

# *Self-Fashioning in Front of a Distorting Mirror: Interwar Jewish Literature Gazing at Classical Chinese Poetry, or Second-Order Modernism*

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**ABSTRACT:** The modernist fascination with the Far East is a well-known phenomenon, driven among other things by the “decline of the West” zeitgeist. When adopted by peripheral communities involved in nation building, it often served other needs and, in the process, became distorted or disproportioned. This article focuses on the representation of the Far East in the Hebrew and Yiddish literatures of the interwar years. Its main argument is that the longing for the Far East in these literatures has contributed to their self-fashioning precisely as occidental and modern. Accordingly, this is an intriguing test case that sheds light on how one peripheral culture gazes at another, how one Other gazes at another—as opposed to traditional postcolonial research that tends to examine Self-Other or majority-minority relations. The article proposes the term “second-order modernism” to describe the fertile changes and disruptions inherent to the displacement of any modernist model onto a peripheral culture.

## **DISTORTING MIRRORS: SECOND-ORDER MODERNISM**

**W**HEN MODERNIST VALUES ARE ROAMING THROUGH PERIPHERAL CULTURES, they tend to be reflected in these cultures as though in a distorting mirror. The image of modernism as universal becomes fractured, revealing its Western character. Modernism’s transparency, its being purportedly nonsignified, then becomes tainted with vernacular colors of either the source or the target culture. I propose naming this phenomenon “second-order modernism.” In the present context, this term refers to the mediation, adaptation, and translation to which the values of modernism—commonly identified with a major and dominant

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All the literary works quoted here, unless otherwise noted, have been translated into English by Ami Asher.

culture—have been subjected on their way to the peripheral, minor culture; their particular distortions and adjustments; and perhaps any move that exposes the underbelly of modernism, its creases and stitches.

The representation of the Far East in interwar Hebrew and Yiddish literatures that is at the focus of this article is a telling example for second-order modernism. In those years, many European authors, particularly German and French, were fascinated by the Far East. This enchantment was born out of a widely shared spiritual distress and a longing for redemption (*Erlösung*) and escape from a suffocating urban existence, in the context of the “the decline of the West” zeitgeist. This exoticism served antibourgeois, antirationalist, and primarily subversive trends in Continental and Anglo-Saxon modernism. For Jewish authors in both Hebrew and Yiddish, however, the longing for the Far East served processes of cohesion and canonization, grounded in the desire to establish both literatures as modern—that is, Western and European.

In what follows, I discuss two cases from Hebrew and Yiddish literatures, respectively, illustrating the mirror game of Westernization through apparent “Easternization.” These two peripheral cultures have traditionally been considered “Eastern” (Yiddish is associated with Eastern Europe and Hebrew with the ancient Near East). Nevertheless, the Far East was foreign to them no less so than to German, French, or other Western cultures. I therefore argue that the total otherness of the Far East in Western eyes is what relativized the otherness of Hebrew and Yiddish literatures, thereby facilitating their Westernization. In other words, gazing at ancient Far Eastern cultures helped Hebrew and Yiddish modernism, particularly in the interwar years, to self-fashion its identity as Western. Given the differences between the various great Asian civilizations, I have chosen to focus here on the relation between modern Jewish literatures and the culture of ancient China, and specifically the poetry of the eighth-century Chinese poet Li-Tai-Pe (Li Bai), as reflected mainly in German modernism and less so in its Anglo-American counterpart. The reflection is more important here than the reality: I seek, not to examine whether Hebrew or Yiddish authors have been accurate in their references to or comments on ancient Chinese culture, but to reveal the function of these representations, as distorted as they may have been, for the two young modern literatures.<sup>1</sup> Note that this was certainly not the mainstream of these literatures but rather a deep undercurrent, the very unconventionality of which may shed light on the canon.

Prior to discussing the representation of the Far East in Hebrew and Yiddish literatures, I wish to present a short history of the relations between Western modernism and the Far East from my point of view as a researcher of a peripheral culture, Hebrew literature.

## WESTERN MODERNISM AND THE FAR EAST

Beginning in the late nineteenth century and for several decades, German culture was affected by fascination with “Oriental wisdom,” and particularly the mysticisms of traditional Asian religions. The period saw multiple translations of Indian, Chinese, and Japanese stories, among

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<sup>1</sup> In the same vein, I do not discuss the research written on actual contacts between the cultures, particularly in Jewish communities in China, or how Hebrew and Yiddish literatures were received in Asian cultures. On this subject, see, e.g., Irene Eber, *Chinese and Jews: Encounters between Cultures* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2008); Lihong Song, “Some Observations on Chinese Jewish Studies,” *Contemporary Jewry* 29 (2009): 195–214; Irene Eber, *Jews in China: Cultural Conversations, Changing Perceptions*, ed. Kathryn Hellerstein (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2019).

other things in an anthology edited by Martin Buber.<sup>2</sup> (His research on Hassidism, which flourished during the very same years, should also be seen in that context, as argued by Paul Mendes-Flohr.)<sup>3</sup> In the background was the rise of German colonialism in the Far East, which culminated in the leasing of Qingdao Bay (known as the Kiautschou Bay concession) from China in 1898. German colonialism considered itself more enlightened than its regional British and French counterparts, contributing to the improvement of China's image in German eyes.<sup>4</sup>

In the early years of the twentieth century, exoticism became increasingly dominant in German culture, with the publication of translations of Far Eastern poetry by the German poets Klabund and Hans Bethge. This is particularly so with regard to the 1907 anthology edited by the latter called *Die chinesische Flöte* (The Chinese flute), which had significant impact on several leading authors. Gustav Mahler's 1908–9 symphonic composition *Das Lied von der Erde* (The song of the Earth) was inspired thereby and included several poems by Li-Tai-Pe in Bethge's translation. *The Chinese Flute* was tremendously popular in German-speaking Europe and left its mark on contemporary culture. This was no ordinary translated book but a trailblazing model: Bethge took considerable license in adapting Chinese poetry from the first millennium CE and presented it as the precursor of the most modern poetry, that of his own day: *vers libre*, fundamentally simple and clear, whose contents are existential and hence universal, and partly mystical. In doing so, Bethge on the one hand introduced that poetry to his readers, so far removed in time and place, and on the other reinforced trends in contemporary German poetry that cherished those very ideals.

This German enchantment with the Far East was echoed in other Western cultures, particularly the Anglo-American and French. Exoticism found its expression both in craft inspired by the chinoiserie and japonaiserie and in fine art. Suffice to mention the attraction of Van Gogh, Manet, Degas, and Monet to Japanese art and the publication of highly influential anthologies of Chinese and Japanese poetry in English, particularly those edited by Ezra Pound and Arthur Waley, published during and shortly after the Great War.<sup>5</sup>

From a broader perspective, this exoticism is related to the major and well-known phenomenon of Orientalism in contemporary European culture, particularly against the backdrop of the climate of decadence and fin de siècle. German historiosophist Oswald Spengler articulated this most famously in *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (The decline of the West; 1918–22). Many

<sup>2</sup> Martin Buber, *Chinesische Geister- und Liebesgeschichten, 3. und 4. Tausend* [Chinese ghost and love stories] (Frankfurt am Main: Literarische Anstalt, Rütten, und Loening, 1916); Martin Buber, ed., *Chinese Tales; Zhuangzi: Sayings and Parables, and Chinese Ghost and Love Stories*, trans. Alex Page, with an introduction by Irene Eber (New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Orientaliut ve-mystika: Ha-estetika shel mifne ha-me'ah ha-yod-tet ve-ha-zehut ha-yehudit" [Orientalism and mysticism: The aesthetics of Jewish identity at the Fin-de-Siècle], *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 3 (1984): 624–861; Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Fin-de-Siècle Orientalism, the Ostjuden, and the Aesthetics of Jewish Self-Affirmation," *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 1 (1984): 96–139; Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Martin Buber: A Life of Faith and Dissent* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Chiann Karen Tsui, "Reflections and Reciprocity: China and German Modernist Literature" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2013), 8–9.

<sup>5</sup> See Ezra Pound, trans., *Cathay* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1915); Arthur Waley, trans., *A Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918); Arthur Waley, trans., *Japanese Poetry: The Uta* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1919); Edna Worthley Underwood and Chi Hwang Chu, trans., *Wanderer and Minstrel under Moons of Cathay* (Portland, ME: Mosher Press, 1929). See also Robert Kern, *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Zhang Yuejun and Stuart Christie, eds., *American Modernist Poetry and the Chinese Encounter* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

believed then, and even before, that the panacea for the degeneration of Western civilization could be found in the primal liveliness purportedly embodied in the East, both Far and Near. This yearning for all things Far Eastern also served the attempt to challenge Western rationalism.

Naturally, the geocultural terminology used at the time—Far East, Near East, and East and West more generally—is Eurocentric. Still, I use this terminology here because it is representative of the consciousness of members of that generation on both sides of the Atlantic. The term “Orientalism,” charged with a critical connotation following Edward Said’s eponymous 1978 masterpiece, is not reproachable here. For Said, Orientalism meant imperialism and colonialism, whereas in Germany—which is not mentioned in his book at all—the attraction to the Orient followed a fertile intellectual tradition whose roots may be traced to as early as the Renaissance, centuries before its political outgrowth, and which bore fruit in the form of an entire academic discipline, as well as local cultural representations.<sup>6</sup> The Orient was the Other, Germany’s mirror image, but often also its doppelgänger—a developed and magnificent culture apparently in the process of declining and simultaneously awakening as well: indeed, German orientalists were keen on tracing Europe and European languages’ roots in the East.<sup>7</sup> I would therefore like to take Said’s thesis a step forward, or rather sideways, so to speak, by arguing that the Other’s gaze upon the Other is much more intriguing in its complexity than that of the “Self” upon the Other—that is, than the gaze of the Westerner educated in modernism upon the Oriental or the exotic in general.<sup>8</sup>

Exoticism served modernism in several respects. Primarily, it dovetailed with modernism’s passion for the archaic and mythic, which stemmed from modernists’ desire to highlight the yawning gap separating the ostensibly immaculate and harmonious past and their seemingly flawed present reality (as suggested by T. S. Eliot).<sup>9</sup> Secondly, this turning to provinces flung far in space and time helped establish different aesthetics—of minimalism, of formal poetic freedom, etc.—that in turn reinforced the rebellion against contemporary literary norms and at the

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<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Eduard Horst von Tscherner, *China in der deutschen Dichtung bis zur Klassik* [China in German poetry until the Classics] (Munich: E. Reinhardt, 1939); Wolfgang Kubin, ed., *Mein Bild in deinem Auge—Exotismus und Moderne: Deutschland-China im 20. Jahrhundert* [My image in your eyes—Exoticism and modernity: Germany–China in the 20th century] (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995); Suzanne Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Washington, DC: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Ursula Wokoeck, *German Orientalism: The Study of the Middle East and Islam from 1800 to 1945* (London: Routledge, 2009); Jennifer Jenkins, “German Orientalism: Introduction,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 24, no. 2 (2004): 97–100.

<sup>7</sup> Marchand, *German Orientalism*, esp. 38–52.

<sup>8</sup> Most studies about Orientalism and Jews tend to focus on either anti-Semitism or colonialism, while here I seek to go far beyond this basic dichotomy of victim-victimizer and the Middle Eastern conflict. See, e.g., Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek Jonathan Penslar, eds., *Orientalism and the Jews* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2005), especially John M. Efron’s illuminating chapter: “Orientalism and the Jewish Historical Gaze,” 80–93. See also Yaron Peleg, *Orientalism and the Hebrew Imagination* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005); Steven E. Aschheim, *The Modern Jewish Experience and the Entangled Web of Orientalism*, *Menasseh Ben Israel Institute Studies* 4 (Amsterdam: Menasseh Ben Israel Institute, 2010); Ulrike Brunotte, Anna-Dorothea Ludewig, and Axel Stähler, eds., *Orientalism, Gender, and the Jew: Literary and Artistic Transformations of European National Discourses*, *Europäisch-jüdische Studien, Beiträge*, 23 (Berlin: De Gruyter; Boston: Oldenbourg, 2015); Ulrike Brunotte, Jürgen Mohn, and Christina Späti, eds., *Internal Outsiders—Imagined Orientals?*, *Diskurs Religion: Beiträge zur Religionsgeschichte und religiösen Zeitgeschichte* 13 (Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Ulysses, Order and Myth” (1923), in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. F. Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 175–78.

same time presented the modernist artists as treading in the footsteps of forerunners likewise far-flung. Thirdly, the difficulty in locating and particularly in mediating archaic sources—in free adaptation rather than in faithful translation—created a priori conditions conducive to fragmentation, disruption, and deconstruction, also key values of modernism. Indeed, Robert Graves famously recalled, “I once asked Arthur Waley how much Chinese Pound knew; Waley shook his head despondently.”<sup>10</sup>

## REPRESENTATIONS OF THE FAR EAST IN MODERN HEBREW LITERATURE

Modern Hebrew literature was formed at first mainly in Europe and in many respects considered itself *ab initio* as part and parcel of European literature.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, its authors were decidedly a minority, located in the margins of the cultural center, not only in ethnic or religious terms but often in the geographic sense as well (with regard to Jewish authors from Eastern Europe), and obviously also because of writing in Hebrew, a minor language compared with such majors as German or French. Like Western culture in general, Hebrew literature—primarily in the interbellum period—was clearly fascinated with Far Eastern cultures. In addition to the motivations driving (mainly) their German, French, and Anglo-American counterparts—who, as we have seen, often sought in Far Eastern literature echoes of their mystic yearnings and keys to unlock the shackles of rational thought—the Hebrew authors had another important reason to look beyond the eastern horizon. This was their way of establishing modern Hebrew literature, then in its infancy, as a bona fide modern European literature: indeed, even the literature written in the language of the Bible has translations of its own of Chinese, Japanese, and Indian poetry. Seen in the light of the rising sun, the marginality of modern Hebrew literature is considerably reduced, and it can see itself—and, hopefully, also be seen—as Western. As suggested above, Hebrew literature became Westernized (also) through its “Easternization”: it sought to become a *Weltliteratur*, a library of global import, by leveraging its “Eastern” exoticness to liberate it from being exotic on its own.

As early as 1904, at the time when Bethge’s adaptations were published in the German press, and prior to their collation in *The Chinese Flute*, Bethge inspired several Hebrew translations of Chinese poetry, published in the Hebrew press. Hebrew *maskil* (enlightened scholar) El’azar David Finkel, who in 1900 had begun publishing a series of articles in Hebrew about China,<sup>12</sup> chose to offer the readership of *Ha-tzefirah*—a prominent Hebrew newspaper published in Warsaw that served as one of the main drivers of Haskalah and Westernization for *Ostjuden*—a selection of poems by Li-Tai-Pe.<sup>13</sup> Finkel described him as “the greatest of Cathay’s poets and one of the heroes imbibing wine in the Kingdom of Heaven” and alluded in a single

<sup>10</sup> Robert Graves, “These Be Your Gods, O Israel!,” *Essays in Criticism* 5, no. 2 (April 1955): 129–50. I have located this quotation through an article by Yoram Brunovsky: “Yefi Sin be-o’haley Shem” [China’s beauty in the tents of Shem], *Ha-aretz*, literary supplement, July 7, 1978, 18.

<sup>11</sup> See Shimon Halkin, *Muskamot u-mashberim be-sifrutenu* [Conventions and crises in Hebrew literature] (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1980), esp. 9–17; Menachem Brinker, *Ha-sifrut ha-ivrit ke-sifrut eropit* [Modern Hebrew literature as European literature] (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Finkel’s series “Eretz Khina ve-yoshve’hah” [The land of Cathay and its inhabitants] was published starting with issue 134 of *Ha-tzefirah* (June 27, 1890) and included about a dozen articles. The next decade saw the publication of S. M. Perlmann’s monograph *Ha-Sinim* [The Chinese] (London: Ha-yehudy Press, 1911).

<sup>13</sup> El’azar David Finkel, “Khina ha-’Atika: Aḥad-’asar mizmorim me’et Li-Tai-Pe” [Cathay: Eleven poems by Li-Tai-Pe], *Ha-tzefirah* 87 (April 29, 1904): 267–68.

sentence to the circumstances of his own familiarization with Far Eastern culture: “He who saw Chinese paintings in the museum, and visited the exhibition on ‘Ancient China,’ found some images there for the following verses.” Finkel subsequently studied Japanese and would become probably the first modern Hebrew writer to translate directly from it into Hebrew.<sup>14</sup> These translations of Li-Tai-Pe’s poetry represent what is perhaps the first artistic adaptation of Far Eastern poetry in Hebrew, necessarily mediated by Bethge’s work. Thus, Finkel imported the most current literary vogue from Germany for his Jewish readers, thereby helping set the modern Jewish clock according to European time.

From the European perspective, India, China, and Japan are—still—perceived as the absolute Other. In Hebrew (as well as French and other languages), “It’s Chinese to me” is the equivalent of the English “It’s Greek to me.” Revealingly, the French use “C’est de l’hébreu pour moi” (It’s Hebrew to me).<sup>15</sup> Thus, not only is the Far East exotic in Western eyes, but so also are Hebrew and its culture. Hebrew poet Avraham Shlonsky (Kryukovo, Ukraine, 1900–Tel Aviv, 1973) expressed this sentiment when reporting to his readers in Palestine–Eretz Yisrael about his 1930 visit to Paris. Although little more than a quarter century had passed since Finkel’s seminal publication in *Ha-tzefirah*, Hebrew literature had made huge strides during those years: its expressive devices gained in sophistication, and it turned from an almost purely literary language read by few to a language spoken by many. The Hebrew Republic of Letters expanded hugely in terms of both geographical scope and readership. And for the first time in the history of modern Hebrew literature, it appeared to find a stable and permanent center in Palestine–Eretz Yisrael, instead of the temporary centers of Warsaw, Vilnius, Odessa, Berlin, or New York. A leading Hebrew modernist and a key contributor to the rise of the literary center in Palestine–Eretz Yisrael, Shlonsky chanced upon a performance of a black choir in the City of Lights. This experience made him wonder how Jewish art—in this case, the Hebrew Habima Theater plays *Ha-dybbuk* (The dybbuk, by S. An-sky) and *Ha-otzar* (The treasure, by Sholem Aleichem)—is perceived when staged in Western cities:

Japanese theater!

Chinese operetta!

Colored choir!

Paris paddles in the ripples of art. Pond after pond of “cultural fragments” froth and foam in an entertaining and scintillating splash: exotics! And it’s hard to determine exactly: which stimulates the viewer and listener more—the amusement or the abusive within us, in the face of our inferior who also strives to be a man.

I go to the colored choir concert. The theater—in Sdot Elisha [Champs-Élysées].

... Before the curtain is raised, I hurriedly jot in my notebook this thought: “Do we not also display our own ‘exotics’ in all kinds of ‘Dybbuks’ and ‘Otzars’? Have not all those senses overwhelmed in Paris, Londons, and Berlins cavorted in the etiquette of masked abuse at the sight of Hebrew actors ornamented with ritual objects and folklore trinkets? And is this not the way of all the ‘acculturated natives’ of the world?” ...

<sup>14</sup> Getzel Kressel, *Lexicon ha-sifrut ha-ivrit ba-dorot ha-aḥaronim* [Lexicon of modern Hebrew literature] (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1967), 2:623.

<sup>15</sup> Edward Uxlendorff, “C’est de l’hébreu pour moi!” [It’s Hebrew to me!], *Journal of Semitic Studies* 13, no. 1 (1968): 125–35.

Curtains up. In the choir—both women and men. The women are dressed in white. The men—in black (the shiny whiteness of the vest is obviously not absent!). And Satan bedevils me: I seem to see “colored of our own” in there: If I’m not wrong, that bespectacled and hunchbacked lad is a yeshiva boy from the Ukraine, whereas that lass comes from Volhynia or Poland.<sup>16</sup>

For the Parisian audience, a clear dichotomy prevails: black or white. Only the foreigner, the visitor, notices the nuances that shuffle the deceptively distinct categories: it may be that some of the blacks are actually Jews in disguise, and if so, one type of the “exotic” has dressed up as another.

The Other’s gaze on the Other, or the relative (Jewish) Other’s gaze on the “absolute Other” (the black or the Far Eastern “native”), is much more authentic than the gaze of the (Western) Self on the generalized Other (whoever is not himself or herself). It is both a deconstructive and a constructive gaze: one Other deconstructs another, identifying subcategories hidden from the view of members of the dominant culture—but, in doing so, reveals a complexity that lies beyond the external label of the “exotic.” In the case of modern Hebrew literature, the gaze upon the “absolute Other” structures its identity as a relative Other, thus bringing it closer to European culture.<sup>17</sup>

Shlonsky’s contemporary Lea Goldberg (Königsberg, 1911–Jerusalem, 1970) often referred to the Far East in her poetry and prose and introduced modern Hebrew literature to some of its artistic images, as in her child’s fairy-tale poem “In the Land of China” (1942). Over years of research and archival work devoted to her writing, I came to appreciate her powerful attraction to the culture of ancient China and, moreover, the extent to which it was used by the poet as a metaphor for a dreamlike alternative reality. In that, Goldberg followed in the footsteps of other European and Hebrew writers. In a story she wrote at age eighteen, “Chinese Legend” (1929), she described a young woman receiving a letter from a rejected lover. It is the tenth letter from him, and before opening it, she guesses its content: once again, he will urge her to return to him. She therefore finds refuge in the illusion that the corny love story has become exotic:

“How good it would have been, for example”—a train of carefree thought crossed her mind—“to know that this letter is indeed from China, that some yellow-faced Chang-Li-Tan-Po with a long and gleaming braid dancing on his back wrote it in his cryptic script, not a word of which can be made out. Then, it would also have been credible that what is written within is as beautiful and inscrutable as an ancient Chinese legend...” She knew, however, that the letter was written by a person with a common name, whose hairs are few and cropped, with glasses resting on his slightly elongated nose. She also knew that the content of this letter was

<sup>16</sup> Avraham Shlonsky, “Heidad, exotical!” [Hooray, exotics!], *Ketuvim* 4, no. 32 (June 26, 1930): 1; Hagit Halperin and Galia Sagiv, with Raquel Stepak, eds., *Masot u-ma’amarim* [Essays and articles] (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, Hakibbutz Hame’uchad, and Laura Sewartz-Kipp Center for Hebrew Literature and Culture at Tel Aviv University, 2011), 326–29.

<sup>17</sup> In 1922, Shlonsky bequeathed Hebrew culture in Palestine–Eretz Yisrael one of its most popular representations of China, in his song “Lo ikhpat” [We don’t care] (written in the Russian Chastushka genre), better known for its opening words: “China has much tea and rice / That far-flung of nations. / In our land the wind blows dry / All kinds of infections.” See, e.g., in Hagit Halperin, *Ha-ma’estro* [The maestro] (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, Hakibbutz Hame’uchad, and Laura Sewartz-Kipp Center for Hebrew Literature and Culture at Tel Aviv University, 2011), 132–36. Written to a popular Ukrainian tune, the song depicts China as a coveted land against the background of the material shortages in Palestine–Eretz Yisrael. It would be edifying to elaborate on this song elsewhere, as well as on the anonymous children’s song “Two Chinamen,” translated into Hebrew from the German “Drei Chinesen mit dem Kontrabass” [Three Chinamen with the contrabass], as popular representations of the Far East in Hebrew culture.

written in a clear and rounded hand, its words and letters all too familiar, and that should she join all these common words into a single whole, no coherent Chinese fable would emerge.<sup>18</sup>

The Chinese legend represents a world complete, antediluvian, and harmonious, a sharp contrast to the essentially defective modern reality. This world is thus destined to remain legendary, an unattainable symbol, akin to the Chinese script, which for the narrator remains an aesthetic object, a pure and senseless signifier sans signified. The corny love story ends with a surprising twist, when we learn that the letter actually tells of the lover's suicide. The letters, which in the woman's imagination seem like quasi-Chinese typographic ornaments, abruptly regain their signification: "Dear God," the story ends, "why were the words so cruel and simple, why was not this last letter, at least, written in Chinese?"

Here, the longing for Chinese culture is not tainted by Hebrew or Jewish colors: on the contrary, it appears that the story could have been narrated by any Western woman. Conversely, in a poem Goldberg published several years later she expressed a unique aspect of the same longing—a Hebrew one. In this poem, the foreignness of the Chinese poet and her inherent inability to understand him (due to temporal and cultural distance, and perhaps also due to his masculinity) paradoxically bring the two closer together. His total alienness, the exoticness that makes him esoteric and unintelligible, is what enables the narrator to come to terms with her own otherness as a Hebrew poet. As in the short story, the poem is also about tainted love, only here the ancient Chinese poet substitutes for the real-life lover who has left her and becomes part alternative lover, part mirror reflecting the narrator's image like the Narcissus pool:

The memory of a kiss scorches my lips,  
On my hand the warmth of a man gone—  
As I read Li-Tai-Pe's verse,  
The eons between us melt down.

Strange and clear are words spun in Cathay,  
Like the thicket of sinews on my pale hand,  
I believe, I'm starting to see why  
My spirit yearns for a beyond.

I'd like to wake up in Shanghai,  
Bear the silence over yellow faces,  
And sing of my heart that's scared and alive  
In prophetic rhyming combinations.

I want to pronounce some expressions,  
I'd no longer know or recall word for word,  
Then read in an English translation  
My poems as simple as light and the world.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Lea Goldberg, "Agada sinit" [Chinese legend], *Netivot* (Kaunas) 8–9, nos. 55–56 (April 24, 1929): 3–4; Giddon Ticotsky and Hamutal Bar-Yosef, eds., *Kol ha-sipurim* [The complete short stories] (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 2009), 20–22.

<sup>19</sup> The poem was initially printed in the journal of the Hebrew modernist coterie in Palestine–Eretz Yisrael, *Turim* 53 (March 17, 1935): 9, about two months after Goldberg's immigration. She did not include it in any of the



As in the short story, the poem's last lines keenly express the desire for words to lose their meaning, for the concrete and comprehensible to become abstract and vague—in what appears to be a wish to escape from the mundane to the mystic. This is the panacea Chinese poetry can provide, because in itself, once translated and adapted into Western words, it has already metamorphosed in the same or opposite direction: from the concrete to the abstract or from the abstract to the concrete. By virtue of this understanding, the narrator in the poem—a Hebrew poet—gains a significant insight about writing in Hebrew: work written in an esoteric language, be it Hebrew or Chinese, exists only once it has been erased, only after its violent transformation upon its Western translation, when the complex, enigmatic text—“words spun in Cathay,” “the thicket of sinews,” “prophetic rhyming combinations”—is transformed “in an English translation” into poems “as simple as light and the world.”<sup>20</sup> This is a distorting mirror: no longer an ordinary mirror inverted left to right but the profound rewriting of the original figure until it becomes a total stranger as a unique way of discovering some hidden potential within it. Concomitantly, Goldberg's Hebrew poem, written from right to left, must pass through the distorting mirror of the Chinese script, which in the classical period was written top to bottom, in order to be read from left to right, in English, and thereby be revealed in a new light.

A review of the Hebrew works mentioned above and many others identifies at least three key functions served by the fascination with the Far East in Hebrew literature (and accordingly in Yiddish literature as well). The third is unique to these Jewish literatures, whereas the first two are necessarily shared with other modernist movements.

The first function is *encryption*, whether of personal desires (as in Goldberg's poem) or of political messages. The geographical distance and exoticness of China and Japan in Western eyes enabled the projection of Western imaginings and fantasies on them perhaps even more than on the Islamic Middle East, whose history was tightly linked to Europe. That brand of absolute foreignness was fertile ground for Western imagination, and specifically, it served as an encryption mechanism. In German literature, for example, it is well known that authors would criticize the kaiser and the Prussian system of government by projecting, and distancing, their criticism onto the emperor of China.<sup>21</sup> A similar example in Yiddish literature, one of many, is the poem “Spoonful of Rice” by Kadia Molodowsky (Byaroza, Belarus, 1894–Philadelphia, 1975), which tells of an emperor of China who prohibited the pronunciation of those three words together.<sup>22</sup> The poor, who only wanted a spoonful of rice, were tormented by hunger, unable to express their wish, and the wealthy could dissemble by claiming that they did want to help the hungry, but that the latter were unable to express their needs. “A Chinese fable tells us so,” the poem ends, and obviously it is the stress on the fabulous and exotic that points to a concrete moral, which would certainly have been difficult to pronounce without such encryption. The use of this stratagem

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books published in her lifetime. It was collated in an edition of all her poems edited by Tuvya Rübner (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1973–), 3:110.

<sup>20</sup> This yearning for metamorphosis (of the self, of Hebrew literature) conceals the desire for self-annihilation as the only way to perpetuate oneself. Necessarily inspired by symbolism, which had a profound influence on Goldberg and other European authors, this conception holds that the highest degree of speech is silence, and of life—death.

<sup>21</sup> Tsui, “Reflections and Reciprocity,” 8.

<sup>22</sup> The poem is included in a children's poem collection that became one of the classics of Hebrew children's literature: Kadia Molodowsky, *Pithu et ha-sha'ar* [At the gate] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hame'uchad, 1945), 61–65; the poem was translated from Yiddish by Avraham Levinson.

for commenting on current affairs, which migrated to Hebrew literature as well, allowed such writing to escape the censor's clutches.<sup>23</sup>

Another function served by the adaptation of Asian poetry for Hebrew literature and its modernist counterparts was *depoliticization*, or the emphasis on the lyrical at the expense of the political. Classical Chinese poetry is perceived in the West as lyrical, minimalist, and impressionist, and therefore nonmimetic and apolitical. Imitating Far Eastern poetry reinforced autonomist trends in modern Hebrew literature that sought to establish it as *art pour art*, an alternative or reaction to the more dominant national-mobilization trends. When an interwar Hebrew poet adapted from Chinese poetry or wrote a Chinese-style poem, this served as an explicit or implicit defiance of mimetic, collectivist, and expressionist writing (in both mood and form, "the rhythm of largeness"). In other words, the dialogue with Far Eastern poetry helped "reduce the temperature" of local contemporary poetry.

Finally, the third function is a certain *liberation from the Hebrew resonance*. Biblical Hebrew, rather than other historical forms, is the foundation of modern Hebrew and is estimated to provide 80 percent of its lexicon.<sup>24</sup> Overall, Jewish culture throughout the generations is characterized by exceptional inter- and intratextual sensitivities, so that it is almost impossible to write in Hebrew without alluding to its ancient sources. Since translations of Chinese, Japanese, and Indian poetry into Hebrew were usually not based on the original but were, rather, second-order adaptations (as German, American, and other translators had already freely adjusted and recast their source texts for their own literary purposes), and since the ancient Asian texts were almost completely unrelated to Judeo-Christian culture, representing such poetry in Hebrew or Yiddish could liberate authors from the burden of the constant debt to linguistic allusions and to the sound and meter of Hebrew works and turns of phrase. In that sense, the enchantment with the Far East was consistent with trends of secularization and universalization of modern Jewish literatures, both Hebrew and Yiddish.

## REPRESENTATIONS OF THE FAR EAST IN MODERN YIDDISH LITERATURE

I will end with an example taken from interwar Yiddish literature in order to broaden the perspective and suggest that the discussion of distorted mirrors offers a surprising point of convergence of Hebrew and Yiddish literatures.<sup>25</sup> In 1940, the Jewish-American poet Yehuda Leib

<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., S. Y. Agnon's tale of the architect and the Chinese emperor in the fifth chapter of *Ad henah* [To this day] (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1952); Rivka Davidit, "Behinot be-Sin" [Exams in China], *Omer*, July 18, 1940, 2; Alexander Penn, "Agada sinit" [Chinese legend] (1949), in *Ha-tur ha-adom* [The red column], ed. Hagit Halperin (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hame'uchad, Sifriat Poalim, and Laura Sewartz-Kipp Center for Hebrew Literature and Culture at Tel Aviv University, 2018), 195–97; Amos Keinan, "Ekh li'hiot bilti taluy: Agada sinit" [How to be independent: Chinese legend], Gnazim Archive, Tel Aviv, collection 668, manuscript 74971.

<sup>24</sup> Raphael Nir, "The Development of Contemporary Hebrew Lexicon," in *Zman yehudi hadash* [New Jewish time], vol. 2, ed. Yirmiyahu Yovel, Yair Tzaban, and David Shaham (Jerusalem: Keter, 2007), 247–53.

<sup>25</sup> For studies in the intersection of Yiddish and Chinese cultures—a field that requires extensive and profound further study—see Chang Shouu-Huey, "China-Rezeption auf Jiddisch: Zu den Li-Tai-Po-Übersetzungen" [The reception of China in Yiddish: On Li-Tai-Po's translations], *Jiddistik in deutschsprachigen Landern* 18 (November 1997): 1–16; Chang Shouu-Huey, "China und Jiddisch, jiddische Kultur in China—Chinesische Literatur und Jiddisch" [China and Yiddish, Yiddish culture in China—Chinese literature and Yiddish], in *From Kaifeng . . . to Shanghai: Jews in China*, ed. Roman Malek (Sankt Augustin: Joint publication of the Monumenta Serica Institute and China-Zentrum, 2000), 479–95; Kathryn Hellerstein, "China in Two Yiddish Translations: Ethnographic and Modernist Appropriations," in *Un/Translatable: New Maps for Germanic*

(Judd) Teller (Ternopil, Ukraine, 1912–New York, 1972) published *Lider fun der tsayt* (Poems of the time). The book included a poem probably inspired by Teller’s journey to Poland in 1938: “Dray yidishe yinglekh shraybn tsu an alten khinezishen poet” (Three Jewish boys write to an ancient Chinese poet).<sup>26</sup> Israeli literary scholar Dan Miron wrote that this was “not only one of the finest of [Teller’s] poems but also one of the lyrical peaks of modern Yiddish poetry altogether.”<sup>27</sup> The poem opens as follows:

Li-Tai-Pe, three Jewish boys  
Send greetings. They spoke  
of your poem today at sunset  
on the Warsaw Nalevki.<sup>28</sup>

The following lines describe the Jewish world in Warsaw at sunset, and the poem then concludes with lines directed at the narrator and the reader, as much as at the ancient Chinese poet:

The boys would have had you add  
two lines to the sunset  
about fear.

What do Jewish boys on Nalevki, Warsaw’s busy commercial artery—which until the Holocaust was connotative (and often derogatorily so) of small Jewish tradesmen—have in common with the eighth-century Chinese poet? The yawning gap between the two ways of life (the uncultivated simplicity of the Jewish boys and the refinedness of Li-Tai-Pe) and the enormous spatiotemporal distance between them are the twin pillars of this poem. The need to add “two lines . . . about fear” to an ancient Chinese poem about the sunset, necessarily a harmonious one (again, in keeping with the contemporary image of ancient Chinese poetry), expresses the tragedy and chaos of the modern age compared with Li-Tai-Pe’s.

The description of three Jewish Warsaw brats reading Li-Tai-Pe may seem out of place, something only a poet could imagine. It is more than likely, however, that Teller, as he usually does in his book, actually relies on a solid factual basis.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, we may assume that the boys read the Chinese poet in a Russian or Polish (re)translation or, even more likely, that they read either Nahum Bomze’s Yiddish translation published in the Polish capital in 1937 or Dov

*Literatures*, ed. Bethany Wiggin and Catriona MacLeod (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 145–56.

<sup>26</sup> The poem was first published in the New York journal *Insich* in 1938 (eighth year, first issue) and was translated shortly afterward into Hebrew by Dov Stock (Sadon): *Davar*, evening edition, March 27, 1938, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Dan Miron, “Ha-ga’on ve-ha-shever shel ha-modernism ha-’idy be-’amerika” [The rise and fall of Yiddish modernism in America], in Yehuda Leib Teller, *Shirim* [Selected poems], ed. and trans. from the Yiddish with a preface by Dan Miron (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1986), 58. See also Yael Feldman’s short interpretation of the poem in her article “Y. L. Teller ve-masoret ha-imagism ha-’idy” [Y. L. Teller and the tradition of Yiddish imagism], *Mozna’im* 4 (1983): 36–37.

<sup>28</sup> Translated by Grace Schulman in *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, ed. Irving Howe, Ruth R. Wisse, and Khone Shmeruk (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987), 656–58. Surprisingly, the poem was not included among Teller’s poems in the large collection *American Yiddish Poetry*, in either of its editions: Benjamin Harshav and Barbara Harshav, eds., *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

<sup>29</sup> Ken Frieden, “New(s) Poems: Y. L. Teller’s *Lider fun der Tsayt(ung)*,” *AJS Review* 15, no. 2 (Autumn 1990): 269–89. I thank my dear friend Ofer Dynes for helping me understand the background of the poem.

Stock (Sadan)'s 1930 Hebrew version, also published in Warsaw.<sup>30</sup> In those years, the Warsaw Hebrew literary journal *Kolot* published the first poems of Jewish poet Jiří (Georgo) Mordechai Langer (Prague, 1894–Tel Aviv, 1943), about which his friend Franz Kafka said, having read them in Hebrew, that “they are somewhat reminiscent of Chinese poetry.”<sup>31</sup> One of his poems is called “On the Poems of Li-Tai-Pe,” and in it, Langer confesses his inability to read the poet’s verses, as his eyes are overflowing with tears of excitement and identification.<sup>32</sup>

It appears that Li-Tai-Pe’s poetry was really a “literary fad” in Jewish Warsaw and nearby Jewish centers in the interwar years, embraced by secular Hebrew Yiddish readers. This was their way of being modern—if only by second order—of turning their backs on the shtetl of the past, precisely by longing for a different, imagined past, for a place they could hardly envision. Moreover, it may also have been their way of dealing with the historical changes that penetrate Teller’s poem, encapsulated in the single word “fear.” Thus, Li-Tai-Pe’s poetry served the three aforementioned functions for these boys: encryption, depoliticization (which, paradoxically, by highlighting the lyrical also underscores the political), and liberation from their own culture of origin.



Space limitations prevent me from detailing many other representations of the Far East in interbellum Hebrew and Yiddish poetry.<sup>33</sup> Future studies could examine a mirror maze of larger scope than the single distorting mirror presented here, made up of representations of the Far East by authors who emigrated from Eastern Europe to the United States, where they encountered migrant Asian communities, as did Teller, Molodowsky, and Gabriel Preil (Estonia, 1911–Jerusalem, 1993). Future research could also examine the mirror maze created in Hebrew and Yiddish literatures in Palestine–Eretz Yisrael by authors from Eastern Europe who settled in the Middle East and wrote about a third East, the Far East: one East observing a third from the point of view of the second. A

<sup>30</sup> *Li-Tai-Pe—Iberdichtungen* [Li-Tai-Pe—Adaptations], trans. Nahum Bomze (Warsaw: P. E. N. Bicher, 1937); *Mi-shirey Li-Tai-Pe* [Li-Tai-Pe—Selected poems], trans. Dov Stock [Sadan] (Warsaw: Ha-shomer Ha-tza’ir, 1930). Sadan’s translation also included two poems by Shi King; the translations had been published earlier in literary journals and supplements.

Years later, a eulogy for Bomze read as follows: “Bomze’s translation of the Chinese poet has nothing of the alienness and aftertaste of the foreign; hence, from the beginning Bomze’s spirit was kindred to Li-Tai-Pe’s manner. It appears that had the Chinese poet written in Yiddish, then he would have had recourse to these very same phrases, idioms, and metaphors. Indeed, Bomze’s translation of the Chinese poet and his own poetic craft are closely bound.” Mordecai Yoffe, “Mesilat shirato shel Nahum Bomze” [Nahum Bomze’s poetic path], *Al hamishmar*, literary supplement, August 13, 1954, 5.

<sup>31</sup> “And when my first poems were published in Eliezer Steinman’s journal *Kolot*, Kafka told me that they are somewhat reminiscent of Chinese poetry. I went on to buy a selection of Chinese poetry in Franz Toussaint’s French translation, and from that [day on], this wonderful book has never left my desk. I said that Kafka read my poem, does this imply that he knew Hebrew? That his memoirists have omitted this item? Yes, Kafka did speak Hebrew. Of late, we have always talked in Hebrew.” Mordechai Georgo (Dov) Langer, “Mashehu ‘al Kafka” [Something about Kafka], in *Me’at tzori* [Collected writing], ed. Miriam Dror (Tel Aviv: Hebrew Writers Association in Israel and Eked, 1984), 132.

<sup>32</sup> The poem is written in couplets in quasi-Chinese style. It ends in what is perhaps an allusion to *Das Lied von der Erde* [The song of the Earth]: “Indeed your poetry resounds with mine / Like a rhyme in song that reverberates the next // And like an echo rising from the deepest chasm / Of ancient mountains, thus I heard it spoken. // ... For by the first line that I glanced at—my eye did falter; / And by the second—no longer could I see; // And by the third—it turned completely into a tear, / A single pure great tear. As bitter as the Earth entire” (*Me’at tzori*, 32).

<sup>33</sup> E.g., in works by Peretz Hirschbein, Yehoash (Solomon Blumgarten), Melech Ravitz, Anda Pinkerfeld Amir, and others.