

Among the Jewish Descendants of Kaifeng

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KAIFENG IS ABOUT THE SAME DISTANCE AND DIRECTION from Beijing that Knoxville, Tennessee, is from the District of Columbia. And there are other similarities between Kaifeng and Knoxville. Kaifeng has about five percent of greater Beijing's population and once enjoyed grander days. During the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127 C.E.), Kaifeng was the capital of China with well over one million people – more than twice its current population.¹ Today Kaifeng sits on a flat, intensely-farmed area near the Yellow River and has little or no industry. Its young people are being attracted to the nearby city of Zhengzhou, the capital of Henan Province, and beyond to Shanghai and Beijing.

No one knows for sure when Jews first came to Kaifeng or their origin. We know that they arrived sometime before 1163 C.E. because in that year they were given permission to build a synagogue.² Professor Xu Xin of Nanjing University, who interviewed many Jewish descendants in Kaifeng, says that the descendants trace their origin to Mesopotamia and the year 1090 C.E. when they were dislodged from their homes by ravaging Crusaders.³ Scholars, however, believe that the community was started by Jewish traders and merchants from Persia and India who began to travel overland to China along the Silk Road as well as by sea even prior to the Northern Song Dynasty.⁴

¹ Jiang Qingxiang and Xiao Guoliang, "Glimpses of the Urban Economy of Bianjing [Kaifeng], Capital of the Northern Song Dynasty," in *Jews in Old China: Studies by Chinese Scholars*, edited by Sidney Shapiro (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1984). Jiang and Xiao estimate the population during the Northern Song at one and one-third million (p. 106).

² Michael Pollack, *Mandarins, Jews and Missionaries: The Jewish Experience in the Chinese Empire* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1980), pp. 60, 267. Irene Eber, "Kaifeng Jews: The Sinification of Identity," in *The Jews of China: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Jonathan Goldstein (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1999), vol. 1, p. 23.

³ Xu Xin, *Legends of the Chinese Jews of Kaifeng* (New Jersey: KTAV Publishing, 1995), p. 4. [See also his more recent and more scholarly book, *The Jews of Kaifeng, China: History, Culture, and Religion* (Jersey City: KTAV Publishing, 2003).]

⁴ Pollack, *Mandarins*, pp. 266-267. According to Pollack, "it is generally agreed" that Jews reached Kaifeng between 960 and 1126 C.E. and that they came from Persia or Bokhara. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that Christian scholars favor the sea route followed by an overland march from the coast to Kaifeng. Still, as he farther points out, synagogue inscriptions hint at an Indian homeland, while synagogue liturgical texts point to a Yemenite background.

Wang Yisha, "The Descendants of the Kaifeng Jews," in *Jews in Old China*, p. 167. Wang thinks

Jews of Kaifeng during the early days of their settlement maintained close contact with the communities from which they came. They were a source of goods not otherwise obtainable in China. Kaifeng legend has it that one of the Song Emperors was so delighted with the multi-hued cotton cloth being sold by the seven newly arrived Jewish families that he encouraged them to stay and bestowed upon them his surname and the surnames of six of his ministers. Even today, the Jewish descendants living in Kaifeng have one of the surnames given them by the Emperor; these names are: Zhao, Li, Ai, Zhang, Gao, Jin, and Shi.⁵

The ouster of the foreign, Yuan (Mongol) Dynasty (1280-1367 C.E.) by the native, xenophobic, Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 C.E.) brought an end to trade with the Middle East and Europe via the Silk Route and brought isolation to the Kaifeng Jews. The world forgot about them; and except for their knowledge that their religion and customs originated in the Land of Israel and had adherents in many far-away places, they forgot the world outside of China. Their isolation from the West ended when, in 1605 C.E., a Kaifeng Jew named Ai Tian (in China, surnames come first), visited the Jesuit mission of Father Matteo Ricci in Beijing. Ai Tian had been told that there were foreigners in the mission who believed in one God and steadfastly maintained that they were not Muslims. He, therefore, assumed they were Jews, having never heard of Christianity. When he visited the mission, he interpreted the pictures that he saw on the wall as scenes from the Hebrew Bible. Mary, Jesus, and John the Baptist, he thought, were Rebecca and her two sons, Jacob and Esau. Ai also observed the likeness of four of Jesus' apostles on a wall of the chapel. With Jacob on his mind, Ai wondered aloud to Ricci whether the figures were four of Jacob's twelve sons. But Ricci knew instantly that he was speaking to a Jew, and he passed the information back to Rome. Thus, the Jews of Kaifeng were rediscovered by the West in 1605 C.E. by a Jesuit priest.⁶

it possible that Jews first came to China at the time of the Roman Empire, but that they settled in Kaifeng during the Northern Song (960-1127 C.E.).

Pan Guandan, "Jews in Ancient China: A Historical Survey," in *Jews in Old China*, pp. 65-84. Pan reports that Kaifeng Jews in 1850 told two Chinese Protestants that they arrived in China during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E.-220 C.E.), pp. 69-70. Pan believes that the Jews came to Kaifeng from India during the middle or at the end of the eleventh century (p. 92).

Gao Wangzhi, "Concerning Chinese Jews 1983," in *Jews in Old China*. Gao asserts that many Jews were living in China at the end of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 C.E.) and that they also settled in Kaifeng at this time (pp. 118-119). In addition, he believes that there was another large influx in the thirteenth century because of the westward expansion of the Mongols (p. 122).

⁵ Xu, *Legends*, pp. 16,23,103. Wang, "The Descendants of the Kaifeng Jews," pp. 168-171. Wang believes that originally they were seventy surnames of Jewish families; but after the great flood of 1642, the other families perished, or were scattered, or were so impoverished that they simply abandoned their religion. All seven of these names are common Chinese family names. Because status and religion are based upon the paternal line, Jewish descendants in Kaifeng today almost exclusively have these seven names.

⁶ A graphic account of the historic meeting between Ai and Ricci may be found in Pollack, *Mandarins*, pp. 5-11

Over the succeeding years, Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, made strenuous attempts to convert the Kaifeng Jews. Historians differ on whether any Jews converted to Christianity, but they agree that none did during their early contact with the missionaries.⁷ But other circumstances were eating away at the heart of the community. Isolation from fellow Jews, poverty, and disastrous floods in 1642 and 1849 C.E. all took their toll. Even more destructive was the fact that their young men were studying Chinese classics rather than Hebrew texts in order to pass civil service exams. Ai Tian's visit to Beijing in 1605 was for the purpose of taking one of these civil service examinations. Over time, with the concentration on Chinese classics upon which their livelihood and status depended, the Jewish elite became increasingly ignorant of Torah and other basic Hebrew texts that were in their possession. Compounding the effect of this growing unfamiliarity with Jewish sources, Chinese civil servants were made to serve in cities other than that of their birth. Thus, the Kaifeng Jewish community was doubly deprived of the support which it should have received from its scholarly elite.⁸

In 1810, the community's last Rabbi died.⁹ With his death, there was no one left who could read the thirteen Torah scrolls that had been in the synagogue for centuries. These Torahs were sold to Christian missionaries to alleviate extreme poverty. Several of the Torahs have been lost. Those that are known to exist are in Oxford University, Toronto University, Southern Methodist University, American Bible Society, Hebrew Union College, and the Jewish Theological Seminary. The flood of 1849 destroyed the synagogue, and it was never rebuilt. Its roof-tiles and utensils were sold, and some of them are now on and in the Great Mosque of Kaifeng. Many members of the community became Moslem; those who did, ceased to identify as Jews. Today there is a hospital on the spot where the synagogue stood.

My wife and I visited Kaifeng in October 1998 with Dr. Wendy Abraham who speaks Chinese. In any visit of short duration – especially where communication is difficult – opinions and impressions are formed based upon the people one meets. These opinions and impressions have a high possibility of error. If a Jewish descendant of Kaifeng came to the United States and were to visit a Reform Synagogue in Omaha or a Chasidic Synagogue in Brooklyn, his opinions and impressions of Jews in the United States would likely be far off the mark.

In Kaifeng, I had the opportunity to meet members of several families of Jewish descent and to visit several points of Jewish interest.

⁷ Pollack, *Mandarins*, p. 114. Xu, *Legends*, pp. 81-86.

⁸ Eber, "Kaifeng Jews: The Sinification," p. 26. Xu, *Legends*, pp. 83-86. Pollack, *Mandarins*, pp. 325-326.

⁹ He is referred to as "Zhanijiao." Xu Xin calls him a "Rabbi" (*Legends*, p. 121). Eber believes that the term implies wider and different responsibilities than those of a rabbi. "Kaifeng Jews: The Sinification," p. 34, note 5.

Shi Lei is a twenty year old college student who understands English. He regrets that he never had the opportunity to ask his grandfather, Shi Zhongyu (who died in 1994), about his memories of Jewish customs. He is largely uninformed, not only about the Jewish religion and history, but also about the history of his ancestors. All of this he deeply regrets, and he would like to learn more. He is an only child. [Shi Lei spent the 2001-02 academic year pursuing Jewish studies at Bar-Ilan University in Tel Aviv, Israel. - JA]

Shi Lei's father is a manager of a government-owned business. Shi Lei's father and grandfather (Shi Zhongyu) both married Han-Chinese women. His father's sister (Shi Ping) is also married to a Han-Chinese. She is a tax collector, and has one child, a son. In China, unless one is a member of a recognized minority, only one child is permitted.

Zhang Xingwang is a high school teacher and a martial arts expert. He has a business-card which reads "Moshe Xingwang Zhang, Jewish Diaspora." "Moshe" has a beard and wore a hat. He expressed a desire that his son study Hebrew in Israel.

Zhao Pingyu, who was a factory worker for the municipal government, died several years ago. Members of his family still live on 21 Nan Jiao Jing Hutong or 21 South Teaching Torah (or Scripture) Lane. In the days when the Kaifeng synagogue stood, the Jews lived on this street or nearby. Today Zhao's family are the last Jewish descendants living on Nan Jiao Jing Hutong. On their doorpost is a *mezuzah* which was given to them by Rabbi Arnold Belzer of Savannah, Georgia, during the 1980s.

Prior to the great flood of 1849, the Jews had a common burial ground. Sometime after that date, each family began to bury their dead in a separate family plot. The Jin family has a plot with many graves outside of Kaifeng near a village called Caizhuang Cun. The plot is in an untended patch of trees and brush surrounded by miles of flat farm land. A stele recites that at one time the family lived in Ningxia – one of four cities where Jews were known to have settled prior to their discovery by the West. The stele was erected in 1989. Today, the Kaifeng descendants cremate their dead since the right to inter is accorded only to certain recognized minorities.

Several families are aware of the Jewish custom of abstaining from pork. The Shi family now eats pork except during meals which commemorate their ancestors. They know that their ancestors did not eat pork; and so, out of respect for their ancestors, they do not eat pork during these special meals.¹⁰

¹⁰ Wang Yisha who interviewed many of the Kaifeng Jewish descendants in 1980 reported that Zhao Pingyu's grandfather, although he had no objection to eating pork, drew the line at raising pigs. Wang, "The Descendants of the Chinese Jews," pp. 178-179. In 1985 two descendants told Dr. Wendy Abraham that their families used to celebrate Passover by eating flat cakes and abstaining from pork. Wendy Abraham, "Memories of Kaifeng's Jewish Descendants Today," in *The Jews of China, Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, vol. 1, p. 81.

I asked if there were any families that never ate pork. To my surprise, they didn't know whether any such families exist. There is no organization of Jewish descendants; there is no day of the year when they gather; there is no vehicle through which they communicate with one another. Each clan is an island unto itself and follows its own traditions.

Despite their ignorance of the Jewish religion, despite universal intermarriage, and despite a loss of a sense of a Jewish community, the Kaifeng descendants identify as Jews. To the Chinese, one's status is derived from the paternal line. The descendants know from family traditions and their family names that there is an unbroken line of Jews on the paternal side for 1,000 years. It matters little to them that they no longer observe the Jewish religion or have knowledge of Jewish customs. They are Jews because of their fathers and because they never became Moslem or Buddhist or Christian.

At one time the Kaifeng Jews were registered with the authorities as "Youtai Houdai" or "Jewish Descendants." The government became concerned that the descendants might seek privileges that are accorded to recognized minorities and changed their description on their Certificates of Registry from "Youtai Houdai" to "Han." This drew protests from the descendants, but, as of this date, they have not succeeded in getting themselves recognized as Jews.

About twenty years ago, the curator of the Kaifeng Municipal Museum, Wang Yisha, conducted a survey of the Jewish descendants of Kaifeng and found about 140 families with six of the traditional Jewish surnames. Those living in Kaifeng totaled 166 people. Estimates of the number of Jews in Kaifeng at their peak vary from 2,500 to 5,000. In 1849 there were reported to be only 1,000 remaining.¹¹

Since the 1980s, many individual Jews and Jewish groups have visited Kaifeng to meet with the Jewish descendants. Some have brought or sent them Jewish religious articles and books in Chinese concerning Judaic studies. Others have performed Friday evening and Sabbath

¹¹ Xu Xin estimates that Kaifeng Jewry reached a peak during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 C.E.) of 5,000. Xu, *Legends*, p. xiv.

Wang estimates, based upon a 1679 tablet, that sixteenth-century Kaifeng had between 3,000 and 4,000 Jews. As of 1980, Wang counted 140 former Jewish families in China with the six Jewish surnames. Of these, 79 families numbering 166 persons still live in Kaifeng. Wang, "The Descendants of the Kaifeng Jews," pp. 171-172.

Pollack, who painstakingly reviews the evidence of the Jewish population of Kaifeng, reports some 2,500 Jews "in the first centuries of their settlement"; about "a thousand or so individuals" after the flood of 1642 C.E.; about 300 to 500 (adults or families) during the nineteenth century; and about 100 families as of 1957. Pollack, *Mandarins*, pp. 317-319.

Isenberg states that in 1849 informants reported 1,000 Jews in Kaifeng. Shirley Berry Isenberg, "The Kaifeng Jews and India's Bene Israel: Different Paths," in *The Jews of China*, p. 94.

morning services for the Kaifeng Jewish descendants. My impression is that the descendants are curious rather than committed. I did not see a religious spark waiting to be re-kindled.

It would be dangerous for the descendants to exhibit a commitment to the Jewish religion if they wished to do so. The Chinese government does not recognize the existence of Jews as a protected religious minority, although it welcomes the tourism that their presence generates. The government would be especially vigilant to oppose a religious movement with foreign support. There is also a difference in the eyes of the government between "religious belief" and "knowledge." Official concern might be aroused by foreign materials with a "religious" Jewish content rather than foreign materials with "academic" Jewish content.

An American organization, the Sino-Judaic Institute, marshaled an exhibit which records the history of the Kaifeng Jews. The exhibit was collected in Palo Alto, California, for shipment to Kaifeng. For many months the exhibit got no further than the Jewish Community Club in Beijing while the government made up its mind whether it was acceptable. After much hesitation and delay, the exhibit is now located in Kaifeng's new Riverside Scene Park in Kaifeng's northwest corner. The exhibit is historical in theme and presentation without any religious content.

Before I left Kaifeng, I gave a member of one of the Jewish families a copy of a Passover Haggadah handwritten in Kaifeng about 350 years ago and also a *mezuzah*. I was profusely thanked for the "precious book, the Haggadah of Chinese Jews" and "that delicate thing which can be put onto a gatepost." How does one interpret this strong response to my gifts? Does it reflect the desire to know more about one's origins, or is it a polite "thank you"? Or could it reflect a religious spark?

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