

A Study Guide For

# A Jewish Girl in Shanghai



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## **A Jewish Girl in Shanghai**

### **Teacher Resource Package**

**Prepared by: Susan Starkman, B.A., M.Ed**

#### **Synopsis:**

Country of Origin: China

Release Year: 2010

Directors: Wang Genfa and Zhang Zhenhui

Runtime: 80 minutes

Themes: World War II, Second Sino-Japanese War Friendship, Religious and Cultural Diversity

Based on the popular graphic novel of the same name, *A Jewish Girl in Shanghai* is the first Chinese animated film to deal with the Holocaust. Rina and her little brother have fled to Shanghai and wait to hear of their parents' fate in Europe. When Zhou A-Gen, a young Chinese boy, offers penniless Rina a free pancake, a strong friendship forms between these two children of very different backgrounds. Along with Rina's brother, the three children set out on many adventures while trying to fend off Japanese bullies and the German presence in the city. This enlightening film offers us a glimpse into Shanghai's "Little Vienna" neighbourhood, where approximately 30,000 Jews sought refuge in WWII. This difficult subject is brought to life through the illuminating interpretation of Shanghai's Animation Film Studio.

#### **Curriculum Links**

*A Jewish Girl in Shanghai* can be used to meet the media studies component of English across all grade levels.

#### **Related Website**

<http://www.jewishgirlinsh.com/index.php>

## **Ways into the Text: Context**

Although the film is a work of fiction, the setting political circumstances portrayed in the film are based in fact. Before viewing the film, students should be given some background information on the history of Jews in Shanghai and on the Second Sino-Japanese War when Hongkew, the area of Shanghai where the film is set, came under Japanese control. Below is a brief history of Jewish migration to Shanghai, with a list of other resources that teachers and students can access for further information.

### **Three Waves of Jewish Migration to Shanghai**

From the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were three distinct waves of Jewish immigration to Shanghai. The first wave was between 1843 and 1920. After Shanghai opened to Western trade in 1842, Great Britain, the United States, France, Italy and Portugal established extraterritorial rights in the city's International Settlement that was administered by a municipal council of Western powers. There was also a French Concession headed by the French Consul General. During this time, approximately 700 Jewish traders from Iraq, India, Spain and Portugal moved to Shanghai.

The second wave of Jewish immigration between 1920-1933 saw thousands of Russian Jews arriving in Shanghai after fleeing the Russian Revolution. Many of these immigrants worked in real estate and were also responsible for developing the stock exchange.

The third wave of Jewish immigration began in 1933 when approximately 17,000 German and Austrian Jews fled from Nazi persecution. This number increased greatly after Kristallnacht when Jews realised that the situation in Europe was worsening for them. At the time, Shanghai was the only city in the world that did not require a visa on entry and thus it became a haven for refugees. Since they had been stripped of all of their assets back home, the Jews arrived penniless and settled primarily in the Hongkew district that had come under Japanese control in 1937 (see section on Second Sino-Japanese War). This area was poor and crowded and the refugees rebuilt many of the bombed out parts, establishing small factories and cottage industries. By 1940, the area around Chusan Road was known as "Little Vienna" because of its cafes, bakeries and delicatessens. By the end of the war, Shanghai was home to approximately 24,000 Jews.

One of the characters in the film is based on a real historical figure. Colonel Josef Meisinger (referred to in the film as Colonel Messinger) was the Gestapo chief in Japan. In 1942, he arrived in Shanghai and proposed his plan for a "Final Solution in Shanghai". In the film, this is alluded to when Messinger tells Mr Yamamoto that "Jews will not be allowed to lead good lives, even in Japan." Although Mr Yamamoto seems to embrace this plan, that is historically inaccurate. In fact, the Japanese authorities defied these orders because many

powerful figures in Japan felt a debt of gratitude to Jewish bankers who had facilitated the loans needed to enable the Japanese government and military to finance its modernisation program several years earlier.

### **Related Activity**

Students could do some research into the Jewish community of Shanghai, collecting information about the area of Shanghai where most of the Jewish community lived. They can find photos of various famous sites of interest in order to create a tourist brochure for visitors to Shanghai.

### **Websites Relating to Jewish Shanghai**

*The Independent Newspaper*

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/shanghai-the-city-that--saved-jews-fleeing-nazis-733824.html>

Unites States Holocaust Memorial Museum

<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007091>

The Scribe

<http://www.dangoor.com/71page18.html>

Haruth Communications

<http://www.haruth.com/jw/AsiaJewsShanghai.htm>

China Odyssey Tours

<http://www.chinaodysseytours.com/shanghai/shanghai-jews.html>

### **The Second Sino-Japanese War (July 7, 1937-September 9, 1945)**

The film is set in the winter of 1939, a time when the Japanese Imperialist Army occupied Shanghai during the Second Sino-Japanese War. In order to better understand the negative feelings that the Chinese characters express towards the Japanese, students should have some background information on the events leading up to the Japanese invasion.

The Second Sino-Japanese War was the largest Asian war of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, fought between the Republic of China and the Empire of Japan before and during WWII. The war was the result of the Japanese imperialist policy aimed at political and military domination of China and Japan's wish to secure China's vast raw material reserves and other economic resources. Before 1937, Japan and China fought small, localised battles referred to as "incidents". The Marco Polo Bridge incident marked the beginning of a full-scale war between the two countries. The Chinese fought on their own against the Japanese until 1941 but, after Japan invaded Pearl Harbour, the Second Sino-Japanese War became part of the greater conflict of WWII. The Battle of Shanghai (known in China as the Battle of Songhu) was one of the largest, bloodiest battles of the War. It lasted three months but, despite fierce efforts to defend the city, it fell to the Japanese in November, 1937.

### **Websites Relating to Second Sino-Japanese War**

New World Encyclopaedia

[http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Second\\_Sino-Japanese\\_War](http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Second_Sino-Japanese_War)

WWII Multimedia Database

<http://www.worldwar2database.com/html/sinojapan.htm>

Answers.com

<http://www.answers.com/topic/sino-japanese-war>

Cultural China

<http://history.cultural-china.com/en/34History7545.html>

### **Extension Activities**

One of the problematic aspects of *A Jewish Girl in Shanghai* is its negative depiction of the Japanese. Apart from the character of Master Tuo, all of the Japanese people portrayed in the film are, at best, bullies and at worst, murderers. Teachers could use this as a springboard to discuss with students the concept of point of view. Ask students from whose perspective is the story told and how it might be different if it were not told from a Chinese perspective.

As a means of offsetting the film's depiction of the Japanese as victimisers, teachers might also consider broaching the subject of the way the Japanese were treated in Canada during WWII when they were the victims of suspicion prejudice. Using the resources listed below, students can learn more about the way the Canadian government held Canadians of Japanese descent in internment camps and confiscated their property after the attack on Pearl Harbour.

Sedai: The Japanese-Canadian Legacy Project

<http://www.sedai.ca/news/internment/>

JapaneseCanadianHistory.net

[http://www.japanesecanadianhistory.net/samples\\_elementary.htm](http://www.japanesecanadianhistory.net/samples_elementary.htm)

The Canadian Encyclopaedia

<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ARTA000403>

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WWII Multimedia Database

<http://www.worldwar2database.com/html/intern.htm>

## **Chiune Sugihara**

Although Mr Yamamoto seems enthusiastic about Colonel Messinger's plan to make life even more difficult for the Jews of Shanghai, The Japanese did, in fact, resist Nazi orders to implement a final solution for the Jews of Asia. Teachers could introduce students to Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese diplomat responsible for saving the lives of thousands of Lithuanian Jews. Defying orders from Tokyo, Sugihara and his wife wrote over 6000 exit visas for Jews trying to escape Lithuania after the Russians invaded in 1940. Known as the "Japanese Schindler", Sugihara's story is equally fascinating but nowhere near as well known. By researching his life, students can explore the issue of heroism and consider both what it means to be a hero and why individuals are driven to commit heroic acts.

Related Websites:

The Sugihara Project

<http://www.eagleman.com/sugihara/>

Jewish Virtual Library

<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/sugihara.html>

PBS Website with links to the documentary *Conspiracy of Kindness* and teacher resources relating to the film

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/sugihara/>

## Characters

*A Jewish Girl in Shanghai* presents a rich opportunity for character education through close analysis of the characters in the film and the relationships that develop between them as they confront the challenges of living through a time of war. In particular, the film can be used as a vehicle through which to explore issues of friendship, family and moral development. Below is a brief outline of the main characters with some guiding questions that can form the basis of a classroom discussion. Students should also think about the minor characters and the qualities they embody. For example, students could consider what functions the parrot, monkey and dog serve in the narrative. Although they are not human characters, they play a vital role in the film by reinforcing particular human traits.

### Rina

At the beginning of the film, Rina is emotionally isolated. Living alone in a foreign country with her little brother, Rina is thrust into a parental role even though she herself yearns for her own mother. Through her friendship with A-Gen, Rina learns to love the culture of her adopted home and to trust someone enough to share her fears about her family's future. She also learns how to stand up to anyone who tries to intimidate her. Students could compare the old woman version of Rina that brackets the beginning and end of the film with the young Rina that appears throughout the rest of the film.

**Focus Questions** (Responses must include specific examples from the film)

1. Why does Rina pretend that she is a boy when she is out in public?
2. Why does Rina insist that A-Gen take her mother's locket as payment for the pancake even though he wants her to take it for free? What does this suggest about her personality?
3. Rina lies to her brother about being full so that he won't feel badly about taking the second pancake that she brings home. Why is she so protective of her brother? What motivates her to put his health above her own?
4. How does Rina find the money to pay for the medicine that A-Gen's mother needs? What does this suggest about her personality?
5. Rina refuses Mr. Yamamoto's demand to play a Japanese military march on the violin. Do you think that this decision is brave or foolish. Why? What other examples can you find in the film where Rina risks her own safety to defy the Japanese?
6. How has Rina changed by the end of the film?
7. We never hear about what happens to Rina's mother. What do you think happened to her and why is it not addressed in the film?

### A-Gen

Like Rina, A-Gen is emotionally isolated at the beginning of the film, with his dog Wang Cai as his only companion. He, too, is thrust into a caregiver role because his mother is sick and his father was killed in battle. A-Gen displays a feisty streak from the beginning of the film when he stands up to a group of Japanese bullies even though they are much bigger than him. Through his friendship with Rina, A-Gen learns more about the world beyond China and the toll that the war is taking on people in other countries.

**Focus Questions**

1. Why does A-Gen risk losing his job by giving Rina a pancake even though she has no money? What does this suggest about his personality?
2. Why do you think A-Gen is so fascinated by Rina even before he gets to know her?
3. How does A-Gen demonstrate his bravery throughout the film? Find as many examples as you can of A-Gen willing to risk his own safety to help the people that he loves.
4. What motivates A-Gen to be strong and carry on even after he loses both his father and his uncle in the war?
5. How has A-Gen changed at the end of the film?
6. What are some of the Chinese holidays and customs that A-Gen introduces to Rina?

**Villains**

In contrast to the heroic characters of Rina, A-Gen and their family members, the Japanese and Germans in the film are portrayed as two-dimensional caricatures of villains. Much of their villainy is captured visually, even before they speak. Students should create a character sketch of each of the evil characters listed below by filling out the physical traits listed in the left-hand column in the chart below.

	<b>Japanese Youth Gang</b>	<b>Mr. Jia (Chinese Collaborator)</b>	<b>Mr. Yamamoto</b>	<b>Colonel Miesner</b>
General Appearance				
Facial Expressions/Mannerisms				
Hairstyle/Distinguishing				



Features (e.g. glasses, bad teeth)				
Clothing				

### **Symbols and Motifs**

*A Jewish Girl in Shanghai* offers teachers the opportunity to introduce students to the way that filmmakers use symbols and motifs to convey certain ideas to their audiences. While a symbol refers to a specific object that represents a certain abstract idea, a motif denotes a recurring theme. Below is a list of symbols and motifs that appear throughout the film. Students should fill out the grid, identifying the scenes in the film where they appear (context) and commenting on their significance.

<b>SYMBOL/MOTIF</b>	<b>CONTEXT</b>	<b>SIGNIFICANCE</b>
Birds flying overhead (Occurs frequently throughout the film)		
Rina's necklace/locket		
Pancakes		
Rina's violin		



## ***A Jewish Girl in Shanghai: General Discussion Questions/Activities***

1. This film is the first animated film to deal with the Holocaust. Why do you think that the filmmakers chose to deal with this subject in this way? Do you think that the film would have been as effective if it were a live action film? Why/why not?
2. Why do you think that the filmmakers chose to begin the film in the present tense when Rina is already an old lady?
3. A-Gen introduces Rina and Michelli to Chinese New Year and Dragon Boat Races. Find out more about both of these events and report your findings to the class.
4. A-Gen introduces Rina to "Uncle Urheen". Find out more about the musical instrument, the urheen. How does it differ from a violin? What other instruments are unique to Chinese culture? Find out more about Chinese music and share some recordings with the class.
5. Rina learns how to make zongzi. What is zongzi? Find a recipe for it. Find out more about Chinese cuisine and share your findings with the class.
6. Although most of the Japanese characters in the film are portrayed negatively, Mr. Tuo is very protective of Rina. Why does he immediately take a liking to her?
7. At the end of the film, Mr. Tuo finds Rina and says that he wants to thank her "because it's [she] who let me learn to...ponder deeply over this war. Though we lost the war, it is perhaps the best result." Why do you think that he feels this way?
8. Why is Mr. Jia, a Chinese man, loyal to the Emperor of Japan? What does the viewer think of Mr. Jia? How do the filmmakers position us to see him as a traitor?
9. What function do the animals in the film serve?
10. Write a letter from Rina to A-Gen a few months after she leaves China. Describe her feelings as she handles the transition back to life in Europe.
11. Write a letter from A-Gen to Rina a few months after she leaves Shanghai. How has the city changed now that the Japanese have left?

## **Websites Cited (All websites cited are from April, 2011)**

*A Jewish Girl in Shanghai*

<http://www.jewishgirlinsh.com/index.php>

*The Independent Newspaper*

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/shanghai-the-city-that--saved-jews-fleeing-nazis-733824.html>

Unites States Holocaust Memorial Museum

<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007091>

The Scribe

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Haruth Communications

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China Odyssey Tours

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The Canadian Encyclopaedia

<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1ARTA0004039>

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