

Introduction

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At a theological school in Jerusalem, five Chinese women in their 20s are intensively studying the Hebrew language and Judaism in preparation for formal conversion. In February 2016, they arrived in Israel from Kaifeng (

cede Hong Kong and open ports on the east coast to foreign trade. Like their predecessors in the Tang dynasty, they came in search of business opportunities made possible by this new foreign presence; they became rich from the import of opium and textiles and the export of tea, silk and vegetable oil and later from property, manufacturing and transport.

The new arrivals, in Hong Kong, Shanghai, Tianjin and other ports, set up communities similar to those in Europe: they built their own synagogues, schools, cemeteries and social institutions. They invited rabbis to lead religious life and married within the community; their social interaction with Chinese was limited. Mostly Sephardic, they came originally from Baghdad and had moved to cities in British India. Sephardic Jews emerged as a community in the Iberian peninsula around a thousand years ago.

From the late 19th century, another group of Jews – Ashkenazis from Russia – arrived in China, this time in the northeast region of Manchuria. Ashkenazis are descendants of Jews who settled in Europe. They helped to create an international metropolis in Harbin; the community peaked at 25,000 in the 1920s. Like their brothers in Shanghai and Hong Kong, they built synagogues, schools and other social institutions and invited rabbis to guide them. They maintained the religious life and laws which they had brought from Russia and Eastern Europe.

The third group of Jews to arrive in China during the modern era were refugees from Nazi Europe. They started to arrive in the mid-1930s and reached 30,000, before the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 cut off the last escape route. They found refuge in Shanghai at a time

when most countries in the world had closed their doors to the Jews. This is the most remarkable – and heroic – chapter in this book. Many came through visas provided by diplomats from China, Japan – and possibly Manchukuo – against the orders of their superiors.

The refugees were given entry into the international concession of Shanghai because the foreign officials who ran it kept the door open. The governments of the Republic of China and Imperial Japan, the invader, both welcomed the Jews; each proposed a designated area for them to settle and develop.

Because of the intensity of the war raging across China, neither “homeland” came to pass; but the proposals alone showed the esteem in which the Jews were held by the two governments – at the very moment when the Nazis and their allies in Europe were implementing “the final solution”.

In Shanghai, the refugees lived in crowded and difficult conditions, cheek by jowl with thousands of Chinese, many also refugees and living on the edge of survival. Despite their own troubles, the Chinese treated these strangers who had suddenly arrived in their midst with kindness and courtesy.

The Japanese who controlled Shanghai from December 1941 refused to implement the demand of their Nazi allies for the mass extermination of Jews. This is the most astonishing – perhaps we can say miraculous – chapter of this story. A Jew living in most countries of continental Europe

faced the daily threat of arrest and deportation to a death camp – but not in China and Japan.

During its occupation of the international concession from December 1941 to August 1945, Japan interned Jews because they held passports of “enemy” Allied countries, not because they were Jewish.

In the Pacific War from 1937 to 1945, millions were killed and injured – but the Jews were not targets and largely were spared. For them, Shanghai, Tianjin and Kobe were safer than Paris, Amsterdam and Vienna.

In the 10 years after the end of World War Two, nearly all the Jews left China – both the refugees and the long-term residents. They were driven out by the civil war between Nationalists and Communists, hyper-inflation and the policies of the new government after 1949 that nationalised private business and treated foreigners with suspicion. They left for the United States, Australia, Canada, South Africa and Israel, the new state established for them in May 1948. Only a small number returned to Russia or the countries in Europe from whence they had come.

A handful remained in China and devoted their lives to the services of the People’s Republic. The only exception was the British colony of Hong Kong that was excluded from the Communist revolution; the community there was able to continue its business, religious and social life as it had done since the colony was founded in 1842.

The door to the mainland opened again after the death of Mao Zedong and the reform policies of Deng Xiaoping from 1978. The government welcomed foreigners as investors, experts, teachers, industrialists and businessmen. Jewish communities formed again, first in Beijing and Shanghai and, as the economy developed, in other cities. Once they reached a certain size, they also invited rabbis and recreated the religious and social life they had enjoyed in their home countries.

Today there are an estimated 10,000 Jews living in the mainland, with an additional 5,000-6,000 in Hong Kong. Tens of thousands more come each year as tourists, business people and students. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) does not recognise Judaism as an “official religion” and has not given back to the community the synagogues they used before 1949. But it allows them their own religious and social life; it keeps a watchful eye on what they do and is happy that, unlike Christianity and Islam, they do not proselytise Chinese.

There is no anti-Semitism, neither official nor among the public. So Jews feel safer and more comfortable in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou than in Paris, Marseilles and many cities in Europe; they can wear a kippah without fear of being attacked or abused. China’s booming economy has created business opportunities they cannot find at home.

From its creation, the new state of Israel was eager to have diplomatic relations with China, one of five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council. But it took 42 years, until January 1992, before the two governments established such relations. This was because Mao chose to

ally with “revolutionary” and Arab Muslim countries. Beijing called Israel a “Zionist entity” and a “tool of imperialist aggression”.

The change came after its defeat by Vietnam during the invasion of spring 1979; Beijing sought the help of Israel to re-equip the outdated People’s Liberation Army. This opened the door to trade between the two countries but exchanges had to be conducted in secret because they contradicted Beijing’s public support for the Arab cause. Diplomatic relations also had to wait until the collapse of the Soviet Union, the biggest supporter of the Arab world.

Since 1992, relations have developed in a way no-one expected. In 2016, China was one of the biggest foreign investor in Israel, ahead of the United States. It is one of the principal sources of the venture capital which Israel’s thousands of high-technology start-ups require. China has become Israel’s third biggest trading partner and largest in Asia. Chinese companies are building large infrastructure projects in Israel and have acquired major Israeli firms. The government welcomes this investment, as a balance to capital from Europe and the U.S. and a way to win goodwill with a global superpower. But the welcome is not universal – critics say that China’s market remains inaccessible to most Israeli firms and are suspicious of the motives of Chinese firms answerable to the state. Is the country selling to a potential enemy high technology, its most precious asset?

Beijing has close military and commercial ties with countries that hate Israel, such as Iran, Syria and Yemen. In addition, the 25 years of

diplomatic relations have not produced a peace dividend for Israel – Beijing does not play an active role to solve the Middle East conflict, nor use its considerable influence with Iran and the Arab countries to broker a settlement.

In the historical context, the story of China is a happy one. Jewish history is long, complex and full of sadness. Primo Levi, a Holocaust survivor, wrote a statement that is etched on the walls of the Ort der Information (Place of Information) under the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin: “It happened, therefore it can happen again ...” A Jewish chemist and author, he wrote a book about his year as a prisoner in Auschwitz. He died in Turin in 1987, at the age of 67, after falling from a third-storey apartment landing; the coroner ruled his death a suicide. He was suffering from depression, in part because of the trauma of being a prisoner. Nobel laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said at the time: “Primo Levi died at Auschwitz forty years later”.

Against this sombre background, the history of the Jews in China is full of light. They never suffered from anti-Semitism at the hands of Chinese, neither during the Imperial era nor the Republican and Communist periods. The attacks they suffered in Harbin in the 1930s were at the hands of Russian fascists, who brought their prejudice with them, and their Japanese collaborators.

During the Tang and succeeding dynasties, the Jews enjoyed the same rights as Chinese citizens and could practice their religion freely. In the century from the arrival of the British in the 1840s and since the open-

door policy of 1978, the Jews in China have prospered in business and other fields and built their communities as they wished. Like Chinese, they suffered under the Japanese occupation in World War Two; and, like other foreigners, they decided to leave China during the Civil War and after the establishment of the PRC. But in neither case were they singled out.

“Chinese and Jewish cultures are the two oldest civilisations in the world and share a lot in common,” said Pan Guang, the most eminent Chinese specialist on the history of the Jews. “Both highly emphasise the value of family ties and education. Although both have absorbed various exotic cultures, their central core has never changed since the beginning.” (Note: “Jews and China – Legends, History and New Perspectives”, by Pan Guang, on website of Centre of Jewish Studies, Shanghai).

Asher Oser, Rabbi of the Ohel Leah synagogue in Hong Kong, put it more poetically: “I believe in God and the hand of providence. Sometimes, if we are lucky, we can see God's guiding hand, and the story of the Jews in China is one of those lucky times. We see God's guiding hand, we have seen providence.”

He also quoted the words of Salo Wittmayer Baron, one of the most distinguished Jewish historians of the 20th century. Baron was born in 1895 in Tarnow, Galicia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian empire and now Poland. Before the war, the town had 16,000 Jews but only 20 remained after the Holocaust. Baron survived because he moved to New York in the 1920s to become a professor. He lost his parents and

sister during the war. In an interview in 1975, he said: “Suffering is part of the destiny [of the Jews], but so is repeated joy as well as ultimate redemption.”

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Chapter
One

Jews arrive in China during the Tang Dynasty



The Jews first came to China in large numbers in the eighth century A.D., during the Tang dynasty (618-907), when it was the world's biggest and most advanced country. They came by land across Central Asia and by ship to the ports on the southeast coast, mainly Guangzhou. They lived in many cities, including Xian, Luoyang, Kaifeng, Guangzhou, Hangzhou, Ningbo, Quanzhou, Beijing and Nanjing.

They moved to China for the same reason as other foreign merchants did and do today, for business and commercial opportunities. Scholars report arrival of Jews much earlier, even during the Zhou dynasty (1,045-256 BC), but lack archaeological or written evidence for their presence.

During the Tang dynasty, China was the world's biggest economy and trading power. Its output accounted for about half of global GDP. It produced large quantities of goods for export, including tea, silk, lacquer ware, porcelain and silver.

The main trading port was Guangzhou, capital of Guangdong province. Living there to conduct this trade were tens of thousands of foreigners, including Jews; these groups had their own restaurants, community associations and places of worship.

The national capital was Changan (

In the Kaifeng Museum, there are rooms with pieces that show the Jewish presence in the city during the Ming period. These include a restored tablet from the synagogue and two tombstones. “The writing on these is evidence of the religious activities on the Jews of Kaifeng and of their political status, social position and living conditions,” said the *Overseas Chinese* magazine (

“They had equal rights and status with other residents of Kaifeng. The different dynasties treated them well and without discrimination. They could work in the government and prosper in business. In Europe, by comparison, they suffered discrimination in economy, politics and culture and were not treated equally. So, they were kept outside mainstream society. In China, their equal treatment naturally led them to assimilation.” (Note 5)

Just as the community was dying out, so westerners interested in Judaism arrived in China. Due to treaties that followed the two Opium Wars of the mid-19th century, the European powers won the right of their citizens to live in China. Among them were Christian missionaries. Some discovered the Jewish history of Kaifeng for the first time; intrigued by it, they began to do research.

In February 1866, an American missionary named William Alexander Parsons (WAP) Martin visited Kaifeng. He found the synagogue in ruins and stones from it in a ditch; of the eight families said to be Jewish, six had married Han Chinese and two Muslim Hui. These missionaries concluded that the community in Kaifeng was unable to speak or read Hebrew, did not perform religious rituals and had lost its Jewish character through assimilation and intermarriage.

The missionaries hoped to revive the interest of these “Jews” in the Bible and introduce the New Testament to them; but they found they had no interest. Nonetheless they marvelled that sons and daughters of Israel had reached this city, so far and remote from the Holy Land. While they

no longer practised the rites of their forefathers, they were aware that the ancestry made them different to the Chinese among whom they lived.

In 1900, the Jews of Shanghai sent a letter to their brothers in Kaifeng inviting them to visit. They arrived in March 1902. At a meeting on the evening of March 26, they were received for two hours by their Shanghai brethren.

“Questioned as to whether any of them knew anything of their religion, they said that, for a long period before the Taiping Rebellion, they were gradually declining and their faith was rapidly being forgotten.” The Taiping Rebellion was a 15-year (1850-1864) uprising that cost 20 million lives.

The Jews of Kaifeng said they did not observe any of the ordinances of the Jewish religion nor “the idolatrous practices of the heathen.” (Note 6)

There followed visits and contacts between the two sides, but the Shanghai Jews could not raise sufficient funds to rebuild the Kaifeng synagogue, mainly due to financial constraints.

In 1911, an uprising overthrew the Qing dynasty after more than 260 years; the Republic of China was born. The next year, the new government signed a land agreement with seven Jewish families in Kaifeng to build a synagogue. The next year the families sold the nearly 10 mu (0.7 hectares) of land to a Protestant church for 1,300 dollars (1,300

During censuses conducted by the Nationalist government, the members of the Kaifeng community were unable to provide written family records; their only memory was oral.

Making *Aliyah*

The state of Israel was founded on May 14, 1948 as a homeland for Jews throughout the world. It became a base for Zionist groups who believe it their duty to “bring home” members of the Jewish race scattered overseas. This is called in Hebrew *Aliyah*, meaning “ascent to Jerusalem”. The descendants of the community of Kaifeng could, therefore, apply to emigrate if they could prove their Jewish ancestry and convince the religious authorities in Israel that they were real Jews.

In 1949, a Communist government took power in China; it promoted atheism and recognised only five “official” religions; Judaism was not one of them. The entry of the People’s Republic of China on the northern side in the Korean War (1950-53) resulted in a western trade embargo and the freezing of relations with the western world for three decades. These conditions made it impossible for the community in Kaifeng to make contact with the Jewish world outside China, invite a rabbi from abroad and resume their religious life.

It was a “revolutionary” era, during which practice of religion was difficult, sometimes impossible. It was extremely hard for Chinese to obtain permission to leave the country. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), fanatical Red Guards made sustained attacks on all forms of

religious practice.

Contact with the outside world only became possible after the death of Mao Zedong (