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**THE TRADE DIASPORA OF BAGHDADI JEWS:
FROM OTTOMAN BAGHDAD TO CHINA'S TREATY
PORTS, 1843-1931**

I was rather surprised to find that in this cosmopolitan city, this ‘Paris of the East,’ where so much feverish energy was spent upon the amassing of wealth and the pursuit of pleasure, there was a veritable stronghold of uncompromising orthodox Judaism. The stronghold was rather sparsely manned, it is true, and those who watched over it might truthfully be described as members of the “Old Guard,” for they belonged mostly to the older generation, as familiar with quotations from the Talmud as with those of the Stock Exchange. Israel Cohen, *The Journal of a Jewish Traveller*, New York, 1925, 124.

The name of Sassoon is less known in Europe than that of Rothschild, but among Arab or Banyan traders, even with Chinese and Japanese merchants, in the Straits as well as on both sides of the Ganges, it is a name to conjure with...” *North China Herald*, 8 February 1881.

The study of Baghdadi Jewish traders in South, Southeast and East Asia in the nineteenth and early twentieth century has so far been neglected, mostly as a result of the great dispersion of materials related to the Baghdadi Jewish diaspora. So far, we possess only studies on individual communities and still have superficial awareness on how the various nodes of the Baghdadi diaspora integrated with each other on a social and commercial level. Undoubtedly, future research will need to weave together the general and the particular to provide a complete picture of the Baghdadi experience from British India to China and from London to Australia.

This paper chooses the treaty port of Shanghai to illustrate how Baghdadi Jewish traders operated between the middle of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. The starting point is 1843, the year Shanghai together with other four cities –the first so-called treaty-ports- was officially opened to foreign trade after the signing of the treaty of Nanking which marked the end of the Opium War (1839-1842). In the following decades the countryside areas, initially designated for the residence of foreign traders, gradually evolved into two self-governing enclaves, the Concession Française and the International Settlement. Shanghai's foreign settlements, like their counterparts in other treaty ports, never became formal colonies and developed into grey areas where Baghdadi Jews could freely pursue their own commercial agendas. The following pages will attempt to piece together the history of Baghdadi Jews in Shanghai in the light of the ambiguous status of the city's foreign settlements.

- **The nineteenth century spice route**

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Jews from Baghdad and its adjacent areas in the Ottoman empire formed a well-integrated trade diaspora that stretched from Bombay to Shanghai, with London as a European base. The spatial structure of Baghdadi networks from India to China followed closely the eastward expansion of the formal and informal British empire and, as a result, the main nodes of the Baghdadi diaspora took shape in Bombay, Calcutta, Rangoon, Singapore, Hong Kong and the Shanghai foreign settlements. We can surmise that Baghdadis' trading networks in South, Southeast and East Asia reproduced ancient Jewish commercial patterns, which successfully adapted to changing circumstances, rather than completely new entrepreneurial endeavours entirely originated

within the framework of the British empire. Thus, to stress the continuity of Jewish networks, in this paper I use the definition trade diaspora even if in the last part of the nineteenth century trade diasporas tended to disappear as a result of the westernisation of commerce and the consequent creation of large ecumenical trade zones.¹

From a *longue durée* perspective we can find intriguing similarities between ancient and modern Jewish settlements in China. In this respect, the establishment of Judaeo-Arabic speaking communities by Baghdadi Jews in Shanghai and Hong Kong in the middle of nineteenth century should be considered in the broader context of the history of cross-cultural trade between the Middle Kingdom, Central and West Asia. We cannot, in fact, overlook that, during the Tang dynasty (618-907 C.E.) and possibly even earlier, small numbers of Jewish traders travelled to China using either the overland Silk route(s) or the maritime Spice route(s), which connected the Middle Kingdom with the Eastern Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. In the nineteenth century Judaeo-arabic speaking Baghdadi traders, in the footsteps of Britons and Parsis, chose the maritime Spice route and sailed to China from their Indian outposts of Bombay and Calcutta via Singapore. As for their most well studied predecessors, Judaeo-persian speaking Jews who settled in Kaifeng, it is not clear whether they reached China by sea or land, probably in the early days of the northern Song dynasty (960-1127).² When Baghdadi Jews arrived in Hong Kong and Shanghai in the 1840s, their Kaifeng brethren, who had staunchly preserved the faith of their ancestors until the end of the eighteenth century, had already been largely

¹ Philip Curtin, *Cross-cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge, 1984), especially chapter one and chapter eleven.

² See especially Donald Daniel Leslie, *The Survival of the Chinese Jews: The Jewish Community of K'aifeng*. (Leiden, 1972); idem, "Integration, Assimilation, and Survival of Minorities in China: The Case of the Kaifeng Jews," in *Jews in China: From Kaifeng...to Shanghai*, ed. Roman Malek (Sankt Augustin, 2000), 45-76.

assimilated by the Chinese host environment, their synagogue was in ruins, and no one could any longer read Hebrew. Rather significantly, the arrival of Baghdadi traders thus renewed a long established, though tiny presence, of Jews in China.

- **Baghdadi Jews in India**

The origins of the trade diaspora of Jews from Baghdad and other areas of the Ottoman could be traced around the middle of the 18th century when Jewish merchants became involved in trade between the Ottoman empire, the port of Basra and India. By the late 18th century Jews from Aleppo, Baghdad and Basra formed the “Arabian Jewish Merchant Colony” in Surat and together with co-religionists based in Calcutta and Bombay imported precious stones, rose water and Arabian horses to India. Once Surat lost its commercial clout, Jewish traders transferred their trade interests to Bombay and Calcutta, which blossomed into the main centres of the Baghdadi diaspora.³ Originally, Baghdadis in India, similarly to the Armenians, acted as cross-cultural brokers and belonged to the ‘greytown’ which “stood literally and figuratively between the ‘blacktown’ where the Indians lived and the ‘whitewtown’ of the Europeans.”⁴⁵ In the early nineteenth century Armenians might have outnumbered Judaeo-Arabic speaking Jews in Bombay: in 1813 about one hundred Armenians lived in Bombay whilst in the early 1830s 20 to 30 families of Jews from the

³ Joan Roland, *Jews in British India: Identity in a Colonial Era* (Hanover, NH., 1989), 15-6; Thomas A. Timberg, "Baghdadi Jews in Indian Port Cities," in *Jews in India*, ed. Thomas A. Timberg (New Dehli, 1986), 273; Brian Weinstein, “Judeo-arabic in India,” *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 1, no. 2 (1999): 62-3.

⁴ Timberg, “Baghdadi Jews,” 277.

⁵ Mesrovb Jacob Seth, *Armenians in India from the Earliest Time to the Present Day* (Calcutta, 1937), chapter XXV passim; Roland, *Jews in British India*, 16.

Ottoman empire lived in the city.⁶ Yet, in the following decades Armenians gradually retreated from Bombay, whereas the Baghdadi Jewish community grew constantly.

Daud Pasha's persecution against Jews in Ottoman Baghdad between 1817-1831 and the forced conversion to Islam of the Jewish population of the Persian city of Meshed⁷ in 1839 contributed to the expansion of the Bombay community. Refugees from these cities –most notably David Sassoon,(1792-1864), the scion of Baghdad's most eminent Jewish family- created successful commercial endeavours, which attracted poor co-religionists from the four corners of the Ottoman empire thus prompting a continuous flux of newcomers to Calcutta and Bombay. As a result the term Baghdadi, assumed in both cities a broad connotation which included "Jews from Syria and other parts of the Ottoman Empire, Aden and Yemen, all of whom were Arabic speaking, and even Jews from Persia and Afghanistan, who were not."⁸

In Bombay Sassoon, swiftly built an international business empire, became the uncontested leader of the local Baghdadi community, and formed a durable allegiance with the British empire. The rise of the Sassoon family as major entrepreneurs associated with the British shaped the strategies of Baghdadi Jews who resided outside the Ottoman lands: the Baghdadi commercial elites adopted Anglicised tastes and an Anglicised way of life and formed an imagined British identity which helped to foster their own business strategies. By the late nineteenth century the model of the "Oriental" merchant-prince had already been replaced by that of the English gentleman who aspired to a club membership and appreciated gentlemanly pursuits. In a few words, Constantinople had been swiftly

⁶ Mesrovb Jacob Seth, *Armenians in India from the Earliest Time to the Present Day* (Calcutta, 1937), chapter XXV passim; Roland, *Jews in British India*, 16.

⁷ Contacts between Meshed and Bombay were maintained as late as 1920 Jewish traders from the city, who were registered as Muslims in their passports, traveled to Bombay. Israel Cohen, *A Jewish Pilgrimage: The Autobiography of Israel Cohen* (London, 1956), 215.

eclipsed by London, though Baghdad remained a crucial religious and emotional reference point for Baghdadi Jews of the trade diaspora.

- **From India to China's Treaty Ports**

Without any doubt, the establishment of dense Baghdadi Jewish commercial networks in China is inextricably linked to the Sassoon family. Shortly after the end of the Opium War (1839-1842), which sanctioned the cession of Hong Kong to the British and the opening of five to foreign commerce, Elias David Sassoon (1820-1880), the second son of David Sassoon, opened branches of the family firm D. Sassoon, Sons & Co. in Shanghai and Hong Kong thus marking the beginning of a stable Baghdadi presence in China.⁹ At the end of the 1860s the Sassoons' networks in China had taken the form of a grid characterised by spatial continuity: the Sassoon firms, D. Sassoon & Co. and E. D. Sassoon & Co. (founded by Elias David Sassoon after the death of the family patriarch) were operating offices in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Tianjin, Hankou, Zhifu, Ningbo, and Niuzhuang.¹⁰ The treaty port of Shanghai and the Crown Colony of Hong Kong represented the two main centres of the Sassoons' operations in China and, not surprisingly, the offices of the firms were usually headed by members or relatives of the Sassoon family. In other Chinese treaty ports Baghdadis remained merely sojourners: young Baghdadi men worked in the Sassoons' offices for a few years before being rewarded with a coveted transfer to Shanghai or Hong

⁸ Roland, *Jews in British India*, 15-7.

⁹ Letter of Jakob b. Abraham d. Sudea (1895) reprinted in P.G. von Mollendorf, "Die Juden in China," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums* 39 (1895), 330-1; "Death of Mr. E.D. Sassoon," *North China Herald* hereafter quoted as NCH, 11 May 1880, 416.

¹⁰ *The Chronicle & Directory for China, Japan, & the Philippines for the Year 1868* (Hong Kong), 155, 201, 223, 234, 236, 238. In the port of Nagasaki in Japan, which was relatively near to Shanghai, the Sassoons operated through agents and did not establish a branch office in the city. Lane Earns, "The Shanghai-Nagasaki Judaic Connection, 1859-1924", in *The Jews of China*, ed. Jonathan Goldstein (Armonk, 1999), 159-60.

Kong. Albeit in the late nineteenth century life in smaller treaty ports was characterised by solitude, the young Sassoon clerks could nevertheless rely on regular contacts with co-religionists. Huge distances certainly did not hinder marriages, which were arranged with young women as far away as India.¹¹

Quite clearly, in the early days, broadly speaking between the 1840s and the 1880s, the Sassoons adopted a strategy based on constant circulation of salaried employees between Bombay, the smaller treaty ports, Shanghai and the Crown colony of Hong Kong. The Sassoon's employees were often born in Ottoman Baghdad, and the great majority had been brought up in Bombay. Their lives were shaped by the liberality of the Sassoons: they usually came from poor backgrounds, had enjoyed access to free education at the David Sassoon's school in Bombay and had then been recruited by the Sassoons to expand their family business in China, as well as, in other outposts of the Baghdadi diaspora such as Singapore. The Sassoons then also acted as a social-security organisation for former elderly employees with no relatives who could take care of their needs.¹²

The Sassoon firms and their *modus operandi* in China in second half of the nineteenth century epitomised the transition of Baghdadi Jews in British India, Singapore and China from a traditional trade diaspora into an enterprising group integrated within the European dominated world economy. In this respect, the Sassoons gave up traditional accounting techniques, adopted a business organisation which resembled that of European trading firms and employed English in commercial transactions. It is not yet clear when Judaeo-Arabic disappeared from their accounts: certainly in the middle of the 1880s the

¹¹ See for example *North China Herald* (hereafter quoted as *NCH*), 20 December 1882.

¹² Chiara Betta, "From Orientals to Imagined Britons: Baghdadi Jews in Shanghai," unpublished manuscript.

files of the Shanghai branch of E.D. Sassoon & Co. which recorded the import of Indian opium to China were already kept in English and according to double-entry.¹³

Trust was a crucial aspect in the relationship between the members of the Sassoon family and their employees, who were always recruited among Baghdadi Jews. As pointed out above, the definition Baghdadi in China, like in India, also included Judeo-Arabic speaking Jews from various areas of the Ottoman empire and even Jews from Iran and Afghanistan. In Shanghai –to give an example- Simon Abraham Levy, the manager of E.D. Sassoon & Co. at the turn of the twentieth century, was born and brought up in Cairo and was therefore, strictly speaking not, a Babylonian Jew.¹⁴ What is indisputable is that the Sassoons did not to hire Ashkenazi Jews, something that can be clearly inferred from the surnames of employees appearing in various editions of commercial directories.¹⁵ The Sassoons also avoided employing non-Jewish Westerners, though there might have been a few exceptions such as when Elias David Sassoon recruited a certain A. de Miranda, probably a Roman Catholic Portuguese, in Hong Kong in 1846.¹⁶

Similar to Western firms, the Sassoons, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century, heavily relied on Chinese intermediaries, the so-called compradores, to conduct business with Chinese merchants.¹⁷ Baghdadi Jews brought up in India were fluent in Hindustani, a lingua franca spoken in India's ports, yet, as a whole, in China they did not learn to communicate in Chinese dialects, could not read Chinese and were not fully

¹³ I have viewed a number of opium files of E.D. Sassoon, Sons & Co. kept in the Shanghai House Property Administration Bureau Archives and have formulated the observation on double-entry after reading Jack Goody, "Rationality and Rationeria: the Keeping of Books and the Economic Miracle", chapter 2, in *The East in the West* (Cambridge, 1996), 49-81.

¹⁴ Public record Office, Kew Gardens. FO 372/47/21695. Sir Pelham to Foreign Office, 22 May 1907.

¹⁵ For this paper I have consulted Shanghais business directories from 1868 to 1928.

¹⁶ *The Hongkong Almanack and Directory for 1846, with an Appendix* (Hong Kong, 1846).

¹⁷ Zhang Zhongli, and Chen Zengnian, *Shaxun jituan zai jiu Zhongguo* [The Sassoon group in Old China] (Beijing, 1985), 120-6.

proficient in local business practices. They were therefore compelled to use the services of compradores, Chinese merchants who besides acting for foreign firms also conducted their own private business. The legal position of compradores vis-à-vis foreign mercantile houses was open to various interpretations since, according to circumstances, they were sometimes recognised as employees of foreign firms and sometimes as independent brokers, therefore creating notable confusion as to whom should have taken “final responsibility for a comprador’s private business.” The issue was especially relevant in a number of court cases that involved the Tianjin and Shanghai branches of D. Sassoon, Sons & Co. and their insolvent compradores in the middle of the 1880s. Conflicts arose especially when compradores incurred in financial losses and it was not explicit whom should have been liable to pay the creditors. When in 1883 the Tianjin comprador of D. Sassoon, Sons & Co. could not honour the payment of gold bullion with opium, his creditor requested the debt to be paid by the Sassoon company on the basis that the comprador during his transactions had issued receipts in the name of D. Sassoon, Sons & Co. even when business was carried out on his private account. The demand was however rejected by the Sassoons who did not want to assume responsibility for what in their eyes was their comprador’s personal business. The episode highlights that compradores, notwithstanding their exposure to foreign mercantile practices were still anchored in Chinese business culture, whereas, at least in this case, the Sassoon firms had readily adopted Western business culture.¹⁸

The spatial arrangements of the Sassoon’s networks in China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reflect the expansion of British private enterprise capitalism

¹⁸ Motono Eiichi, “A Study of the Legal Status of the Compradores during the 1880s with Special reference to the three Civil Cases between David Sassoon Sons Co. and Their Compradores,” *Acta Asiatica*, no. 62

in China's treaty ports, areas which developed into self-governing enclaves even if they had not been officially ceded to foreign powers.¹⁹ The Sassoons' and more in general the Baghdadis' extraordinary commercial success in China depended, in fact, largely on the close association they established not only with the British empire but also with local British commercial elites. This was especially true in Shanghai, the actual importance of which as China's main economic centre in the first decades of the twentieth century cannot be overstated: by the end of World War One Shanghai had blossomed into an international industrial and commercial hub with its own distinctive commercial culture. Much of the city's phenomenal economic development depended on the fact that two areas the Concession Française and the International Settlement, were ruled by foreign municipal councils. The status of the International Settlement was especially ambiguous since no foreign power held effective control over its municipal council, which was dominated by the local British oligarchy, formed by hardcore British settlers, the so-called Shanghailanders. Most significantly, the latter counted on the support of the Sassoon firms, and more in general of Baghdadi Jewish merchants, who regularly elected a councillor until the 1920s. British consular authorities were acutely aware of the mutual interests which tied together Shanghai's British oligarchy with the Baghdadi commercial elite and stretched rules by granting British protection to those Baghdadi Jews who as Ottoman subjects were supposed to receive French protection. The practice was, however, discontinued in 1906 when London finally discovered the unorthodox ways of the Shanghai consulate-general.²⁰

(1992): 44-70.

¹⁹ On China's treaty ports see especially Robert Bickers, *Britain in China: Community, Culture and Colonialism, 1900-1949* (Manchester, 1999), 1-21.

²⁰ Chiara Betta, "Marginal Westerners in Shanghai: The Baghdadi Jewish Community, 1845-1931", in *New Frontiers: Imperialism's New Communities in East Asia, 1842-1952*, eds. Robert Bickers and Christian Henriot (Manchester, 2000), 40,1, 43-6.

The Sassoon firms, especially between the middle of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, helped to forge a strong sense of community among Baghdadis by sponsoring the building of a cemetery and a synagogue. Baghdadi Jews in Shanghai remained always proud of their Babylonian heritage, which was kept alive in Baghdadi homes, also after the community, especially the wealthiest members, underwent a marked process of Anglicisation. From the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, Shanghai Baghdadis, like those who lived in other communities of the Baghdadi diaspora, shed their “Oriental” roots by forging an imagined British identity which entailed loyalty to the British empire, the usage of English as main language and the adoption of a westernised way of life. Baghdadi shared their imagined identity especially with Parsis, the most “English” of Bombay’s residents. In reality, among Baghdadis the degree of Anglicisation depended largely on class: the wealthiest Baghdadis were highly Anglicised, whilst the middle and lower-middle classes westernised at a slower pace. As for the Baghdadis’ “other”, destitute Jews who travelled to Shanghai from as far as Jerusalem and made a living either by begging or by peddling goods, did not feel any need to adopt westernised life-styles.²¹

- **Comparing diasporas: Baghdadi Jews, Parsis and Opium**

These (Jews and Parsis) came almost entirely from India, or parts adjacent, and they were all British subjects. There were two large Jewish houses, the two Sassoons, and the remainder of the Jews, and all the Parsees, were either brokers or merchants in a very small way. They were quite inoffensive, and their raison d’être was chiefly

²¹ Betta, “From Orientals to Imagined Britons.”

the opium trade.²² From the memoirs of Charles M. Dyce, prominent silk merchant of Shanghai between 1870 and 1900.

To understand in depth the Baghdadi diaspora in China, we should view it in the wider context of entrepreneurial groups with bases in British India, which occupied functional niches under the aegis of the British empire in the India-China trade in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Baghdadi Jews, Parsis and Gujarati Muslims imported to China cotton yarn and opium, Sindhis concentrated their interests in the silk trade whilst Peshawari Muslims traded tea, silk and furs. In contrast, Greeks and Armenians, ancient trade diasporas which were not linked to the British, remained on the fringe of foreign trade communities in China since their business was mostly confined to petty trade, though a handful of Greek firms set up what appeared to be flourishing businesses, especially in the treaty port of Tianjin.²³ In Shanghai, Greeks such as M. Pappadopoulos “importer of Turkish and Egyptian cigarettes” and the “Sino-Egyptian” tobacconists H. Kessissoglou and J. Mouradoghlu were prominent in the commerce of tobacco.²⁴

Throughout the 1840s and 1850s Parsis, who had been relevant participants in the Indian Ocean trade for centuries, represented the dominant foreign diaspora in China and were active in the colonies of Macao and Hong Kong and the newly opened treaty ports of Guangzhou and Shanghai. Numbers easily explain the Parsis’ commercial predominance: in 1848 as many as 50 Parsi merchants were working in Chinese treaty ports and in Hong Kong and Macao whilst only five Baghdadi Jews -the employees of David Sassoon and

²² Charles M. Dyce, *Personal Reminiscences of Thirty Years' Residence in the Model Settlement Shanghai, 1870-1900* (London, 1906), 50.

²³ *The Comacrib Directory of China* (Shanghai, 1928), passim; Claude Marcovits, “Indian Communities in China, c.1842-1949,” in *New Frontiers*, 64-8, idem, *The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750-1947: Traders of Sind from Bukhara to Panama* (Cambridge, 2000), 147-8.

²⁴ *The Directory & Chronicle for China...* (Hong Kong, 1910 edition), 899; *Comacrib*, 450.

Co.- were working in Hong Kong and China's newly opened treaty ports. More specifically, in Shanghai in the late 1850s more than ten Parsi firms had opened offices in the city whereas Baghdadi commercial interests were represented only by David Sassoon, Sons & Co.²⁵

In the following decades, however, Parsis failed to develop further their spatial networks in China and adopted a rather defensive commercial strategy whilst Baghdadi Jews under the enlightened guidance of the Sassoon's firms, gradually build up a steady presence in Hong as well as in a number of treaty ports. The formidable decline of the Parsis' commercial clout could be ascribed to their reluctance to choose China as their permanent home since, as a rule, they did not bring their wives and children to China. In Shanghai at the beginning of the twentieth century Parsi presence remained confined to a group of about forty men for whom Bombay remained their home.²⁶ In contrast Baghdadi started to settle with their families in Shanghai probably already in the 1870s, and, as a result, their numbers grew constantly: the community was probably formed by a few dozens individuals, in the twentieth by a few hundred people.²⁷ As settlers, Baghdadi Jews exploited the commercial interstices, which took shape in the foreign settlements and channelled their enormous entrepreneurial drive in the real estate market, one of the most profitable activities in the city. As sojourners Parsis, remitted their own earnings to Bombay and carefully avoided any speculative involvement in land dealings, thus failing to

²⁵ *Anglo-Chinese Calendar for the Year 1848* (Canton, 1848); Shanghai shehui kexueyuan jingji yanjiusuo (Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, Economic Research Institute), ed., *Shanghai dui wai maoyi, 1840-1949* (The Foreign Trade of Shanghai, 1840-1949) (Shanghai, 1989), Vol. 1, 68-74.

²⁶ "Parsees were not entirely resident in Shanghai for a larger number of years but they came here for a period and then returned home..." " H.M. Supreme Court. In the Matter of the Parsee Cemetery Trust Deed and in the Matter of the Act 52, George III, c 101," *NCH*, 6 July 1906, 36.

²⁷ For a general view of Baghdadi in Shanghai see Maisie J. Meyer, "The Sephardi Jewish Community of Shanghai 1845-1939 and the Question of Identity" (London, 1994).

make considerable profits.

The dwindling number of Parsi firms in Shanghai reflects their extraordinary decline in the city. In the early twenties Parsi interests were mostly represented only by two firms: Cawasjee Pallanjee, & Co., which had been operating in China since the time of the East India Company, and Tata, Sons & Co., a concern belonging to the Tata family, Bombay's most prominent Parsi dynasty. As for Gujarati Muslims, a third middlemen minority based in Bombay, which competed with Parsis and Baghdadi Jews in the India-China trade, they never formed a significant community and were present in Shanghai through the firms Abdoolally Ebrahim & Co. and E. Pabaney.²⁸

The commercial rivalry between Parsis, Baghdadi Jews and Gujarati Muslims needs to be assessed in the context of the import to China of Indian opium which was legal between 1858 and the end of 1917.²⁹ Before the legalisation of the opium trade opium smuggling in Shanghai was controlled by British traders, especially by Jardine & Matheson and Dent, Beale & Co. and to a less extent by the American firms of Russell & Co. and Augustine Heard & Co. British dominance is confirmed by the number of opium clippers which moored in Wusong, near Shanghai, in 1851: 42 were British, 11 American, three Parsis and only two belonged to the Baghdadi firm of David Sassoon, Sons & Co. Parsi vessels that reached Shanghai in 1851 exported to India gold bullion and general goods, whilst those belonging to David Sassoon, Sons & Co. apparently left Shanghai empty.³⁰ Nevertheless, the Sassoons also sold opium in exchange for gold bullion, a line of trade which needs to be further researched.

²⁸ *The Directory & Chronicle for China...* (Hong Kong, 1906, 1909, 1910, 1919 and 1920 1910, and 1920 editions), 651-733.

²⁹ For a background of the opium trade see Gregory Blue, "Opium for China: The British Connection." In *Opium Regimes: China, Britain and Japan, 1839-1952*, eds. Timothy Brook and Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi (Berkeley, 2000), 31-6.

After 1858 British merchants gradually disengaged themselves from the opium commerce, leaving it in the hands of Parsi, Baghdadi Jewish, Gujarati Muslims, and even Persian firms with strong bases in Bombay. The Persian firms H.M.H. Nemazee & Co. and M. M. B. Afshar & Co. were latecomers in Shanghai since they established branch offices in the city in 1895 and 1897.³¹ Towards the end of the nineteenth century Baghdadi Jews, especially the two Sassoon firms, represented the main players in the opium trade.³² The Parsi firms Cawasjee Pallanjee & Co., R.S.N. Talati & Co., Talati & Co., and the Gujarati Muslims' concerns Pabaney and A. Ebrahim were also heavily engaged in the import of Indian opium to Shanghai. Among Parsis, Tata & Co. used four steamers to import opium, cotton yarn, and other merchandise from Bombay to Shanghai and then exported coal and other commodities to India.³³

Baghdadi Jews, Parsis, Gujarati Muslims not only competed with each other but also manifested notable solidarity among themselves in safeguarding their own commercial interests. The commercial elites of these groups routinely lobbied together and petitioned British consular authorities whenever they felt that their business in the opium trade could be damaged. In this respect Baghdadi Jews, Parsis and Ismailis formed a common front in 1886 and 1887 to protest against the increase of taxation (import duty and *lijin* tax) on the opium they imported from India to China.³⁴ Baghdadi Jews and Parsis co-operated closely especially after the opium trade came under scrutiny from British public opinion towards

³⁰ *Shanghai dui wai maoyi*, 79.

³¹ Wright, Arnold, ed., *Twentieth Century Impressions of Hong Kong, Shanghai and Other Treaty Ports in China: Their History, People, Commerce, Industries, and Resources* (London, 1908), 654.

³² In 1899 and 1900, E.D. Sassoon & Co. imported as many as 13286 chests of opium from India Zhang Zhongli and Chen Zengnian, *Shaxun jituan zai jiu Zhongguo* (The Sassoon Group in Old China) (Beijing, 1985), 22.

³³ *NCH*, 19 January 1894.

³⁴ "Memorial from the Opium Merchants," sent to Sir John Walsham, Brat., H.B.M.'s Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary, Shanghai 25 May, 1886 published in *NCH*, 11 June 1886, 612; Eiichi Motono,

the end of the nineteenth century. Their attempts to justify the trade and downplay the effects of the drug were clearly stated in the interviews they granted to Royal Opium Commission, set up in India between 1893 and 1894.³⁵

In their interviews Baghdadi and Parsi traders stressed that opium, if used in moderation, was a safe commodity rather than a dangerous drug with deleterious effects. Baghdadis consciously exploited the various strands of the leisure discourse on opium constructed by Chinese in Shanghai and maintained that opium as a recreational activity for the upper classes usually brought no visible harm to Chinese. Only the lower classes could be damaged by smoking the drug.³⁶ Accordingly M.S. Howard of David Sassoon, Sons & Co. maintained that “opium had debilitating effects on those who could not afford it whilst it was a mere entertainment activity for the upper classes.”³⁷ S.A. Nathan, of E.D. Sassoon & Co then added that “if taken moderately opium was very beneficial.”³⁸ Baghdadi traders also skilfully employed the commonly used Western stereotype that whilst Europeans naturally indulged in drinking alcohol, the Chinese were instinctively drawn to opium. In this respect E.S. Gubbay of David Sassoon & Co., a long time resident of the treaty ports of Ningbo and Shanghai contended that “the Chinese who smoked or imbibed opium were better behaved, more quiet, and far more sensible than those addicted to alcoholic drinks.”³⁹ The high status of opium traders in Chinese was finally upheld by the Parsi Hormasji Kuvarji who stressed that opium merchants “enjoyed as much respect and credit as tea and

Conflict and Cooperation in Sino-British Business, 1860-1911: The Impact of the pro-British Commercial Network in Shanghai (London, 2000), 107, 111-2, 193n.77.

³⁵ In reality the Commission served the interests of pro-opium groups and its final report attempted to “justify the opium policies of the governments of the United Kingdom, India, and other British colonial holding in Asia.” Blue, “Opium for China,” 39.

³⁶ Alexander Des Forges, “Opium/Leisure/Shanghai: Urban Economies of Consumption,” in *Opium Regimes*, 167-85.

³⁷ *NCH*, 19 January 1894.

³⁸ *NCH*, 30 March 1894.

silk merchants.”⁴⁰

The final blow for opium traders came in when 1907 the British government finally consented to implement a policy of gradual reduction of opium imports to China which aimed to reach a final demise of the trade in 1917. Though the decision penalised Baghdadi, Parsi, Ismaili and Persian firms, it also offered fresh opportunities for traders to speculate on the rising prices of the Indian varieties of opium, which quality was much more prized than the China-grown product. In Shanghai among individual Baghdadi traders the real estate tycoon Silas Aaron Haroon exploited to the full climbing opium prices and made huge profits on as many as five tons of opium.⁴¹ As a group Baghdadi traders together with Parsi merchants exploited together the reduced availability of Indian opium by organising in 1913 the Shanghai Opium Merchants' Combine, headed by the Baghdadi trader E.I. Ezra, which acted as a monopoly for the import of Indian and Persian Opium. The commodity was then distributed by powerful Chaozhou merchants.⁴²

Once the opium trade became illegal in 1918, Baghdadi Jewish firms, as a whole, conformed to the new rules and ceased to engage opium dealings.⁴³ Nevertheless a few individuals, such as the younger brothers of Edward Ezra, Judah and Isaac, were reluctant to give up what in the past had been a lucrative and legal business. After a series of commercial misadventures in Shanghai, in the 1920s the two brothers sought better fortune in San Francisco where they became entangled in a smuggling ring of opium and narcotics from China to California. In May 1933 both brothers were charged with illegal importation

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Yu Bohai. "Hatong" (Haroon) (unpublished paper, 1990), 4.

⁴² Brian Martin, *The Shanghai Green Gang* (Berkeley, 1996), 46-7, 49.

⁴³ Throughout 1918, some Baghdadi traders were probably still selling the opium they had accumulated in the previous decade. In July 1918 a Shanghai merchant, probably British, requested to 1600 pounds of opium

and sale of narcotics in the United States, thus bringing their families fortunes to an end.⁴⁴ The Ezras, who like their more prominent brother Edward had been respected merchants in Shanghai's foreign settlements in the 1910s, had become dangerous narcotics traffickers in San Francisco the 1930s. In reality the commodity they dealt with –opium- was always the same, only circumstances, times and attitudes had changed. With the Ezra case in San Francisco, the involvement of Baghdadi Jews in the opium trade, which had started to compete with the Parsis in the 1840s, had come to a full circle. By the time the Ezra brothers were indicted, opium fortunes that were made legally in Shanghai by Baghdadis as well as by other foreigners and Chinese had already been reinvested in other lines of trade, in industrial endeavours or in real estate.

- **Business Strategies in the Treaty Port of Shanghai**

Altogether we can distinguish between three generations of Baghdadi Jewish firms in Shanghai. The first generation was represented by the Sassoon firms, which in the decades between 1845 and the early 1880s set the foundations for the establishment of a permanent Baghdadi community in Shanghai. The second generation of Baghdadi firms were founded by ex-Sassoon employees that broke away from the shackles of the Sassoons and started to operate as individual brokers and general merchants in the 1880s. At the very beginning, these entrepreneurs were still firmly anchored in Judeo-Arabic culture and did not necessarily use Western accounting practices as their business records and correspondence were often kept in Judeo-Arabic, a language, which provided a high degree of secrecy in

from the Hardoon Company. PRO. FO 671/452/212-3. Edward Ezra to Sir Edward [Fraser], 12 July 1918. Enclosure. Langley [?] to Messrs. S.A. Hardoon, 12 July 1918.

⁴⁴ "Ezra Brothers under Arrest in U.S.," *NCH*, 24 May 1933; "Another Arrest in Ezra Case," *NCH*, 14 June 1933; "An Ezra Case Echo," *NCH*, 4 October 1933.

commercial dealings. Altogether, is feasible to assume that individual Baghdadi merchants and brokers stopped using written Judeo-Arabic in the 1890s.⁴⁵

As for the third generation of Baghdadi firms, they were founded in the course of the early twentieth century by Baghdadis who were usually born in Shanghai, had received a British education, and developed a local identity comparable to that of British settlers. The structure of these firms was similar to those of the second generation: they were mostly small family firms engaged in various forms of brokerage and general commerce. We can surmise that Baghdadi firms of the second and third generations usually functioned on a rather limited and local scale and never developed into highly sophisticated international business operations. They often employed relatives and therefore kinship ties and trust were closely intertwined. Altogether, personal contacts were crucial for Baghdadis in environment such as the Shanghai Stock Exchange, where they confused their British competitors by speaking in Judeo-Arabic. Not surprisingly, business partnerships between Baghdadis and non-Jewish businessmen were extremely rare, two exceptions being the firms Benjamin & Potts and Toeg & Read, formed by Baghdadi Jewish and British brokers. Of the two, only Benjamin & Potts represented a successful endeavour and remained a unique example of long-term commercial co-operation involving Baghdadi Jewish and British businessmen in Shanghai.⁴⁶

We should dispel the assumption that all Baghdadis in Shanghai worked for established firms. Some owned food or clothing shops, which catered for co-religionists, other peddled goods, and the poorest solicited alms. As a whole, however, Baghdadi Jews were exceptionally successful in the Shanghai foreign settlements. Though during they stay

⁴⁵ See for example 'Kelly Silas Kelly v. Raphael Sidka Raphael', *NCH*, 12 March 1884, 303.

they diversified their commercial activities, much of the wealth they accumulated derived from opium and land investments. In Shanghai opium profits were often reinvested in real estate in the city's foreign settlements which, in constantly troubled China, provided a safe refuge both as business and residential centres. Being Chinese areas under foreign administration, the settlements had envisaged a complex system of land tenure, which secured foreign protection not only to foreign landowners but also to Chinese who employed foreign trustees. Not surprisingly, land values in these areas underwent a constant re-evaluation and between 1900 and 1930 properties situated in the most expensive section of the International Settlement increased their values tenfold. Prices depreciated only once, in 1910, at the height of the rubber boom.⁴⁷

Among Baghdadi opium traders the Sassoon firms, especially E.D. Sassoon & Co., and Silas Aaron Hardoon heavily invested in real estate. E.D. Sassoon & Co., started to acquire land in 1877, nine years after opening its Shanghai branch. In the following decades, the firm continuously expanded its land interests and in 1921 it owned as many as 29 properties in the foreign settlements, for a total of almost 300 *mu* and a value of over 13 million taels.⁴⁸ Once Sir Victor Sassoon transferred his base to Shanghai in the late 1920s he consolidated the firm's real estate interests and, through a number of family companies, erected some of Shanghai's main architectural landmarks such as the Cathay mansions and the Cathay Hotel, which at its completion in was advertised as "The most modern hotel in the Far East."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ These comments are based on the consultation of Shanghai's commercial directories and Shanghai's newspapers.

⁴⁷ Richard Feetham, *Report of the Hon. Justice Feetham, C.M.G., to the Shanghai Municipal Council* (Shanghai, 1931), 1: 328-9, 338, 342-3.

⁴⁸ For the only complete overview of E.D. Sassoon & Co. real estate dealings see Zhang, *Shaxun jituan*, 33-62.

⁴⁹ "Modern Shanghai. Jewish Contributions IV," *Israel's Messenger* (hereafter quoted as IM), 5 April 1929.

Silas Aaron Hardoon epitomised the commercial achievements of individual Baghdadis who reached Shanghai as employees of the Sassoon firms. Born in Ottoman Baghdad in 1851, he moved as a child to Bombay where, as an adolescent, he found employment at D. Sassoon, Sons & Co., and was sent to work in the Hong Kong branch. After moving to Shanghai in 1874 he first worked for D. Sassoon, Sons & Co. and then for E. D. Sassoon, & Co. In 1900, whilst serving as general manager of E. D. Sassoon, & Co., he founded his own company that acted, for some years, as agent for the British America Assurance Co., imported opium and, most importantly, dealt in real estate. Hardoon's land dealings, which are kept in Shanghai, provide precious insights on how he operated in the real estate market. Hardoon, like other Shanghai land dealers, often mortgaged properties to raise cash to finance further real estate purchases.⁵⁰ As for E.D. Sassoon & Co. it loaned cash on the security of properties. The mortgage money amounted to about 30-40% of the property, with yearly interest starting from 7 and a half and 8%. When small and medium landowners were not able to repay the loan, the property was re-possessed by E.D. Sassoon & Co.⁵¹

Hardoon's most valuable properties were situated on Nanking Road, China's most fashionable shopping venue, the epitome of Shanghai's distinctive urban and commercial culture. Hardoon's land along the road was leased to commercial ventures such as the Wingon and Sincere department stores, which had brought to Shanghai new and revolutionary shopping practices. In less valuable areas Hardoon built cheap housing, usually in *lilong* (alleys which represented a prominent feature of Shanghai's hybrid

⁵⁰ These remarks are based on the consultation of the Hardoon archives which are kept in the Shanghai House Property Administration Bureau Archives. Chiara Betta, "Silas Aaron Hardoon (1851?-1931): "Marginality and Adaptation in Shanghai," (London, 1997), 112-27.

⁵¹ Zhang, *Shaxun jituan*, 38.

architecture) and rented them out expensively to Chinese tenants. At the time of his death in 1931 Hardoon owned 450 *mu* of land and approximately 1200 buildings and was without any doubt Shanghai's most successful Baghdadi real estate tycoon.⁵²

It should not be overlooked that other Baghdadi merchants played a prominent role in the rise of a modern real estate market in the city's foreign settlements. Especially towards the end of the 1920s Baghdadis heavily invested in real estate ventures. The Somekh, Elias and Toeg families spent enormous amount of money to erect expensive and fashionable residential housing which boasted the most up-to-date appliances and the latest architectural styles and contributed to give a Western shape to Shanghai's skies.⁵³

Yet, two decades later the Baghdadi stay in the city came to an abrupt end: in May 1949 Communist troops entered Shanghai and in the following years most foreigners left the city. During the Maoist era, Shanghai, on the basis of its capitalist past, was heavily penalised compared to other mainland cities. The city's landscape was consciously neglected and Western buildings, such as those erected by Baghdadi Jews, were left in a decrepit state, as a reminder of a bygone era. The rehabilitation of Shanghai as a commercial hub at the beginning of the nineties has fuelled a frenzied real estate boom: old buildings have been re-placed by towering skyscrapers, which assert Shanghai's present determination to re-invent itself as a leading financial and commercial hub in the global world at the beginning of the third millennium.

To conclude, this paper has stressed that the Baghdadi settlement in Shanghai needs to be assessed as part of the intertwining Baghdadi Jewish networks which blossomed under the

⁵² Betta, "Hardoon", 112-27.

aegis of the British empire from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. Baghdadi Jews were traditional merchants from the Ottoman empire who adopted Western commercial practices, underwent a strong process of Anglicisation, but nevertheless maintained a strong attachment to their Baghdadi heritage and trusted only co-religionists of similar extraction. In Shanghai, the Sassoon firms as well as smaller companies employed only Baghdadi co-religionists thus creating close-knit commercial ties - impenetrable even to Ashkenazi Jews- that were largely based on personal relations. In this respect, the Baghdadi diaspora maintained many traits of historical diasporas and could be compared to its Parsi, Greek, Armenian and Chinese counterparts. As much as *guanxi*, a complex set of personal relationships, played and still play a crucial role among Chinese engaged in business; kinship and personal ties based on a shared Baghdadi Jewish culture defined the business strategies of Baghdadi Jews of the diaspora.

On one level, as a middlemen minority, Baghdadi Jews specialised in the import to China of opium and cotton yarn and probably also in the export of Chinese gold bullion to India. In this respect, it cannot be overlooked that they shared similar functional niches with other minority trading groups based in Bombay, especially Parsis and Gujarati Muslims, and also Persians. On another level, as settlers in the Shanghai foreign settlements, Baghdadi Jews took part in the private enterprise capitalism which characterised the *modus operandi* of British entrepreneurs in China's treaty ports. They thus became heavily involved in developing a modern real estate market in Shanghai and amassed huge fortunes by investing in land, especially in the central areas of the International Settlement. Their close commercial ties with the local British oligarchy made Baghdadi Jews more politically

⁵³“Modern Shanghai. Jewish Contributions, III,” *IM*, 4 January, 1929, 4; “Modern Shanghai. Jewish Contributions VII,” *IM*, 7 February 1930; “Rivers Court Apartment for Mrs. R-E. Toeg,” *IM*, 4 July 1930, 12;

powerful than in former colonial environments, something which should not be overlooked in any analysis of the history of Baghdadi Jews. In a few words, in the opium trade Baghdadi Jews acted in co-operation/competition with other middleman minorities; in the real estate business they exploited the ambiguities of the treaty port system and became firm allies of Shanghai's British settlers. As a whole, Baghdadi Jewish traders in Shanghai manifested a great flexibility in adapting to local circumstances, something which undoubtedly favoured their remarkable commercial achievements

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