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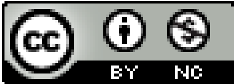
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22

Suzhou River and Garden Bridge: Reading Images of Exile in Shanghai

Mareike Hetschold

The aim of this chapter is to reflect on the notion of exile in the context of historical urban art practices. This is followed by the question of whether a conceptual differentiation derived from art history and its pictorial evidence can inform a contemporary understanding of exile. This project advances current discussions surrounding the expansion of the concept of exile, which question its (historical) fields of meaning and (current) possibilities of application. (Dogramaci and Otto 2017; Dogramaci and Mersmann 2019; Hansen-Schaberg 2019, 16; Bischoff 2019, 18; Andress 2020).

This chapter, which is based on my research within the ERC Metromod project,[1] looks at urban exile experiences and art practices in Shanghai from the 1930s to the 1950s, specifically regarding émigrés fleeing from Europe (Germany and Austria) to China or Shanghai. Urban perspectives on artistic practice in exile, which conceive of the city itself as an actor, make this line of vision appear limited – in geographical and temporal terms. Shanghai has a complex history as an arrival city, as a place of refuge and as a place to flee from at the same time. It sheltered a wide range of émigré communities: 80 per cent of its Chinese population consisted of Chinese fugitives who had migrated from different provinces, mostly from Jiangsu and Zhejiang. The largest group of foreign émigrés were Japanese, followed by the British and by Russian speaking émigrés who fled their country in the wake of the Russian Revolution. At the end of the 1930s, between 1937 and 1939, around 21,000–22,000 European, mostly Jewish, refugees had arrived in Shanghai. (Shih 2001, 236; Aubrun et al. 2019, 39; Pan 2019, 12) They all contributed to its urban development which then in turn shaped not only their exile experience in Shanghai but also, in the context of the arts, their artistic practices and job opportunities. So while we should be careful to not essentialize exile artists, reading and interpreting art in exile helps us understand

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specific dynamics of creative production and, thus, the different conditions of exile themselves.

Within this complex understanding, we need to remain conscious of the questions surrounding the complicated, sometimes contentious relationship between the city, artistic practices and exile, as well as possible perspectivizations and contextualization's regarding notions of exile. Art practices in urban space are simultaneously involved in its production and conditioned by it: "Metropolitan art perceives urbanity not solely as a space that creates motifs, but [as] a complex web linking creativity and environment, art theory and metropolis" (Dogramaci 2010, 9, translated from German by the author).

Urban environments and their stories can be perceived and told in many ways. In the introduction to her book about life in Shanghai's alleyway homes, *Shanghai Homes. Palimpsests of Private Life,* the scholar Jie Li writes:

> This book is built on the concept that an old house, inhabited by various families over several decades, is a layered ruin of their private lives, woven into but not subsumed by larger historical events. [...] In such intimate spaces, history did not proceed cleanly, with each new era purging the bygone era, but rather accrued into rich sediments of personal memories. [...] Like a museum of history, it presents a selective assemblage of objects and narratives, but the selection process is seldom as deliberate and systematic as a curated exhibition. Instead, each house is a palimpsest of inhabited spaces, material artifacts, and personal narratives that evolved over time.
>
> (Li 2015, 2f.)

Jie Li addresses a specific urban setting: the lived space of Shanghai's alleyway houses and its transformations over time. She writes about spheres of the 'private', of 'everyday objects' or 'personal memories' interwoven with and part of urban processes, as well of as political events pointing beyond the city space. Individual, collective and (im)material (trans)formations of spatial practices overlap like geological sediments and emerge as palimpsests throughout her narrative.

In Cai Jun's short story "Suzhou River", the sediments of Shanghai's urban topographies act as the setting for an exploration of fantastic space–time loops on foot and in a bathtub: embedded in the diffuse dream and waking states, the first-person narrator wanders along shifting present, past, imagined and future cityscapes. When, during a flood, the water of the Suzhou River enters his flat and bathroom, his bathtub carries him out into the city.[2]

> I had always wanted to row on a boat by myself along the web of canals to the south of the Yangtze and listen to the sound of the women's singing through the mist as

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> they picked water chestnuts. But I never wished to find myself navigating naked in a steel bathtub, wrapped only in a padded coat. Yet I had no choice.
>
> (Cai 2020, 141f.)

On the way he meets a Sikh, "probably still guarding the door at the bottom of the river" (ibid., 142), a European, "the one who's lost, forever repeating himself, going round and round in circles, on a never-ending loop" (ibid.), and a version of himself, "In the faint streetlight, I finally made it out. It was my face" (ibid., 146), before being carried out of the city by either the current of the river or his dreams:

> Wrapped in my cotton-padded coat, gently rocked by the ripples of the Suzhou River in the soft evening light, I finally slept. I dreamt that I floated out into the Huangpu River, then further out to the mouth of the Yangtze, and then out to the sea, until the ends of the earth.
>
> (ibid.)

Urban architectures, such as modern flat compounds with balconies and lifts and the Bund skyline, old alleyway house quarters that survived along the southern bank of the eastern Suzhou River, the bridges that span it, and the old Custom House on the Bund, structure the narrative into recurring spatial sections.

The titular Suzhou River becomes the real protagonist of the story and the city also takes on a life of its own:

> The day was drawing in and the busy city was acting like nothing happened. Neon lights flickered, emitting a dazzling brightness. Not a single trace was left of the devastating flood. I looked at the sleepless city, and then back at myself, pitiful, alone floating on the current in the middle of the Suzhou River.
>
> (ibid., 143)

These very different texts and readings, each in its own way, propose an understanding of urban practices, processes, events, perceptions, structures, spaces or topographies that allow for different levels of perspectivization and call upon different actors. Following on from Cai Jun's story, we can ask whether and how the Suzhou River as an 'urban actor' could be used to look at exile and art production in Shanghai in the first half of the 20th century. An approach via the motif of the Suzhou River is obvious: the teeming boats, the Garden Bridge and its Huangpu estuary have always been popular motifs, not only for commercial postcard production. My choice of images in this chapter is by no means meant to be exemplary. Rather, their differences create a space for reflecting on interwoven notions of exile. The images differ in terms of media and creation contexts, and

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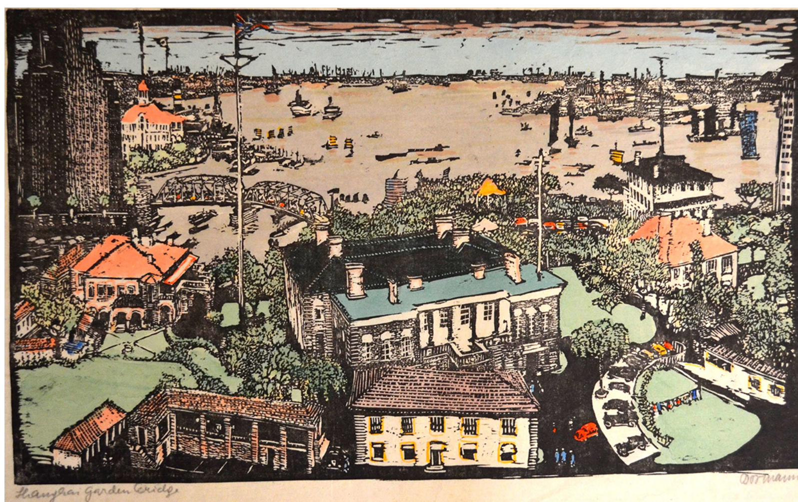
thus negotiate exile-relevant questions in distinct ways: in this way, they allow for a considered and differentiated analysis of exile.

Urban topographies and exile experiences – Visual perspectivations of the Suzhou River

The mouth of the Suzhou River and the Garden Bridge was not only a popular motif for postcards but also became a neuralgic zone when the Sino-Japanese war broke out. As a 'natural' border, the river divided the Japanese occupied area in the north from the foreign territories in the south and witnessed massive interurban flight movements. With the proclamation of the designated area, established north of the river in Hongkou in 1943, the passage across the river into the 'city centre' became a rare occasion for its inhabitants, who depended on obtaining permits and on the arbitrariness of the Japanese authorities. Against this background, depictions of the Suzhou River appear significant to flight and exile experiences and help identify the varying positions of those exile artists creating them.

The artist and printmaker Emma Bormann's approaches the Suzhou River estuary in her print *Shanghai Garden Bridge* (fig. 22.1) from an elevated vantage point south of the river.[3] The former British Embassy is placed in the centre of the picture. Behind the mouth of the Suzhou River, we can see the Garden Bridge (now called Waibaidu Bridge) and the Broadway Mansion. The wide riverbed of



FIGUR 22.1: Emma Bormann, *Shanghai Garden Bridge*, woodcut, or linocut, around 1941 (© private collection).

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the Huangpu opens out towards the horizon into the Yangtze estuary delta. The sky seems to merge with the sea behind. In the foreground, generously interspersed with green spaces and trees, the urban space grows denser towards the north, in the direction of Hongkou. The traffic on the Yangtze and the Suzhou River seems moderate, wide streets with dense traffic are not to be seen. Only small colourful spots indicate movement on the Garden Bridge, it is impossible to make out individual people. The colour scheme is strategic, not wasteful. The bright, loosely placed splashes of colour create an upbeat mood.

A few years earlier, another image of the same urban space was created. It is attributed to the businessman, founder and owner of the Sincere Department Store, Ma Yingbiao (Ma Ying-piu, 馬應彪), and was published without further details together with other photographs in *Life Magazine* on 13 September 1937 (fig. 22.2).[4] From the height of the Broadway Mansion, it captures the Garden Bridge looking north to south. The bridge turns into a wide road that winds along the Huangpu and the Bund into the International Settlements. The bridge and the street stretch from the lower right edge of the picture towards the upper left corner; their shape determines the photographed urban space. The free and empty green spaces south of the river mouth contrast with the dense crowds on the bridge and street. The photograph was taken in the summer of 1937 during the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. It shows people trying to escape from the Japanese military and the heavy warfare in the districts north of the Suzhou River to the relative safety of the foreign settlement areas. The short text accompanying the pictures reads: "Hundreds of Chinese Refugees, who had crossed the Garden Bridge were killed, when, on August 14 stray bombs landed on the Great World Amusement Park" (*Life* 1937, 25). Other pictures show the aftermath of the bombing of the Sincere Department and Wing One Store.

These disparate images and perspectives on the Suzhou River estuary and the Garden Bridge not only refer to their respective historical production contexts (when Ma Yingbiao took his photographs at the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, Bormann had not been in the city yet) and their creators' different artistic positions but also to the different roles Shanghai's urban and 'natural' topography (the Suzhou River and its bridges) played for the different experiences of flight and exile in Shanghai. While the photograph directly confronts the viewer with the ongoing flight of thousands of people across the neuralgic zone and over the bridge, the photographer's lense floats seemingly unaffected above the events.

Bormann's Shanghai prints address the (individual) experience of exile not always or directly, but often by referring to the invisible or the non-existent. Created after 1941 (no exact dating is given), the print's perspective on the Suzhou River estuary might not so easily have been replicated by other European artist colleagues who also lived in exile in Shanghai at the time.[5]

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FIGURE 22.2: Ma Yingbiao (馬應彪), *Refugees crossing Garden Bridge*, 1937 (*Life*, vol. 3, no. 11, 13 September 1937, p. 25. Courtesy of the LIFE Picture Collection).

Bormann's lived urban space correlates with her artistic practice and the respective pictorial space. She was not forced to settle in the so-called Shanghai Ghetto, whose borders severely restricted the lived urban space for the artists enclosed there.

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Reading these two images helps to understand the different roles Shanghai's urban topology played for its inhabitants, among them émigrés deeply affected by their various ethnical, socioeconomical, political or religious backgrounds.

It was not only the Sino-Japanese War in (modern) Chinese history that forced large parts of the Chinese population to flee. Shanghai's rapid increase in population in the second half of the 19th century during the Second Opium War (1856–1869) correlated with the Taiping Rebellion (1850–1864) and its lasting devastating demographic, socio-economic, political and environmental effects (Osterhammel 1998, 106–110; Aubrun et al. 2019, 13; Hsü 2000, 200–224).[6] Shanghai's population growth led to a successive densification of urban space (Aubrun et al. 2019, 13, 16). During the Sino-Japanese War, 60–95 million people were on the run at least once in their lifetime (Muscolino 2010, 453). Shanghai's population (density) increased enormously within a short period of time (Aubrun, et al. 2019, 13). The newcomers settled mainly in the districts north of the Suzhou River. On the outskirts of the city, shanty towns sprang up for those who came to Shanghai penniless (Henriot 2006, 217). Christian Henriot's study "Shanghai and the Experience of War: The Fate of Refugees" captures the fatal consequences of modern war for the heterogeneous population and refugee groups within the world's fifth largest metropolis at the time:

> Shanghai was probably the first large metropolis to experience large-scale modern warfare in its very midst. In 1937, bitter and brutal fighting raged for three months in and around the city, with intense bombardment from ships and planes. Within weeks, hundreds of thousands of residents were thrown on to the streets and turned into refugees. As war spread to the countryside, more people poured into the city.
> (Henriot 2006, 215)

The Suzhou River acted as a demarcation line, dividing the urban space into war zones, danger zones and zones of relative safety before the Japanese took control of all of Shanghai (1941 International Settlement, 1943 French Concession). In her book *Shanghai. China's Gateway to Modernity*, the scholar Marie-Claire Bergère describes the situation at the beginning of the war as follows:

> When fighting broke out, the inhabitants of Zhabei, Hongkou, and Yangshupu, fleeing the battlefield that their quarters had become, tried to take shelter in the international settlement by crossing the other side of the Suzhou River. The Garden Bridge, also known as "The Bridge of Life," now became a bridge of death. [...] For the residents of the concessions, the war was simply a spectacle to be watched from their rooftops and upper terraces [...]. However, the concessions were not completely spared. Their black Sunday came on August 14, when Chinese planes carrying bombs

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> indented for Japanese ships at anchor on the Huangpu dropped them instead on the crowds throning the Bund and Edward VII Avenue. More than 3,000 corpses were found. [...] Soon the concessions had to cope with an influx of refugees that increased their population from 1.75 to 4.5 million within a few weeks.
>
> (Bergère 2009, 290)[7]

The Japanese set up checkpoints on Garden Bridge. Passage across the river between the occupied zones north of the Suzhou River and the concession areas to the south became a difficult, sometimes life-threatening undertaking (ibid., 291). Such massive inter-urban flight movements can be understood against the backdrop of Shanghai's semi-colonial structures of urban space. Passage from one part of the city to another also meant crossing different dominions that were subject to the jurisdiction and administration of different nations.

Interurban flight and exile – Crossing the Suzhou River and Garden Bridge

Another perspective on flight and exile experiences of the time can be addressed via another image dedicated to the fleeing people. Again, it references those for whom the Garden Bridge played a significant role in their flight and exile, as they were directly, materially confronted with it while attempting to cross it. Although the Chinese refugees did not technically leave the realms of their 'home country', the flight to a place of refuge *within* the country, and even within a city, meant the crossing of different national territories, due to the complex geopolitical power relations dividing Shanghai's urban dominions. While the last two images by Bormann and Ma I discussed helped address the issue of possible movement, for example, the positioning of oneself within disparate urban power realms at different times, the next image presented will help address the relations between different notions of exile, the city and exilic city dwellers.

In the early 1940s, the artist Jiang Zhaohe (蒋兆和) created a monumental work of art entitled *liumin tu* (流民图). The word *liumin* (流民) in the title is commonly translated as 'refugees', but also refers to 'exiles'. It is used to point to historical rather than contemporary political events. A more contemporary term for 'refugee' is *nanmin* (难民), directly translated as 'difficult people'.

An analysis of the term *liumin* or the usage and combination of the character *liu* in exile contexts is beyond the scope of my research. Nevertheless, the term in the title of Jiang's painting points to its diverse and dynamic fields of meaning and application. The *liumin* (directly translated as 'floating people') of Jiang's *liumin tu* designated a group of people who were forced to flee within

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the empire due to disasters, and social and political upheavals (Bianchi 2017; Huang 黄 2018; Huang 黄 2019; Lu 1999; Liu 2002; Theobald 2016; Theobald 2017; Waley-Cohen 1991). In his essay 红尘过客—明代艺术中的乞丐与市井 (Hongchen guoke – mingdai yishu zhong de qigai yu shijing), the art historian Huang Xiaofeng (黄小峰) elaborates on different yet interrelating Ming paintings which depict *liumin* in various urban and rural settings. The *liumin* figures seem to merge with those of the beggars, disabled and other displaced persons. The pictorial space of these figures is connected to discourses of artistic representations of the urban space, but not limited to it. According to Huang, the mobility of these figures who commute between rural and urban spaces can be understood as a representation of the urban itself (Huang 黄 2019, 4–15).

Jiang began to work on his project in Beijing in 1941. It resulted in an approximately 25–27 metres long and 2 metres higн picture scroll. Today, only a part of the scroll remains. It has been in the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) in Beijing since 1998. The other parts have survived in black and white photographs (fig. 22.3). Originally from Luzhou, Sichuan, Jiang himself emigrated to Shanghai in 1920. There, he first worked as a commercial artist, among others for

FIGURE 22.3: Photograph of 蒋兆和 《流民图》1943 中国美术馆 [Jiang Zhaohe, Liumin tu, 1943, Zhongguo meishuguan].

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Ma Yingbiao's Sincere Department Store. The contact with the established artist Xu Beihong helped him pursue his artistic career. He taught at universities and art academies in Nanjing, Shanghai and Beijing. His work *liumin tu* depicts over 100 different figures. They refer to the many destitute people who were forced to flee the war.

The composition of the figures is diverse: peasants, citizens, workers, beggars and scholars, women, children and men of different ages, lifeless and emaciated bodies intertwine and line up. The story of this painting is as follows: To work on his figure-rich painting, Jiang travelled to Nanjing and Shanghai. He studied exiles who lived in precarious settlement areas at the time. He made numerous sketches and worked in secret with models in the studio in Beijing. After its completion in 1943, the painting was exhibited in Beijing as a 'group portrait'. Only a short time later, the exhibition was shut down by the Japanese military police. A second exhibition attempt was to take place in 1944 in Shanghai in the French Concession. There it was confiscated by the Japanese military and disappeared until 1953, when parts of it were found badly damaged in an old warehouse on the Suzhou River in Shanghai (Sullivan 1996, 108ff.; Liu 刘 1984).

Today, and after its rehabilitation in 1979, this ink figure painting is considered one of Jiang's most representative works. The black lines capture the figures in timeless gestures of sorrow, pain, grief and fear. Arranged in different groups, the figures' gazes correspond with each other and involve the viewer. Other figures gaze towards or avert their eyes from invisible sources of horror. Only a few hints in the background provide information about the spatial context. At the beginning, a few lines suggest the ruins of destroyed buildings. Towards the end, an old tree, a gnarled pine, gathers a group of figures around it.

Above all, the constellations of figures, their clothing, posture, gestures and facial expressions reveal the inhumane situation they have found themselves in and the horror they are facing. While most of the figures remain motionless, the picture's sheer dimension sets the viewer in motion. Only by walking along it is it possible to encounter the remaining figures and their "interlocking spatial units" (Wu 2018, 269). The motif of movement is inscribed in the painting on multiple levels – via the context of its creation, the title, the motif, the medium and the arrangement of its pictorial spaces, as well as via the process of viewing it as a whole.

Jiang's painting does not show a view of the Suzhou River or the Garden Bridge as the other visual representations, I have discussed throughout this chapter. But it evokes the massive movements of refugees and the people for whom the passage across the river and the bridge became a question of survival. In the preparation for his painting, Jiang studied the people of the shanty towns in Nanjing and Shanghai. Without being explicitly depicted, urban borders (such as the border of the Suzhou River) and their significance for those trying to cross them are deeply inscribed in Jiang's painting.

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Conclusion

The fragmented, migratory and destructive histories of this art work and its artist are irrevocably interwoven with that of Shanghai. And while Emma Bormann's print *Shanghai Garden Bridge* could visually, materially and contextually not be farther from Jiang Zhaohe's *liumin tu*, it is similarly interwoven with Shanghai's history as a place of 'refuge'. These disparate visual worlds mediate the heterogeneous simultaneity of individual experiences of exile as they are situated in Shanghai's geography and urban topologies, and its semi-colonial and geopolitical structures. They enable us as viewers to trace and mine Shanghai's many layered sediments of flight and exile.

While my selection of images cannot be all-encompassing and should be perceived as experimental rather than representative, it has not only showcased how experiences of exile in Shanghai and their creative, artistic practices differ widely but also how the meaning and context of flight and exile constantly shift and evolve.

Jiang's painting inscribes itself in a painting tradition and calls up the (historical) rural and urban *liumin* while drawing a modern, urbanized version. The victory of the CPC (Communist Party of China) over the GMD (Guomindang) and the establishment of the PRC (Peoples Republic of China) then caused millions of people to emigrate and go into exile (liuwang 流亡) outside the borders of the new People's Republic of China. In the introduction to the *Chinese Reflections on the Exile Experience after 1949* issue of *Oriens Extremus: Kultur, Geschichte, Reflexion in Ostasien* (vol. 52, 2013), Thomas Fröhlich and Birgit Knüsel Adamec write:

> the different spheres of exilic experience and conceptual variety indicate the difficulty of arriving at a concept of exile: To what extent can we even refer to "exile" with regard to China in the 20th century?
>
> (Fröhlich/Knüsel Adamec 2013, 7)

They advocate for an understanding beyond "occidental ideas of exile" (ibid.) and suggest to listen to those "who define their own situation as being one of exile" (ibid.).

Around the same time during the first half of the 20th century, the definition of exile and its scholarly application underwent significant changes within different historical, cultural, political and linguistic contexts. Although these changes are triggered by interdependent larger historical events, including Western and Japanese Imperialism, German national socialism and WW II, these different contexts need to be taken into account when trying to sketch a general definition of 'being in a state of exile'. In addition to the reading of texts in order to understand specific

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local and historical exilic experiences, the 'reading of images' can enrich prevailing 'literary' perspectives on exile. As a visual practice rooted in complex compositional structures and media contexts, images can help us address the multitude of exilic experiences within a 'single urban frame', such as the frame of the Suzhou River for example. Besides providing a personal narrative of exile, these images and how they have been created refer to the respective urban conditions of exile and the possibilities of artistic practices in exile. As such, they call into question any notion of exile as definitive, finite or all-inclusive. Exile appears instead as a palimpsest-like, dynamic and lively complex that is continuously revised, renewed and reconfigured from past and present, private and public, individual and collective, homo- and heterogeneous texts and images.

NOTES

1. "Relocating Modernism: Global Metropolises, Modern Art and Exile (METROMOD)" is a 5-year project funded by an ERC Consolidator Grant and located at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität (LMU) Munich. For further information, see: www.//metromod.net.
2. Published in: Jin, Li and Dai Congron, editors. *The Book of Shanghai: A City in Short Fiction*. Comma Press, 2020, pp. 131–46. This anthology from the *A City in Short Fiction* series brings together ten stories by various contemporary authors. Jin Li writes in her introduction: "Airports, luxurious hotels, shopping malls, financial centres – these may be what most metropolises around the world have in common, what we expect to find, what we are thinking we're coming to look at, but what's unique about any destination is the particular outlook of the citizen living there, the intricate, varied and often hidden historical traditions each one carries with them. Even in the same city, the economic possibilities, lifestyles and living conditions of different groups of residents are multiple, complex, and widely disparate" (Jin, in Jin/Dai 2020, xiii).
3. Emma Bormann's oeuvre bears witness to her extensive travels around the globe and to the agility and versatility of her artistic rendering of the (urban) sites she encountered. Austrian born, married to a Jew and suspended from her teaching position at the University in Vienna, she followed her husband into exile to South China in 1938, from where she and her two daughters proceeded to Shanghai in 1941 in order to flee from the advancing Japanese military. For a comprehensive survey of her impressive artistic production and carrier see Johns, Andreas. *The Art of Emma Bormann*. Ariadne Press, 2016.
4. The title of the photo reportage is: "The Chinese Outfight the Japanese as Shanghai Blazes." *Life*, vol. 3, no. 11, 1937, pp. 23–26. On Ma Yingbiao as a photographer and his biography, see *Virtual Shanghai*, www.virtualshanghai.net/References/Biography?ID=173. Accessed 2 July 2021. On Sincere Department Stores, see *The China–Australia Heritage Corridor*, www.heritagecorridor.org.au/places/sincere-department-stores-hong-kong. Accessed 2 July 2021.

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5. In 1943, declared 'stateless' by the Nazi regime, most Jewish European emigrants were forced into a small, designated area in Hongkou – the so-called Shanghai Ghetto – by the occupying Japanese authorities. Already facing harsh economic conditions, for many this meant the loss of previous income opportunities, as well as of their professional and social networks (Pan 2019, 11–28).
6. Shanghai is rooted in the complex geopolitical and cultural structures of a semi-colonial metropolis. After the First Opium War, the signing of the Treaty of Nanking in 1843 and the "most favoured nation" clause contained therein, Shanghai's territory as one of China's five port cities was split into British and American concessions (later known as the International Settlement) as well as French and informal Japanese concessions – each with its own jurisdiction. The term 'semi-colonial' can be traced back to the 1920s and was used, among other things, in Marxist criticism "as a way to describe the coexistence between the native feudal and the colonial." (Shih 2001, 31) Shih uses the term in order to describe the specific impacts of multilayered imperialist presence in China and their fragmentary colonial geography (largely confined to coastal cities) and control, as well as the resulting social and cultural formation (ibid.).
7. The administrative authorities were overwhelmed and initially tried to stop the refugees from entering the concession. Accommodating 250,000 refugees, the Jesuit father Jaquinot de Basenge created a safe zone located in the old Chinese town, which was respected by the Chinese and the Japanese military (Bergère 2009, 29; Kranzler 1974, pp. 40–60).

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