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## ARE THERE REALLY JEWS IN CHINA?

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*The Renewed Interest in Chinese Jewry / The State of the Kaifeng Community / Remnants of the Jewish Refugees / "Foreign Friends" / Jews on Sojourn / The Jewish Presence in East Asia and the Pacific*

### *The Renewed Interest in Chinese Jewry*

Since the opening of China to Western tourism, there has been a renewed interest in the Chinese Jews; a bit of Jewish exotica which resurfaces in the West from time to time and has been the subject of at least three books in the past three years. (Because of its unusual nature, more has been written about the historically insignificant Jewish community of Kaifeng than about the Jewish communities of Chicago or Moscow.) Most recently, *Time Magazine* had a full page article on the Chinese Jews of Kaifeng which effectively anointed them full-fledged Jews seeking to preserve their Jewish heritage.

In May, I had occasion to be in China to lecture at the Chinese Academy of the Social Sciences, an official government research institute that combines the functions

of the Brookings Institution with those of government-sponsored centers for research into matters of policy concern. I was specially invited to lecture on "The Organizational Dynamics of American Jewry" before a group from the Academy's Institute on World Religions, at their request. This gave me an opportunity to meet with Professor Gao Wangezhi, the head of the Christianity section of that Institute, under which the study of Judaism is subsumed. His own principal interest is Jewish studies, especially the study of the Jews in China. Among his publications on the subject is an article in Chinese on the origins of the Jewish people, published in the Institute's journal, and several articles on the history of the Jews in China.

I also met with Professor Zhao, one of

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the vice-presidents of the Academy, himself a scholar of the philosophy of religion and interested in Jewish thought. I talked with Sidney Shapiro, a Brooklyn Jew who settled in China in 1947 to participate in the Chinese revolution and has since become a Chinese citizen and has raised a Chinese family. Since resurfacing in the West a decade ago, he has become a link between China and world Jewry. Lastly, I visited with various Americans, Jewish and non-Jewish, stationed in China at the American Embassy.

Needless to say, one of the major questions which I raised was, to what extent are there Jews in China? And, if there are any, who are they? What follows is I believe, the best available answer to these questions; one which accurately reflects the current situation.

#### *The State of the Kaifeng Community*

There are four groups of Jews, or people of Jewish descent in China. The first are the so-called Chinese Jews of Kaifeng, now estimated at some 100 families totalling approximately 500 people. The city of Kaifeng, located approximately 300 miles from Beijing, contains the remnants of a Jewish community which flourished in the city from about the ninth to the seventeenth centuries, and which continued to be identifiably Jewish until the 1840s. The origins of the community are unclear, although they appear to be derived from an invitation extended by a Sung Dynasty emperor to a group of Jews to settle and manufacture cotton fabrics in Kaifeng, which at that time was the imperial capital. Approximately 1000 Jews responded as a group and formed a community, which reached its peak in the Middle Ages, when Jews from Western and Southern Asia (principally Iran, Afghanistan and India of today) were actively involved in the China trade. They settled in at least six other cities throughout China, including Beijing in the seventeenth century.

Of those communities, only Kaifeng Jewry flourished sufficiently to survive for a millennium, preserving some traces of their Jewishness until their synagogue was destroyed by an earthquake in the 1840s and the last of them assimilated. The only remnants of the community today are a knowledge of the site of the synagogue, upon which another building now stands; a stele from the Middle Ages with inscriptions of major events in the history of

the community carved into it, but no longer legible; and a practice, still preserved by some, of avoiding the eating of pork. The surviving records and artifacts of the community have long since been transferred to Britain or the United States. I myself have seen one of the community's two surviving Torah scrolls in the Hebrew Union College library in Cincinnati. There are substantial records of the community's existence, compiled or written by Europeans, since the Kaifeng Jews were discovered by the Jesuits in the sixteenth century.

Beginning with the settlement of Jews in Shanghai, Canton, and Hong Kong in the nineteenth century, some efforts were made to bring the Jews of Kaifeng back into the Jewish fold, but all of these came to naught. In my opinion, based upon the experiences of similar Jewish populations in other parts of the world which had also acquired an indigenous cast over the centuries and appeared racially different, these local Jews, living in a xenophobic environment, were afraid to identify with any foreigners. As a result, the Jews themselves hastened the process of their assimilation into the general society. Still the facts of their assimilation are murky. Some became "simply Chinese," as Professor Gao described them, but most became "white Moslems," who did not eat pork but did not practice traditional Islam either. To avoid pork in China is to set oneself truly apart and, in a civilization where organized religion is virtually unknown, this leaves many questions unanswered.

In any case, it would be hard to claim the Chinese of Jewish descent in Kaifeng today as Jews. At the same time, as the result of their new contacts with Western Jewry, there has been a revival of local interest in their own heritage. Two of the senior members of the community are now seeking to establish a museum of Chinese Jewish history in Kaifeng. Since there are virtually no Jewish artifacts or documents remaining in the city, even if they are successful, they will have to rely upon facsimiles of the originals now spread around the world.

They do have the enthusiastic backing of the Kaifeng municipal government, whose leaders envision such a museum as a major tourist attraction. The Chinese have caught on to the high percentage of Jewish tourists in China and have noticed that the American Jewish Congress is a major sponsor of China tours. It is not unreasonable for the people of

Kaifeng to expect that a substantial portion of the Jewish tourists would come to Kaifeng to see a Jewish museum. On the other hand, they still have not received the necessary clearance from the central government which is acting very cautiously, perhaps out of fear of offending the Arabs, nor do they have any funds. They are attempting to raise some money with the help of an American Jew temporarily residing in China as an English teacher, but have apparently made no real progress.

The museum is the only plan they have for reviving a formal Jewish presence in Kaifeng. There are no plans to rebuild the synagogue, since the site is otherwise occupied. At the same time, they are seeking recognition for the Jews as China's ninety-seventh recognized nationality, which would bring them many benefits, not the least of which would be an exemption from the severe restrictions on childbearing, which allow Han Chinese (the group which comprises 93 percent of the Chinese population) couples only one child.

Despite all of these obstacles, this observer would hazard a guess that some of these 500 Kaifeng Jews will indeed become Jewish over the next several decades, because the Jews of the West will make them into Jews. Once discovered, they will be pursued in one way or another until they and their neighbors become so conscious of their "Jewishness" that the deed will be done even if it will not be halakhically recognized.

While in China, I heard from Professor Gao that Rabbi Joshua Stampfer of Portland, Oregon, had brought one of the girls of Kaifeng to Portland to study and return to Judaism; a report subsequently confirmed in the *New York Times* in June of this year. In the meantime, there are at least some people in China who want to study the historical records of Jews who settled in the country prior to modern times. There is likely to be more of that as well.

#### ***Remnants of the Jewish Refugees***

Just as the Jews of Kaifeng were disappearing as Jews, China received a new wave of Jewish settlement — Sephardi merchants from the countries bordering on the Arabian Sea who accompanied the British to Hong Kong, Shanghai, Tientsin and other cities opened to foreigners in those years. Jewish communities of several hundred people were formed

in each of the first three cities. They were joined by a larger migration of Jewish refugees during the period from the turn of the century to World War II.

Thousands of Jews fleeing Russia, the upheavals of World War I, and Nazism found their way to China. They established communities in such places as Harbin, Tientsin, Mukden and Shanghai. For nearly half a century, Jewish life flourished in those communities, reaching a peak population of over 30,000. A *kehillah* (a formal Jewish community organization) was formed in Shanghai, and for a few years, there were even yeshivot in the city, established by refugees from Nazism who left as soon as World War II ended.

After the Chinese Communist takeover in 1949, there was a mass exodus of these refugees, particularly to Israel, Australia, and North America. The communities were dissolved, leaving British-ruled Hong Kong as the only Chinese city with an organized Jewish life. By the early 1960s, only two Jews remained on the books in Shanghai out of a community of 20,000. The Joint Distribution Committee knew of a diminishing handful of others in other cities. It seemed that all the others emigrated.

With the reopening of China in the 1920s, occasional Jews from Shanghai were found, mainly women who had married Chinese or Russian non-Jews and had stayed behind with their husbands. Most of them are now widowed and living out their remaining years in obscurity. There are probably no more than a dozen such people, if that many. One example is Israel Epstein, who was one of the leading English propagandists for Communist China until his retirement. He was brought to China from Poland at the age of two by his refugee parents and "grew up with the country."

#### ***"Foreign Friends"***

A third group of Jews in China consists of the "foreign friends," people who came from the West in the 1940s, particularly from North America, to join the Communist revolution. While these foreign friends were by no means all Jewish a large percentage were. Those who stayed acquired Chinese citizenship, married local women, and settled down to endure the trials and tribulations of the post-revolutionary generation. Today, a handful of

them still remain,

One of them is Sidney Shapiro, who acquired some notoriety in the Jewish world because of the book he edited on *Jews in Old China*, which was published in New York, and because of his efforts to be the link between China and world Jewry. Shapiro, who has almost a stereotypical Brooklyn manner about him, makes bagels and lox at home; has visited the United States several times since former President Richard Nixon opened Chinese-American relations in 1971; and pursues the study of the Jews of China as an avocation.

### *Jews on Sojourn*

The largest group of actual Jews in China are transients. They are temporarily stationed in the country either in foreign embassies as members of the foreign diplomatic corps--particularly that of the United States--or in connection with business interests and technical assistance programs. There also are a few who come individually for brief periods of time under contracts to teach English or to provide some other such service. Again, we have no accurate count, but there are likely to be at least 200 such Jews in China at any given time. They include such people as the Second Secretary of the U.S. Embassy for Cultural Affairs in Beijing, the Consul For Cultural Affairs at the Consulate General in Shenyang (formerly Mukden), and an undetermined number of Israelis who are reported to be in China providing technical assistance in agriculture. In several cases, sojourners have married Chinese partners, some of whom have converted to Judaism.

It is these Jews who provide whatever organized Jewish life exists in China, notably an annual Passover Seder and some kind of Kol Nidre service on Yom Kippur eve. In every case, these are ad hoc affairs, organized by some member of the "Jewish Community," at his or her initiative and reaching out to those Jews who happen to be in the vicinity. Thus Ruth Ann Kurtzbauer, Second Secretary of the U.S. Embassy, organized a Seder in Beijing this year in her apartment in which 50 people participated, 35 of them Jewish. Matzot were sent in from the United States, and there were enough people present with sufficiently traditional backgrounds to conduct an American-style Seder.

### *The Jewish Presence in East Asia and the Pacific*

If none of this adds up to much, it is only another reflection of how thoroughly Jews are absent from East Asia. There are approximately two billion people in the area from the Sino-Russian border to Singapore and eastward to Hawaii. In all of that vast area, there are no more than five permanent Jewish communities: Tokyo and Kobe in Japan; Manila in the Philippines; Hong Kong; and Singapore, with a total of less than 2,000 Jews among them. Moreover, only Hong Kong and Singapore have had any significant Jewish presence in modern history. That is because both are new cities, established in the nineteenth century by the British, that attracted Sephardi Jews from the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea regions. The only other Jewish concentrations in the Asian-Pacific region are the 70,000 Jews of Australia and the 5,000 Jews in Hawaii. Jews from both communities are in the process of forging contacts with the other countries of the Pacific rim. If those contacts develop, no doubt in time there will be permanent Jewish settlers in China who wish to retain their Jewish identity and connections. But, for the moment, the Jews of China remain something between an exotic memory and a transient whisper.

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*Daniel J. Elazar, president of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, recently completed a month long journey in the Far East where he lectured in China, the Phillipines, and Australia. This is the first of several reports which he has prepared as a result of this trip.*