common memory and unique identity associated with old Shanghai. For those *Old China Hands*, national identity seemed obscure and somewhat ambiguous – they were born in China but had minimum connections with the major population; with the distinct biological features of their racial origins, they nonetheless were kept distant from the nations of their ancestors. It was the special political status of the concession that nurtured the “Municipal identity”. Those who had been interned under Japanese occupation further felt comradeship among the inmates. After the

¹² Zoya Shlakis Collection, 1–21, Old China Hands Archives, California State University, Northridge.

¹³ Zoya Shlakis Collection, 1-23, Old China Hands Archives, California State University, Northridge.

Second World War, although those Caucasian residents left China and started to live a “typical” Westerner’s life, those *Old China Hands* were never as “typical” as their appearance might have suggested. The long separation from China and the entangled relations between the countries of their birth and postwar residence under the Cold War atmosphere led the *Old China Hands* to hide parts of their inner selves. This also explains why the reunion was considered “a therapeutic experience”.

Perhaps the most significant legacy left by the Anaheim reunion was the launch of the oral history project for the *Old China Hands*. The coordinator of this project was Rose Horowitz, a Jewish lady born in Shanghai in 1924 who migrated to the United States right before the Communist takeover of China. Of British origin but holding an Iraqi passport before the war, she was considered a “second-class enemy” by the Japanese and able to escape internment in the camp, and was therefore not eligible to attend the reunion in 1988. Hearing that the *Old China Hands* reunion would take place in Southern California and was open to non-internees, Rose Horowitz was very enthusiastic about the event and tried to organize an oral history project to preserve recollections of their life in China, particularly during the Japanese occupation of Shanghai in the Second World War. She contacted Professor Michael Onorato, then the director of the Oral History Program at the California State University, Fullerton. Regardless of the warning that the Oral History Program was short of funds for such an undertaking, Rose Horowitz continued to work towards it, enlisting dozens of interviewees, raising funds for processing supplies, recruiting volunteers to transcribe the interviews, and eventually persuading Prof. Onorato to mentor the interviewers and incorporate the *Old China Hands* Project into the Oral History Program at CSUF.

Memories of the *Old China Hands*

In a sense, the oral history project could be seen as the way the *Old China Hands* wrote their own history. However, this history had certain biases resulting from the organization of the project, particularly in relation to its facilitator Rose Horowitz. More than simply bringing people together to tape their stories, Horowitz played a much more active role, seeing through every step of the interview process from the beginning. Besides distributing general guidance and tips for oral history procedures provided by the Oral History Program at UCLA and CSUF, she compiled a chronology of modern Shanghai history to ensure that the interviewers had the

adequate background knowledge to conduct the project.¹⁴ When the *Old China Hands* had the third reunion in Vancouver in 1992, she brought equipment with her to the venue and taped more stories. With a clear agenda, she tended to interrupt when the interviewees began to drift off topic, trying to bring them back on track. When Professor Michael Onorato interviewed her, “she wanted to move me along”, as he recalled.¹⁵ Thus, Rose Horowitz played an important role in shaping the framework of the *Old China Hands*’ stories.

The entire *Old China Hands* Project consists of 47 interviews, including the one with Michael Onorato, who narrated the history of the project. As Rose Horowitz lived in Eagle Rock City, a neighborhood of Northeast Los Angeles, most of the interviewees came from the LA region. Being a Sephardic Jew, Rose Horowitz’s *Old China Hands* connection overlapped with her Jewish acquaintances. In fact, while conducting the *Old China Hands* Project, she also helped to organize the oral history of “Jews in China” for the Skirball Museum of Hebrew Union College.¹⁶ As a result, many of her *Old China Hands* interviewees shared their ethnic background: of the 46 *Old China Hands* interviewees, 16 are Jews, some of whom came to Shanghai seeking adventure before the Second World War, whereas others found themselves in this strange oriental city because Shanghai was the only port open to the Jews without a visa during the period of Nazi persecution. Nonetheless, there were 16 interviewees of British origin and 21 were born in China or Hong Kong.¹⁷

In addition, many interviewees came from well-to-do families especially before the war, which also affected the representation of the *Old China Hands*’ history – Rose Horowitz’s background showcased such a scenario.¹⁸ The history of her family in China could be traced back to the mid-nineteenth century, when her great-grandfather on the maternal side served as British Consul in Zhenjiang, Jiangsu Province. His family was settled in China for four generations, and Rose Horowitz, her grandmother and mother were all born there. Meanwhile, the husbands of Rose Horowitz’s grandmother and mother were immigrants, seeking opportunity in Shanghai. Born to a Jewish family in Allahabad, India, her grandfather received education in England, traveled between India and Russia, and finally settled in Shanghai. Her father was born in Turkey and

14 Rose Horowitz Collection, I-1-1, Old China Hands Archives, California State University, Northridge.

15 Interview with Michael Onorato, Old China Hands Collection, OH3507, Center of Oral and Public History, California State University, Fullerton.

16 Rose Horowitz Collection, I-1-4, Old China Hands Archives, California State University, Northridge.

17 Kimberly Hendrickson: *The Old China Hands Project Finding Aid*. Master Project in History, California State University at Fullerton, 2007.

18 Interview with Rose Horowitz, Old China Hands Collection, OH 2068, in the Center for Oral and Public History (COPH), California State University, Fullerton.

came via India to Shanghai. It is of note that despite sojourning in different countries for several generations, Horowitz's family maintained marital relations exclusively with Jews. Both Horowitz's maternal grandfather and father found employment with the Sassoons, one of the most influential Jewish merchants in China at the time, manifesting strong ties with the Jewish community developed before the influx of Jewish refugees during Hitler's persecution.

Rose Horowitz's father worked as the senior accountant for the Sassoons and earned his family a very comfortable life in Shanghai. As Horowitz describes, they had a ten-room, freestanding house with a back yard as large as a tennis court, a fleet of servants in charge of all sorts of domestic chores, and two cars that functioned not just as a means of transportation but were the symbol of social status in 1920s Shanghai. She also recalled spending summer days in Guling and Qingdao with her family, going to luxurious movie theatres every Sunday afternoon, shopping at fancy department stores – all sorts of fond memories about modern Shanghai. In fact, Rose Horowitz grew up with the concept that Shanghai was “home”, as she claimed:

“We were raised with the idea that this was our home. We were living in the Settlement, which was self-governing to an extent, basically English-speaking as far as business and schooling and what have you went [...]. We were foreigners, but we never thought of it as a foreign land. We thought of it as our land, God help me! We really did. Yes, we considered ourselves foreigners. That's what I am, you know. I don't think of myself as a sort of somebody holding an Iraqi passport or what have you. I spoke English. Most of the people we associated with were British, were thinking in the same terms, speaking the same language.”¹⁹

The pleasant lifestyle was completely interrupted by the Japanese assault in the Pacific Rim. On December 7, 1941, Japanese troops attacked Pearl Harbor and declared war on the Allies, following a series of battles and then occupation of the Allies' colonies in East and Southeast Asia, and taking over the public services and confiscated private corporations in the “enemy territory”. As his company registered with the British-governed Shanghai Municipal Council, Rose Horowitz's father became unemployed during the war and the family began to live on savings and selling their assets. Later the Japanese ordered people to wear armbands so as to “classify enemies”, shut down recreational venues, and required people to register with the police in their districts. In addition, the Japanese evacuated people from their houses and seized them for the storage of weapons and ammunition. Fortunately, Rose Horowitz's family were able to

¹⁹ Interview with Rose Horowitz, 6, 20. Old China Hands Collection, OH 2068, in the Center for Oral and Public History (COPH), California State University, Fullerton.

retain their house, but had to take in a number of the homeless. When the battles between the Allies and Japan became more critical, food supply became scarce and life more and more difficult. Worse still, Rose Horowitz's parents were severely ill and her father finally died of a stroke. After the war was over, her family decided to leave China, the country they had lived in their entire life, because "the situation had changed", as Rose Horowitz commented. In 1943, the unequal treaty and extraterritoriality were abolished and Shanghai returned to being solely "Chinese" after the presence of the International Settlement for almost a century. Not only did the foreigners' privileges vanish but they perceived a different attitude towards them by the Chinese, as another interviewee Fred Artindale explained why he did not stay in Shanghai after the war:

"Yeah, right after the war, there was propaganda out. And it was China for the Chinese, foreigners were now 'foreign pigs.' And we get out of here. And the whole attitude towards foreigners had changed. We were frightened to go out on the street, you know [...]. And my first impression of Shanghai, after the war, at that time, October 1945, was it was hopeless. No use in even picking up life again, so forget about it."²⁰

Regardless of nationality and social status, people in wartime Shanghai suffered agony and trauma one way or another, but the *Old China Hands* seemed to feel enormously deprived after the war. While they obviously belonged to the winning side, the Allies' victory did not award them peace and privilege. Instead, a new wave of hostility came from the Chinese. Although race-based animosity had occurred once in a while before the war, this time the *Old China Hands* became vulnerable without the protection of the concession government. To justify their sense of loss, the *Old China Hands* seldom mentioned the inequality of the entire concession system, but stressed the interdependence between foreign masters and Chinese servants.

In addition to revealing their sense of deprivation, the *Old China Hands* often told the stories in the internment camp, especially the conditions of everyday life. The shortage and inferiority of food supply was their common memory during the two and a half years of imprisonment; almost all the internees mentioned their experience of hunger and malnutrition in the interview. There were three sources of food supply: the rations provided by the Japanese, the monthly parcels sent by local non-internees via the International Red Cross, and foodstuffs that internees brought with them into the camp. Mabel Haynes, a British lady interned in Shanghai, vividly described the diet conditions in Lunghwa Camp:

²⁰ Interview with Fred Artindale and Virginia Artindale, pp. 7, 18. Old China Hands Collection, OH 2100, in the Center for Oral and Public History (COPH), California State University, Fullerton.

“The general kitchen received what came in in the rations that the Japanese sent. The rations at first were better; they got worse and worse and worse. It was cabbage and turnip – a lot of cabbage, I remember, and turnip. And people talk of potatoes [...]. So those were the meals, and they were smelly. The meat was high. It was always just rank, but you ate it. You just had to, otherwise there was nothing else.

We received parcels every month. Each person was allowed ten pounds through the Red Cross. We were lucky because the Swiss were in Shanghai and the Swiss oversaw what the Japanese did for the internees and oversaw the Red Cross [...]. With these packages, which contained sugar, flour, peanut butter, and [...] lard.²¹”

With the inadequacy of protein and calorie intake, internees began to lose weight and show symptoms of feebleness. When Virginia Artindale left the Lunghwa Camp at the age of 11 and a half, she weighed only 60 pounds, equivalent to the weight of a normal six-year-old child. Her father Fred Artindale lost 41 pounds during the period of internment.²²

Despite the difficult situation, the interviewees tried to emphasize how they endured and overcame the hardship. For instance, many internees had vivid memories about “chattie”, a little earthenware stove which burnt charcoal to produce a strong heat for cooking on the top – a sort of private kitchen in which one could cook the foodstuffs coming from the Red Cross parcels to increase the variety in one’s diet. In Fred Artindale’s case, this was a three-pound coffee can with a small hole in the bottom and wires hung on the side.²³ While the rice received from the Japanese was of the lowest quality with bugs in it and all broken, James Welch still complimented that “the rice we made up pretty well”;²⁴ and Mabel Haynes further explained “the rice was in vats and it was cooked quite well, and it was pretty clean because we had a system for cleaning the rice”.²⁵

Under such difficult circumstances, mutual assistance was indispensable in order to face adversity. The inmates often put together their food items to make a stew or a cake for sharing. This was particularly important for those who were interned unexpectedly and thus had no local

21 Interview with Mabel Haynes, 53-54. Old China Hands Collection, OH 2317, Center for Oral and Public History (COPH), California State University, Fullerton.

22 Interview with Fred Artindale and Virginia Artindale, 12. Old China Hands Collection, OH 2100, in the Center for Oral and Public History (COPH), California State University, Fullerton.

23 Interview with Fred Artindale and Virginia Artindale, 11. Old China Hands Collection, OH 2100, Center for Oral and Public History (COPH), California State University, Fullerton.

24 Interview with James Welch, 20. Old China Hands Collection, OH 2300, Center for Oral and Public History (COPH), California State University, Fullerton.

25 Interview with Mabel Haynes, 52. Old China Hands Collection, OH 2317, Center for Oral and Public History (COPH), California State University, Fullerton.

connection to send them food packages. Esther Bloomfield in the Lunghwa Camp was a little proud of how they lent a hand to those in need:

“I felt so sorry for people like Hank Behrens, who was a member of the S.S. President Harrison crew. They had no money to buy things. They came in with the barest minimum and they were hungry all the time. I think Hank will tell you that he is so grateful he knew the Bloomfields because we always had the extra things to eat.”²⁶

The SS President Harrison, an American passenger liner since the early 1920s, was sent to evacuate American military personnel from the Far East in October 1941. At the time Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, the SS President Harrison, passing through the waters near Shanghai, was soon captured and her crew was interned in Shanghai until the end of the war.²⁷ Unlike the local Allied nationals, the crew was exposed to an entirely strange environment and had no local acquaintances to provide any aid. They would definitely need support from other inmates.

These heart-warming stories from the internment camp were certainly the moments that helped the internees survive; but more urgent in their agenda of the entire oral history project was to repudiate the account of the camp history as portrayed in the Hollywood film *Empire of the Sun*, adapted from the eponymous novel by J. G. Ballard. While the author claimed the book was based on his life experience, many inmates considered it “imaginary” to the extent that “events are telescoped or rearranged chronologically in his memory and in imagination and recollection he plays a heroic part amidst scenes of horror – rather in the style of “Treasure Island”.²⁸ A former Lunghwa internee Daphne Fredericks pinpointed the errors in the book: “Prisoners” were described as half-naked or ragged; there were supposed to have been numerous deaths from starvation and disease; corpses were described as buried under a thin layer of soil.²⁹ Rose Horowitz also “felt very, very strongly that this is not the way it was, and it’s not something you turn into a joke because it hurt too darned much”.³⁰ Mabel Haynes made a long statement on the film and the novel worthy of quoting:

26 Interview with Esther Bloomfield, 6. Old China Hands Collection, OH 2104, Center for Oral and Public History (COPH), California State University, Fullerton.

27 For the history of S.S. President Harrison, see: David H. Grover/Gretchen G. Grover: *Captives of Shanghai. The Story of the President Harrison*. Napa, CA 1989.

28 Peggy Abkhazi’s letter to Daphne Fredericks, dated November 4, 1984. Abkhazi Archives, RG No: AR325, Box 2/5.

29 Daphne Fredericks’ letter to Peggy Abkhazi, dated October 10, 1984. Abkhazi Archives, RG No: AR325, Box 2/5.

30 Interview with Rose Horowitz, 36. Old China Hands Collection, OH 2068, Center for Oral and Public History (COPH), California State University, Fullerton.

“[I]n camp, as I have said over and over again, our own people who looked after the administration of the camp were so imbued with the need to keep us going in all areas, mentally, physically, and even socially and hygienically. We followed such good hygiene and we were so careful in all respects to keep our camp nice and clean and neat and for all of us to be upstanding. That is the aspect I had of our camp. Except for one occasion when Red Cross parcels came to a certain group and they were not shared, that was the only time there wasn’t outright sharing. The camp was run so very well, that for Ballard to have written his book the way he did and to have allowed that film *Empire of the Sun* to be depicted in the way it was, was really not a very kind gesture toward all of us who endured Lunghwa Camp in such an exemplary manner, and especially to those people who so bravely escaped from camp. Joyce Huxley, when she heard that Ballard’s book was being nominated in London for Book of the Year by the London *Times* was incensed, as well all the other people in England at the time who heard of it and who wrote to the London *Times* privately and in the paper that this book should not be considered because it did not do justice to the other inmates of the camp. Joyce Huxley said, ‘After all, my brother risked his life. He escaped from the camp and he joined the Allied forces. He escaped from the camp, then joined the British forces and he returned to camp when we were liberated.’ She said, ‘How can I stand by and let Ballard’s book and film go unanswered?’ And she was right.”³¹

For Mabel Haynes and many other inmates, the years in the internment camp may have been difficult and traumatic, but they made every effort to retain their dignity and therefore felt resentment at being defamed in public. In a sense, the *Old China Hands* oral history project was an effort not only to unfold the forgotten past and supplement the master narrative of World War II history, but also to contend popular culture by preserving their memory in the academic institution and to do their own justice.

As a collective project, the *Old China Hands*’ oral history provided an opportunity to create a sense of community. However, some interviewees participated in the project for personal purposes, of which Lorna Mason (née Jacobs) was a good example. Interviewed on March 9, 1990, Mason, like many other interviewees, began the story with her forefathers’ landing in China. What made her story striking was that her interview was entirely focused on her father’s life, instead of her own. Briefly describing how her grandparents met and married in Hong Kong and her mother’s family migrated from Russia to China, Lorna Mason spent much more time talking about her father’s involvement in the scout movement in Hong Kong and China. In particular, she detailed how her father became involved with the Jewish community in Shanghai. Her father Noel S. Jacobs, a British Methodist, fell deeply in love with her mother, a Russian Jew,

31 Interview with Mabel Haynes, 66-67. Old China Hands Collection, OH 2317, Center for Oral and Public History (COPH), California State University, Fullerton.

to the extent that he converted to Judaism in order to marry her. He devoted himself to what he called “his wife’s people”, that is, the Jews in Shanghai, by organizing them into cub scouts, boy scouts, rover scouts, and then scout troops affiliated with the Shanghai Volunteer Corps. By implanting the Scouting principles and values, Noel Jacobs hoped to make the Jewish youth “the equals among the English and other nationalities in Shanghai”.

In addition, he also took initiative to urge the Jewish community to prepare for the incoming escapees of the Third Reich. In 1938, hearing of the arrival of a number of Jews from Germany and Austria and while the local leaders in the Jewish community refused to help them settle down, Noel Jacobs was furious and rebuked:

“Look, these are your people. They might not be Russian Jews, but they’re Jews. They’re coming here. They’re your people. You make room for them. You take care of them. They [the Jewish leader] said, ‘Well, we don’t have any place.’ My father said, ‘Your synagogue is the place. You get that synagogue organized and get the people to come in. They’ve got to have a place to be resettled and organized.’ From what I understand that he was that much as leader that he instigated whatever preparation was necessary to settle them.”³²

By “quoting” her father, Lorna Mason attempted to characterize him as a well-organized figure with much compassion for the Jews.

Before the Pacific War broke out, the Americans and British knew the war with the Japanese was becoming inevitable and started to evacuate their citizens, particularly women and children. Lorna Mason’s family were sent to California in April 1941, with the exception of her father, who remained to work in the British American Tobacco Company. As an Allied national, Noel Jacobs was doomed to be interned during the war. Recalling her father’s life in the camp, Lorna Mason again chose to describe the most positive side in the darkness. As a Scout master and handyman, he made himself two wooden suitcases which, when opened up, became a table and a bookcase respectively. He was involved in 27 different areas of work, including the camp advisory committee, Boy Scout troop, entertainment, sports, canteen committee, and church. His job was so appreciated that every department he was involved with gave him a medal. As Lorna Mason said: “Inside the camp, he kept a good smile and kept things going.”³³

³² Interview with Lorna Mason, 16-17. Old China Hands Collection, OH 2121 Center for Oral and Public History (COPH), California State University, Fullerton.

³³ Interview with Lorna Mason, 14-15. Old China Hands Collection, OH 2121, Center for Oral and Public History (COPH), California State University, Fullerton.

Compared with the dynamic accounts of her father's life, Lorna Mason's own role in the interview was only subsidiary. She was able to precisely date the year of her great-grandfather's arrival in Hong Kong, the year of her grandparents' marriage, and the year of her father's birth, but did not mention the date of her own birth. Accordingly, Lorna Mason's interview looked more like the commemoration of her father, rather than her own memory of Shanghai life. Certainly she did this on purpose. In her letter to Rose Horowitz after the interview, she expressed a strong motive to leave her father's name in history:

“Anyway, I know he did a great deal and yet I wish I knew so much more! However, I was determined to preserve his history and felt in my own small way I could do it by writing that *Jacobs Family History* for our own children, grandchildren, and those that follow them for the future.

When I heard from Mabel that it was your hope to preserve the history of the Shanghai people through that oral history, I was thrilled! This way, I thought, the name of Noel S. Jacobs could be preserved forever – at least I hope so!

It was very interesting – at the reunion which was attended by almost 700 people on the one main day – I really felt like an outsider looking in! The majority of the people there had a closest of being together in internment camps. When I attended a small group of Pootungites and casually mentioned my father's name and no one knew him, I was somewhat sad – since I know he did so much for the internees there, and now was not even remembered!”³⁴

The experience at the Anaheim reunion made Lorna Mason believe that it was her call to do her father justice by participating in the oral history project – as he did his best to bring good to both the Jewish and the internment camp communities, he deserved more recognition from his friends of the time and posterities of the future. This is probably why Lorna Mason ended her interview with one final episode that in 1967, the former Jewish Scouts in Shanghai, then returning to their homeland Israel, invited Noel Jacobs and his wife “to be our guests and come to Israel for one month to see what your old Boy Scouts have done and to see the building up of this country”. After Noel Jacobs' death, those people volunteered to create a memorial forest in Mod-in, Israel in honor of their “Scout Master, friend and leader”.³⁵

34 Lorna Mason's letter to Rose Horowitz, April 19, 1990. Rose Horowitz's Collection, I-1-9, Old China Hands Archives, California State University Northridge.

35 Interview with Lorna Mason, 21-22. Old China Hands Collection, OH 2121, Center for Oral and Public History (COPH), California State University, Fullerton.

Conclusion

The oral history project of the *Old China Hands* first and foremost aimed to preserve the stories of those who spent years before and during the Second World War in China. Indeed, a few former internees attempted to reveal their experiences in the camps, but soon felt that “their wartime treatment was relatively ‘mild’ and ‘kind,’ compared to the utterly inhuman way” suffered by the Jews in the Nazi concentration camps or the Allied Prisoners of War in the Japanese camps in Southeast Asia since “there [was] little of the sheer brutality” in their stories.³⁶ Not until the former internees came to the age of retirement were they aware of the urgency to speak out. Many of the interviewees were the beneficiaries of the British imperial expansion, but they also witnessed the loss of its glory. The oral history project provided them with an opportunity to make sense of their colonial past and reconnect with their cohorts. The oral history project thus collectively commemorated their time and life in China and made it the unique component of their own identity. Certainly, each individual participated in the project with his or her own agenda. In particular, those who narrated in detail their life under Japanese internment intentionally combated the distorted pictures presented in popular culture and openly demanded justice for their own history. Others would take the oral history project as a venue for celebrating personal or family success. The action of storytelling and archiving thus represented an effort to engrave ordinary people’s accounts into formal history-writing.

36 Felicia Yap: *Voices and Silences of Memory. Civilian Internees of the Japanese in British Asia during the Second World War*, in: *Journal of British Studies* 50 (2011), 928.

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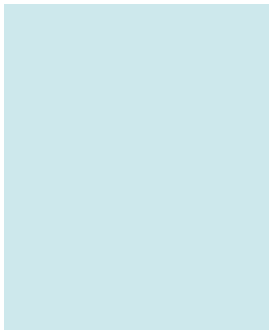
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