

Jews in China: Legends, History and New Perspectives

By PAN Guang

Jews in Ancient China: The Case of Kaifeng

It was during the Tang Dynasty (around the 7th - 8th Century) that the earliest groups of Jews came to China via the overland Silk Road. Others then may come by sea to the coastal areas before moving inland. A few scholars believe that Jews came to China as early as the Han Dynasty (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.) — some even go so far as to place their arrival earlier, during the Zhou Dynasty (around the 6th Century B.C.) — though there have been no archaeological discoveries that would prove such claims. After entering China, Jews lived in many cities and areas, but it was not until in the Song Dynasty (960-1279) that the Kaifeng Jewish Community formed.

In the Northern Song Dynasty, a group of Jews came to the then capital Dongjing (now Kaifeng, as it will be referred to below). They were warmly received by the authorities and allowed to live in Kaifeng as Chinese while keeping their own traditions and religious faith. Thereafter, they enjoyed, without prejudice, the same rights and treatment as the Han peoples in matters of residence, mobility, employment, education, land transactions, religious beliefs and marriage. In such a safe, stable and comfortable environment, Jews soon demonstrated their talents in business and finance, achieving successes in commerce and trade and becoming a rich group in Kaifeng. At the same time, their religious activities increased. In 1163, the Jews in Kaifeng built a synagogue right in the heart of the city. After more than 100 years, with the support of the government of the Yuan Dynasty (1279 – 1368), the synagogue was renovated. By the Ming Dynasty (1368 – 1644), the Jewish community in Kaifeng reached its most prosperous period. It included more than 500 families, with a total population at about 4,000 – 5,000. The Jews' social status also continued to rise. At that time, there were Jews who had become government officials through imperial examinations, some had grown extraordinarily wealthy through business, some had become skilled craftsmen or hard-working prosperous farmers, and still others doctors and clergymen. At the same time, the Jews were almost unconsciously becoming assimilated into the mainstream of Chinese Confucian culture. They took part in the imperial examinations, changed their Hebrew names to Chinese ones, used Chinese for speech and study, started to intermarry with other nationalities, dressed like Chinese, and absorbed Chinese habits and traditions while their own gradually faded away. In 1642, Kaifeng Synagogue was destroyed and many religious scriptures lost in a major flood of the Yellow River. The Jews in Kaifeng rebuilt their synagogue in 1663 and recovered some of the scriptures, but the number of the Jewish community had decreased to less than 2,000.

By the late 17th century, the Jewish community had essentially lost contact

with the Jewish world outside. By the mid-19th century, the Kaifeng Synagogue lay in ruins, and the Jews in Kaifeng had lived without a rabbi for many years. They could not read Hebrew and had ceased performing religious rituals. Just around that time, Western missionaries “discovered” the descendants of Jews in Kaifeng, provoking a frenzy of research by Europeans and Americans into the Kaifeng Jews. Later, Jews in Shanghai also tried in vain to help the descendants of Jews in Kaifeng to restore Jewish traditions. In the end, the Jewish community in Kaifeng was integrated into Chinese culture.

From Baghdad to Hong Kong and Shanghai: The Sephardi

Experience in China

Sephardi Jews arrived in China as a result of the Opium War and the subsequent upsurge of trade with Britain. Coming to China from British-controlled places such as Baghdad, Bombay, and Singapore, most of them were merchants and businessmen with British citizenship. Originally from Baghdad, the Sassoon family first shifted their operations eastward to India and then went on to become the first Jews to establish firms and engage in business in Hong Kong and Shanghai. In the wake of the Sassoons, other Sephardi merchants originally from Baghdad such as Harpoons and Kadoories came to China to seek their fortunes. As external trade centers open to foreign countries, Hong Kong and Shanghai became their leading bases for business. They soon revealed their commercial talents, taking advantage of their traditional contacts with various British dependencies as well as the favorable geographic location of Shanghai and Hong Kong to develop a thriving import – export trade from which they quickly amassed a great amount of wealth. They then turned around and invested this wealth in real estate, finance, public works and manufacturing, gradually becoming the most active foreign consortium in Shanghai and Hong Kong, whose influence spread throughout China and the entire Far East.

They were also engaged in public welfare and charity work within the community, building synagogues, establishing schools, and providing aid to Russian Jewish immigrants and European Jewish refugees. They supported the Zionist movement, and, in order to safeguard their own interests, occasionally became involved in Chinese politics. Some of them like Mr. Silas Aaron Harpoon also patronized Chinese arts and culture. Basically, they maintained friendly relations with the social and political groups in China.

But the Sephardi merchants’ interests in China sustained great losses following the Japanese invasion of China in 1937, and when Japan occupied Shanghai and Hong Kong after the Pearl Harbor Incident in December of 1941, the Sephardi merchants lost all their property in those occupied territories. After the war, with the outbreak of the Chinese civil war and the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the Sephardi merchants gradually transferred their

property to Hong Kong and abroad. After 1949, they continued to forge ahead, taking advantage of the Hong Kong's position as the main trading channel between China and the West. Since the implementation of reform policies and the “opening” of China to foreign businesses after “Cultural Revolution”, many Sephardi merchants have once again begun to make investments on the Chinese mainland, promising that their relations with China will continue to further strengthen and expand.

The Second Homeland: Russian (Ashkenazi) Jews in China

Unlike the Sephardic Jews, Russian (Ashkenazi) Jews came to China not mainly for trade, but rather because of rising anti-Semitism in Russia and Eastern Europe from the 1880s onward. This wave led to the migration of millions of Russian Jews to North America, and tens of thousands also crossed Siberia, reaching northeast China, Inner Mongolia, and further to southern parts of China. During this period, the construction of China Eastern Railway, the expansion of Russian power in China, the Russo-Japanese War, and the two Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 all propelled the migration of Russian Jews to China. At beginning, they mainly lived in Harbin and neighboring areas, where they formed the largest Jewish community in the Far East. After Japan's invasion of northeast China, they moved southward and settled in communities in cities such as Shanghai, Tianjin and Qingdao.

Most of these Russian Jews initially lived in poverty, able only to eke out a meager living by running small businesses. Later they rose to the middle class through their own efforts. Because they greatly outnumbered the Sephardic Jews, they became an active force in community activities and Zionist movement. Some of them were technicians and intellectuals, and contributed to China's economic and cultural development by working in enterprises and organizations set up by Chinese, Russians, Sephardic Jews and other foreigners.

Long-resident Russian Jews looked upon China as their second motherland. Some studied hard and were integrated into Chinese culture, and played a positive role in promoting Chinese-Jewish and Chinese-Russian cultural exchanges. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, a number of Russians Jews stayed on and some of them got USSR passport. Not until the beginning of the Cultural Revolution did the last group of Russian Jews leave.

Haven for Holocaust Victims from Nazi Europe

While the Nazis were conducting their furious persecution and slaughter of European Jews seventy years ago, many persons upheld justice and boldly rescued the Jewish victims of the Nazi terror. At the same time, however, the governments of many nations were imposing strict restrictions on the immigration of Jewish refugees. Especially after 1938, almost all countries closed

their doors to the desperate Jews. Looking back at what was done to the Jews by the “civilized world”, we, the people of China, are proud of the fact that when Jewish people were on the verge of death and struggling for survival, the Chinese city of Shanghai provided them with a vital haven and all possible forms of relief. From 1933 to 1941, Shanghai accepted over thirty thousand European Jewish refugees. Excluding those who went on from Shanghai to other countries, by the time of the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941 the city was sheltering 20,000 - 25,000 Jewish refugees. According to Simon Wiesenthal Center, Shanghai took in more Jewish refugees than Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and India combined. Before Pearl Harbor, Sephardic Jews, Russian Jews and Jewish refugees from Nazi Europe in Shanghai amounted to over thirty thousand, forming the largest Jewish community in the Far East. The prosperous community had its own communal association, synagogues, schools, hospitals, clubs, cemeteries, chamber of commerce, more than 50 publications, active political groups (from Utopian Socialism to Revisionist Zionism) and a small fighting unit - Jewish Company of Shanghai Volunteer Corps., which was at the time the world's sole legal Jewish regular army.

The Nazis and their accomplices not only killed six million Jews in Europe but also seriously menaced Jewish communities outside Europe, including the Jewish communities in China and especially in Shanghai. In July of 1942, eight months after the outbreak of the Pacific War, Colonel Josef Meisinger, chief representative of the Gestapo in Japan, arrived in Shanghai and proposed a “Final Solution in Shanghai” to the Japanese occupation authorities. Although the “Meisinger Plan” was not put into effect due to differences between the Japanese and German governments’ attitudes toward Jews, the Japanese authorities proclaimed a “Designated Area for Stateless Refugees”, ordering refugees who had arrived in Shanghai from Europe after 1937 to move into the area within a month. The pressure of Nazi Germany and the vagaries of Japanese policy toward the Jews kept Shanghai’s Jews in difficult, unpredictable, and sometimes dangerous straits for nearly four years. But, in the end, almost all Shanghai’s Jews, not only Central European Jewish refugees but also the Sephardic congregation and Russian Jews, survived the Holocaust and the war, mainly depending upon their own mutual aid as well as the great support from American Jews and Chinese people.

Like “Schindler”, “Wallenberg” and “Sugihara”, the name “Shanghai” has now become synonymous with “rescue” and “haven” in the annals of the Holocaust.

The Historical Pages of Traditional Friendship between the Chinese and Jewish People

The Jews who came to China were nurtured in some cases by the breadth and profundity of Chinese culture; likewise, they with their own cultural

traditions had an influence on Chinese society. The important point is that although many Jews inhabited China from ancient to modern times, no indigenous anti-Semitic activity has ever taken place on Chinese soil. Why has China never witnessed any spontaneous and native anti-Semitic activity? I think the main reasons are as follows:

1. Anti-Semitic originated from deep-rooted religious prejudice, which is more conspicuous in Christian Europe. However, as a whole, Chinese are influenced by the Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, and therefore this kind of strong anti-Semitic fanaticism with deep religious bias does not exist in China, and never has.

2. From the cultural point of view, Chinese and Jewish cultures share a lot in common. For example, both highly emphasize the family tie function and educational value, and although both have absorbed various exotic cultures, their central core has never changed since birth. On a stone monument erected in 1489, the Kaifeng Jews wrote: "Our religion and Confucianism differ only in minor details. In mind and deed both respect Heaven's Way, venerate ancestors, are loyal to sovereigns and ministers, and filial to parents. Both call for harmony with wives and children, respect for rank, and for making friends." All these contributed to the prevention of the impact of anti-Semitism on Chinese people.

3. Since the middle of last century, the Chinese people suffered much devastation as the Jews did. Nearly 35 million Chinese were killed and wounded by the Japanese fascists during wartime. Anti-Chinese atrocities which happened in some parts of the world in the past several centuries and even in Indonesia in 1998 remind us of similar anti-Jewish outrages which occurred in Europe in the past many centuries, especially between 1933 and 1945. This shared experience engendered in the Chinese people a deep sympathy for Jewish people and made them oppose firmly any kind of anti-Semitism.

What is especially worth mentioning is mutual respect, sympathy and support between Jews and Chinese people. As early as December 14, 1918, in his letter to Mr. E. S. Kadoorie, Mr. Chen Lu, Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Chinese government expressed that China endorses the establishment of a Jewish national home in Palestine. On April 24, 1920, Mr. N.E.B. Ezra, another leader of Shanghai Jewish community, received a letter from Dr. Sun Yat-sen, founder of the Republic of China. In his letter, Dr. Sun wrote: " All lovers of Democracy cannot help but support the movement to restore your wonderful and historic nation, which has contributed so much to the civilization of the world and which rightfully deserves an honorable place in the family of nations." Soon after Hitler's anti-Semitic campaign started, Madame Sun Yet-sen (Ms. Song Qingling) headed a delegation to meet with the German Consul in Shanghai and lodged a strong protest against Nazi atrocities. Her delegation included all the important leaders of The China League for Civil Rights. As the materials recently discovered indicate, Dr. Feng Shan Ho, Chinese Consul

General in Vienna, Austria 1938 to 1940 was one of the first diplomats to save Jews by issuing them visas from the Holocaust. Also, we found some documents which indicate in 1939, the Chinese government planned to set aside territory in Yunnan for the resettlement of Jewish refugees from Europe. For various reasons, the plan was never carried out.

When thousands of Jewish refugees arrived in Shanghai between 1937 and 1941, millions of Shanghai residents themselves became refugees after the Japanese occupation of Shanghai. However, in spite of this, the natives of Shanghai tried their best to help Jewish refugees in various ways. In the hardest days in Hongkew from 1943 to 1945, Jewish refugees and their Chinese neighbors enjoyed mutual help and shared weal and woe. They, though largely separated by linguistic and cultural barriers, found themselves bound together by mutual suffering.

I should also emphasize here that Jews in China also did their best to support the Chinese national-democratic movement and resistance against Japanese aggression. Some Jewish friends joined the anti-Japanese war or cooperated with the Chinese Underground, even gave their lives for the cause of the liberation of the Chinese people. I could give many examples here with deep respect. The well-known Morris "Two-Gun" Cohen, was aide-de-camp to Dr. Sun Yat-sen, 1922-1925. Following Sun's death, he worked for a series of Chinese leaders and rose to become a Jewish general in the Chinese Army. Mr. Hans Shippe, a writer and reporter from Germany, was the first Jewish volunteer to fall in battle on China's soil during her war against Japanese aggression. He left Shanghai and joined Chinese Army in 1939. On November 30, 1941, several days before Pearl Harbor, He died with a gun in his hand in an engagement with Japanese troops in Shandong province. Chinese people erected a monument for him near the battlefield. I should also mention Dr. Jacob Rosenfeld. He came to Shanghai from Austria as a Jewish refugee in 1939 and left Shanghai to join the anti-Japanese war in 1941. He served in the ranks of the Chinese army for ten years, obtaining the highest rank of Commander of the Medical Corps as a foreigner. Had he not died of a heart attack abruptly in Tel Aviv in 1952, it was speculated he would have been appointed high-level officer of Ministry of Health of the PRC.

“Jews from China” and Jews in today’s China

After the Second World War, China descended into civil war, and, for a variety of reasons, a number of Jews left China. Following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, many Jews continued to live and work in peace on Chinese soil, and it was not until the outbreak of the “Cultural Revolution” that they were forced to leave. Jewish communities have continuously thrived in Hong Kong and Taiwan as part of China. Today, “Chinese Jews” live throughout the world. While their natures, pursuits, and occupations differ, they nevertheless have a common point—recalling China as their “home” and

consider themselves “old China hands.” In order not to forget the memorable years they spent in China, they have established associations that frequently hold events and issue various publications.

Since the introduction of China’s policies of reform and openness, they have returned with their children to their “homecity” in order to seek their roots, visit old friends and travel. Some have come to China to invest and do business, participating in their former-home’s new upsurge of development. After his revisit to China in 1978 after an absence of thirty years, Lord Lawrence Kadoorie wrote: “We are grateful to the country where we grew up.” He met Mr. Deng Xiaoping during his visit to Beijing in 1985. When Michael Blumenthal, U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, returned to Shanghai in 1979, he showed off his old Shanghai haunts in Hongkou to the press. One change he noted since he arrived in Shanghai from Germany in 1939: “There are now no people dying in the street.” Ambassador Yosef Tekoah (Tukachinsky) said at a banquet when he revisited China in 1989: “The most wonderful time of the life is youth. I spent the time in China. Now I am back with the purpose of looking for something that is the best.” The late Shaul Eisenberg came to China as a refugee during the Second World War and later went on to become a noted businessman. He actively invested in Shanghai enterprises, establishing, for example, the Y.P. Glass Factory. During his life, he energetically supported the project for establishing Pudong Diamond Exchange Center in Shanghai which is now coming true.

In 1992, China and Israel established diplomatic relations, further encouraging the return flow of Jews to China. At present, Beijing and Shanghai have begun to see the emergence of new Jewish communities made up of businesspeople, technical experts, diplomats, and foreign students. Since Hong Kong’s return to China, the Jewish community there has once more come to life.

Jews in China: A Hot Topic of Academic Research and Public Interest

Since the mid-20th century there has been a steady increase of books on Jews in China, and during the 1980s and 1990s this subject became an international “hot topic.” Particularly since the establishment of Sino-Israeli diplomatic relations in 1992, academic conferences have regularly been devoted to the subject and a large number of books on the topic have appeared. This enthusiasm for the subject is not limited to academic circles but extends to the mass media, television and movies. To a certain degree, interest in the subject carries social and political connotations. First, this “Oriental” page in the history of the Jewish people has academic value in the fields of Jewish studies, sinology, history, religious studies, ethnic studies, cultural anthropology, and philosophy. Moreover, this topic has important practical significance in

opposing racism and fascism, furthering friendly relations and cultural harmony between all peoples, and preserving peace in the world. Since the subtext of this topic is the special friendship between Chinese and Jews, it also plays a unique role in furthering the continued opening-up of China and developing relations between China and nations like Israel and the United States.

On behalf of the Israeli people, late Yitzhak Rabin, when he visited Shanghai in 1993 expressed his heartfelt thanks to Shanghai for providing a haven for Jewish refugees from Nazi Europe. During his visit to Shanghai in 1995, the Austrian President Thomas Klestil paid a special visit to Hongkew (today's Hongkou) to lay a wreath in memory of the Holocaust victims from Austria. In 1998, U.S. First Lady Hilary Clinton and U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright visited Shanghai's Ohel Rachel Synagogue. Israeli President Ezer Weizmann paid a 1999 visit to a photo exhibit at Shanghai's Ohel Rachel Synagogue, where he once again thanked the Chinese people for rescuing Jewish refugees. In 1999, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroder visited Shanghai's Ohel Rachel Synagogue. His visit is especially significant, because the majority of Jewish refugees in Shanghai during wartime came from the Nazi Germany and its occupied area. When the short visit was coming to an end, Mr. Schroder wrote in the distinguished visitor's book: "A poet once wrote 'death is envoy coming from Germany'. We know that many persecutees found a haven in Shanghai. We never forget this history. Today, we are here to show our appreciation and praise to those who provided every possible relief for the persecutees."

These pages in history, composed on Chinese soil by many ordinary Chinese and Jews and cataloging the traditions of Sino-Jewish friendship, form a chapter in the history of human progress that will forever shine.

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