

## Feature / By Dr. Yitzchok Levine

# The Jews of China

### Settlement of Jews in China<sup>1</sup>

It is not clear when Jews first knew about the existence of China. The majority of Bible commentators identify it with Eretz Sinim ('the land of the Sinim'), whence the deported sons of Israel shall return to their land (*Yeshayah* 49:12); others, however, deny the identification. At any rate, the Jews in Persia from early times were connected with the silk trade, and, as a consequence, entered into direct relations with the 'silk men' ('Seres,' from 'ser' = *seraim* = 'sericum' = 'silk'), as the Chinese were called by the Romans.

"It is difficult to say, however, at what time the first Jewish settlement in China took place. In all likelihood, Jewish merchants immigrated, or changed a temporary sojourn into a permanent one, at various epochs. The tradition of the Chinese Jews traces the first immigration back to the Han dynasty between 206 B.C.E. and 221 C.E., and more exactly to the time of the emperor Ming-ti."

Throughout China, Jews were called "Tiao Kiu Kiaou" (the sect that extracts the sinews, based on *Bereishis* 32:33: "Therefore, [even] to this day, the Children of Israel are not to eat the sinew of weakness which is on the upper joint of the thigh, for he gripped the sinew of weakness at the upper joint of Yaakov's thigh").

Little is known about the history of the Jews in China during the Middle Ages. Two Mohammedan travelers who were in China in 851 wrote, "Many of them, for the sake of riches and preferment, have abjured their own religion."

It is very probable that a new colony of Jews came to China during the tenth century. "Professor Chavannes declares: 'Between 960 and 1126 [Sung dynasty], Jews coming from India brought, for the first time, as tribute to the court of China, stuffs from western maritime countries (si yang poo). The Jews came to China by sea, and not by crossing central Asia; they were members of the Jewish colonies settled in India. Lastly, their arrival does not appear to have been prior to the end of the tenth century C.E.'"

"The Jews, who were never active participants in Chinese affairs, being taken for Mohammedans (Hwei Hwei), are nevertheless mentioned in Chinese annals:

"The Jews are referred to for the first time in the 'Yuen shi' under the year 1329, on the occasion of the re-establishment of the law on the collection of taxes from Dissenters. Mention of them is again made under the year 1354, when, on account of several insurrections in China, rich Mohammedans and Jews were invited to the capital in order to join the army. In both cases, they are named 'Chu hu'



Jews of K'ai-Fung-Foo, China

(Djehud)."

### The Jews of K'ai-Fung-Foo (Kaifeng Foo)

"Throughout the Middle Ages, the European Jews had no knowledge of the existence of Jews in China; even Benjamin of Tudela, who mentions China, seems to know nothing about them. It was through Catholic missionaries in the seventeenth century that the first information reached Europe of a Jewish community, consisting of about five hundred or six hundred members, in K'ai-Fung-Foo (Kaifeng), the ancient capital of Honan; of one at Hangehau-Foo; and of others in other Chinese towns. But owing to the existence of an ancient synagogue at K'ai-Fung-Foo, which, though rebuilt several times, had preserved the oldest records of Jewish settlements, the interest of the historians was centered upon the Jews there; and the inscriptions in the Chinese language found on its marble tablets, dating from the years 1489, 1512, and 1663, which have been often translated and published, have cast unexpected light upon a hitherto entirely unknown chapter of Jewish history. The following abstracts of these inscriptions give an insight into both the history and the character of the Chinese Jews.

"The inscription of 1489 referring to the immigration states: 'Seventy families came from the Western lands offering tribute of cotton cloth to the emperor, who allowed them to settle at Peenlang' (K'ai-Fung-Foo). In 1163, the synagogue was erected by a certain Yen-too-la; and in 1279, it was rebuilt on a larger scale. In 1390, the Jews were granted land and additional privileges by Tai-tsou, the founder of the Ming dynasty. In 1421, permission was given by the emperor to Yen-Tcheng, a

physician greatly honored by him, to repair the synagogue, incense for use therein being presented by the emperor. In 1461, the synagogue was destroyed by flood, but was restored by a prominent Jew. New copies of the Law were procured; and the table of offerings, the bronze vase, the flower vases, the candlesticks, the Ark, the triumphal arch, the balustrades, and other furniture were presented to the synagogue by prominent members of the Jewish community.

"Another inscription dated 1663, by a Chinese [Jewish] mandarin (Chinese public official), gives a graphic account of the rebellion which caused the fall of the Ming dynasty in 1642 and the destruction of the city, the synagogue, and many Jewish lives, and of the rescue of the sacred writings by a Jewish mandarin, who, with the help of the troops, restored the city, and together with his brother, rebuilt the synagogue in 1653. Only one complete scroll of the Law having been recovered from the waters, this was placed in the middle of the Ark; and twelve other scrolls were copied and placed around it. Other holy writings and prayer-books were repaired by members of the community, whose names are perpetuated in the tablet, together with the names of all the dignitaries who took part in the restoration."

### The Decline of the Jews of K'ai-Fung-Foo

Initially, the Jews of K'ai-Fung-Foo remained loyal to the Torah.

"In their heyday, the K'ai-feng Jews, following the Talmudic prescriptions, observed most of the Jewish ceremonies, holidays and festivals such as Sabbath, Yom Kippur, Feast of Unleavened Bread, Shavuoth, Succoth, Purim, Hannucha and Simchat Torah. A

couple of statements from the stone inscriptions indicate how rigidly they observed the Sabbath and Yom Kippur.

"They practiced circumcision. Chinese Jews observed Kosher rules with respect to meat so meticulously that they earned the nickname, T'iaochin Chiao, i.e., religion that plucks sinews. During the worship service, the men regularly wore yarmulkas and faced west during prayers to the direction of Jerusalem, as Jews did elsewhere."<sup>111</sup>

For several centuries, these Jews apparently maintained contact with the Jews of Persia, who supplied them with the teachers and books necessary for Jewish religious education. They lived apart from non-Jews in a tightly-knit community, did not mingle in Chinese society and used only Jewish names. In this way, they were able to maintain their Jewish distinctiveness and a Torah way of life. However, things began to change in the fifteenth century.

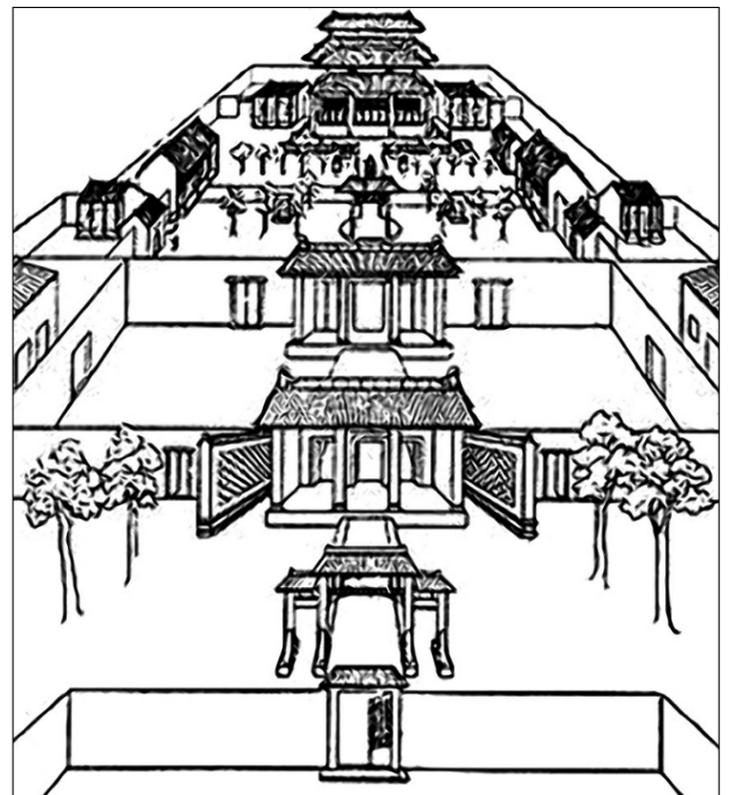
"In 1421, a Jew named Hassan (An San) was rewarded by the Chinese Emperor for reporting an act of attempted treason against the Emperor by Kaifeng's Prince Su. Part of Hassan's reward included being given the Chinese name Chao Ch'eng or Chao the Honest. This paved the way for the Jews of Kaifeng to become full-fledged members of Chinese society. It was not long before the rest of the community took Chinese names, although they continued to use Hebrew names in their communal records. A number of Kai Fung's Jews began working for the Chinese government.

"China's civil service was far more egalitarian than any in the West at the time. It recruited offi-

cial on the basis of examinations leading to three successive degrees, roughly corresponding to the Western bachelor's, master's and doctorate. The exams tested a student's knowledge of and ability to interpret Confucian scriptures. They were open to all Chinese citizens. Within a generation of Hassan's breakthrough, Jews in Kaifeng began passing the exams and becoming mandarins. The next three hundred years (c. 1421-1723) were their Golden Age. Jewish mandarins attained a wide variety of [important government] positions.

"But, at the same time that they were rising in Chinese society, Kaifeng's Jews were beginning to drift away from Judaism. They lost all contact with foreign Jews. They adopted Chinese customs for marriages, funerals and 'capping' (a rite of passage analogous to the Bar Mitzvah). The examination system left little time for other interests — least of all, [for the study of] scriptures in a foreign tongue. And Chinese officials were required to take positions away from home, to prevent corruption and nepotism. This made it difficult for successful Jews to keep the commandments."

Inevitably, participation in the civil service transformed "the Jewish intellectuals into Confucian *literati*. And being a Confucian *literatus* signified much more than a mere academic and status achievement, for it affected the person's whole character and his philosophical as well as religious perspective. Once a Jew became a member of Confucian *literati*, he was expected to (and he invariably did) conduct himself as a Confucian, within the framework of Confucian thought pattern. In other words, a



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Bird's-eye view of the Temple Buildings at K'ai-Fung-Foo, China.



Chinese Jews reading the Torah from a "chair of Moses."

membership in the *literati* necessarily involved internal as well as external metamorphosis." <sup>IV</sup>

#### Forgotten by the Jewish World

At some point, the Jews of K'ai-Fung-Foo lost contact with the outside world. In particular, they were cut off from interactions with other Jewish communities. It was not until the beginning of the seventeenth century that outsiders found out about them. In June of 1605, a Jesuit missionary named Matteo Ricci was visited by a Chinese mandarin named Ai T'ien from the city of Kaifeng.

"Ai told Ricci that he belonged to a small religious sect that believed in only one G-d. Other Chinese, unable to distinguish his people from the far more numerous Moslems, called

them 'the Moslems who pluck the sinews from their meat,' after their unusual method of butchering animals. But his people were not Moslems, Ai said, and in fact disliked the larger sect.

"Unfortunately, they had not been in touch with those fellow believers for generations. This was what brought Ai to visit Ricci while in Peking. He told the Jesuit that he had read about him in a Chinese book that described Europeans as believers in one G-d, but not Moslems."

Both Ai and Ricci mistakenly thought that they practiced the same religion but soon learned this was not the case. Ricci realized that Ai was a Jew, whereas Ai realized that Ricci was most certainly not a Jew.

Ricci recorded his meeting with Ai in his diary and in a letter,

both of which were eventually published. During the first part of the eighteenth century, a number of Jesuit missionaries visited Kaifeng and attempted, without success, to convince the Jews there to convert to Christianity.

"These missionaries catalogued symptoms of the Jewish decline. Kaifeng's Jews used their Scriptures for Chinese-style fortunetelling (drawing lots), they reported. A few tried to sell Torah scrolls, but their leaders prevented it. Only forty to fifty men came to the synagogue for holidays, and barely a *minyan* for the Sabbath. Rich Jews avoided attending synagogue by donating new copies of the weekly readings. Their pronunciation of Hebrew, added one missionary who spoke that language, was so unusual that 'if I had not seen the Hebrew before my eyes, I would not have believed it was Hebrew.'

"Another remarkable piece of evidence confirms this picture. It is a bilingual 'memorial book of the dead' — perhaps the only Chinese-Hebrew manuscript in the world. In it, Kaifeng's Jews registered the names of their deceased. It was compiled in the mid-seventeenth century, apparently from memorial books of the individual clans (there were seven Jewish clans in Kaifeng). Nearly a thousand names are listed, some from as far back as the early 1400s. Abandoned altogether around 1670, the manuscript was sold to Europeans in 1851.

"The memorial book provides vivid testimony of Jewish assimilation in Kaifeng. Some Jews are listed in Hebrew and others, presumably those who did not use Hebrew names, in Chinese. Many Jews who had Hebrew names had sons who used only Chinese ones, but hardly any Chinese-named fathers had Hebrew-named sons. The movement was in a single direction: away from their traditions."

#### Contact Lost and Then Reestablished

The last Christian missionary in Hunan province (where Kaifeng is located) was thrown out by the Chinese government in 1724. The result was that the outside world again lost contact with the Jews of Kaifeng.

In 1843, a young Englishman by the name of James Finn published a book called *The Jews in China*.<sup>V</sup> "Finn had never been anywhere near China himself, but based his book on documents he found in the British Museum while researching Jewish history for the London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews.

"No new information had come from Kaifeng since the expulsion of the missionaries. Everything written in the interim had been based on the Jesuit accounts, often with a healthy dose of imagination. Jews in Europe and America had written letters to Kaifeng in Hebrew, but with no response. No one knows if they were received; if so, it is not likely they could have been understood.

"With typical English doggedness, Finn set out to close that gap. He made the rounds of China-bound travelers, giving them copies of his book and urging them to contact the Jews.

Among them was a diplomat on his way to a new post as British consul, who agreed to translate a letter to them into Chinese. Finn wrote the letter himself in English and Hebrew and mailed it to the consul, who forwarded it to Kaifeng. It was addressed to 'The Honorable Sinew-Plucking Sect, Kaifeng.'

"Miraculously, Finn's letter was not only received but answered. A Chinese Jew named Chao Nien-tsu sent a reply to the consul in 1850. His letter was a poignant cry for help from Jews who, for all they had known, might have been the only ones left in the world. 'The receipt of your present letter,' Chao wrote, 'assures us that the holy religion contains still a germ of vitality, and that in the great English nation, the history of its origin has not been lost.'

"Chao painted a gloomy picture of Jewish life in Kaifeng, on the verge of disappearing entirely. He described himself as one of the few Jews who still cared about their religion. 'Morning and night,' Chao wrote, 'with tears in our eyes and with offerings of incense, do we implore that our religion may again flourish.'

"Chao reported that the synagogue was crumbling. 'Our temple in this place has long been without ministers; the four walls of its principal hall are greatly dilapidated, and the compartments of the hall of the holy men are in ruins. The water-chamber [*mikveh*] and the treasury are in ruins likewise.' To make things worse, some of the Jews were pulling it down. Chao named eight men who were mortgaging or selling parts of the building. 'If any person be deputed hither,' he said, 'measures should be taken to put a stop to the scandalous proceedings of these people.'"

#### Attempts to Revitalize the Community

In the middle of the nineteenth century, a number of attempts were made to send Jews from the United States and England to help revive the Jewish community of Kaifeng. These failed due to political unrest and war in China. When the first Westerners were able to visit Kaifeng in 1866, they found that the synagogue had been torn down.

By 1900, the Jewish community of Kaifeng numbered about 140. It had no religious leader, no synagogue and no religious education. In that same year, the Jews of Shanghai became interested in the plight of the Kaifeng community and started the Shanghai Society to Rescue the Chinese Jews. The Society begged the Jews of Kaifeng not to sell any more of their *seforim*, and offered to help them rebuild their temple. Again, nothing came of this effort.

By 1910, only one stone inscription remained at the synagogue site, which was now covered by a stagnant pond. Today, the Chinese Medicine Hospital stands on the site of the Kaifeng Synagogue.

A UPI reporter who visited Kaifeng in early 1980 said that she had found a few dozen people who claimed to be descended from Jews, but they were in all respects indistinguishable from the other Chinese inhabitants of

the city. Sadly, this is what the once vibrant Jewish community of Kaifeng had come to.

#### Postscript

There are lessons for all of us to learn from the history of the Jews of Kaifeng, the most important being what can lead to assimilation and how it can be prevented. At a certain point in their history, the Jews of Kaifeng lacked any real knowledge of Judaism. They had no religious leaders who could instruct them in Judaism. This lack of Torah education, combined with the openness of Chinese society, led the Jews of Kaifeng to become more Chinese than Jewish, resulting in the demise of this Jewish community.

Today, we also live in an open society. If we want our children to remain Torah-true Jews, we must be sure that they receive an excellent Torah education. This, however, may not be enough. Even someone who possesses a good knowledge of *Yahadus* may not be immune to the temptations of the outside world. Thus, we must always be on our guard regarding the opportunities that are offered to us, and, it may well be, that we have to forgo some of these opportunities to insure our commitment to Judaism.

#### Post Postscript

The reader should not think that the story of the Jews of Kaifeng has ended. Amazingly, some of the descendants of Kaifeng's Jews have recently shown renewed interest in their Jewish heritage. In recent years, a few hundred of them have immigrated to Israel and converted *k'halachah*, living their lives as observant Jews. One such person is Shoshana Rebecca Li, a descendant of the Jewish community of Kaifeng, China, who made *aliyah* a few years ago. On January 28, 2008, she married Ami Emmanuel, an American who had also made *aliyah*.<sup>VI</sup> A video clip taken during the wedding shows a *chasanah* that conforms to all aspects of *halachah*, including a *mechitzah* that separates men and women.<sup>VII</sup>

The spark of Judaism may be faint and nearly extinguished, but one can never know when it may ignite and again burn brightly.

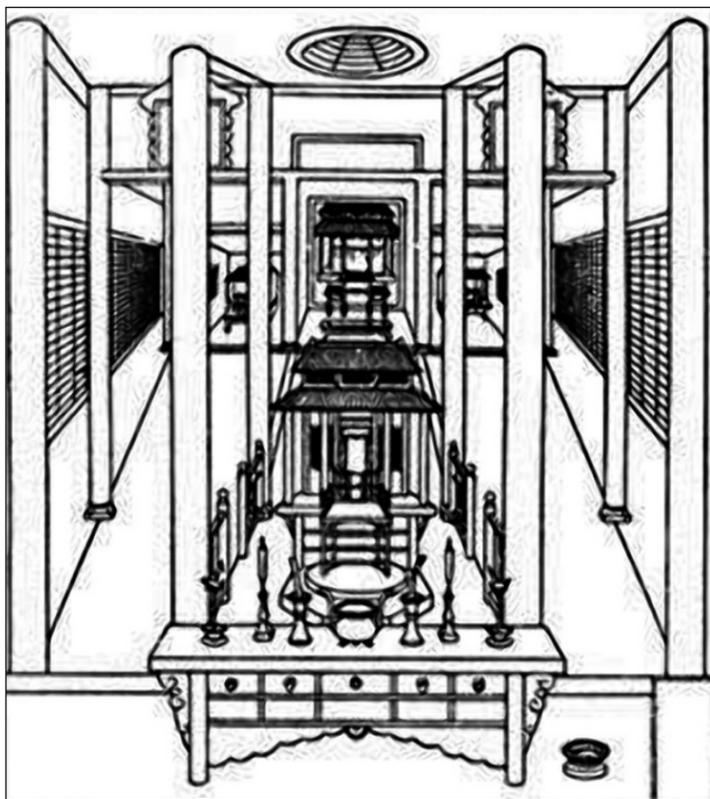
<sup>i</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from *The Jewish Encyclopedia, China*. Ktav Publishing Company, New York, 1905, pages 33-38.

<sup>ii</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes in this section are from *Acts of Faith, A Journey to the Fringes of Jewish Identity, The Assimilation of the Chinese Jews*, by Dan Ross, Schocken Books, New York 1984 pages 167-192.

<sup>iii</sup> "Jewish Assimilation: The Case of Chinese Jews" by Song Nai Rhee, *The Journal of Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1973 #1, page 117.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.* page 121.

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Interior of the synagogue at K'ai-Fung-Foo, China.

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