

# A Crackdown on Chinese Jews

SUPPRESSION OF ANCIENT JEWISH CULTURE



**T**he roughly 1,000 people living in Kaifeng, China, who identify as Jews are facing increasing restrictions on their religious life by government officials.

The city's sole learning center has been shuttered; the community's historic *mikvah* apparently filled and closed, and Jewish tour groups from abroad have been banned, among other difficulties of late.

Anson Laytner, former president of the Sino-Judaic Institute and retired Judaic studies professor at Seattle University, refers to the circumstances as "suppression" of Jewish culture and claims these are human rights violations.

Her information about the community is dependent on parsing conversational clues and rumors, however. Laytner describes communication with the community there as "sporadic" via phone and Skype. "When they speak to me, they're very circumspect, due to their discussions likely being monitored."

Other rumors indicate the heightened scrutiny of Kaifeng Jews' coming and goings by authorities, he says.

Several landmarks have been the focus of government suppression, adds Laytner, including the Kaifeng Municipal Museum, which houses the ancient stone stele from the synagogue. Previously open to visitors,

it is now closed. The Song Dynasty Park, which has an exhibit donated by the Sino-Judaic Institute on the Kaifeng Jews, is also now closed to visitors.

The Kaifeng Merchant Guildhall, which had an exhibit in Chinese on the Kaifeng Jews, has had the exhibit expunged.

Two separate groups—Israel-based Shavei Israel and the aforementioned Sino-Judaic Institute—that are in contact with Kaifeng's Jews are expressing their deep unease about the situation.

Shavei Israel, with representatives personally interacting with the Kaifeng Jews for more than 15 years, is taking a quiet-but-safe approach to the recent issues.



Michael Freund with Bnei Menashe olim

Director Michael Freund said that their interest is to avoid both speculation and forceful discussion on the topic, for the time being, lest there develop more consternation within the Chinese government towards the Jews of Kaifeng.

“On the one hand we are concerned about the reports of certain restrictions being imposed on the Jewish descendents of Kaifeng,” he said.

“However, we remain optimistic, because of the long and close relationship between the Jewish people and the Chinese people over the centuries, as well as the fact that the bilateral relationship between Israel and China continues to improve.”

Shavei Israel’s mandate has been to seek out isolated Jewish communities, assisting with education and with *aliyah*. Thus far, the organization says it has helped nearly two dozen members of Kaifeng’s community immigrate to Israel, and convert through Orthodoxy.

“They are a part of the extended Jewish family, and I believe we have a responsibility to reach out to them, while of course respecting China’s laws and sovereignty,” explains Freund.

While Laytner agrees the added attention may raise the ire of authorities, as it has in the past, he says it is no longer useful anymore to sit on the sidelines.

lems for the country, a thousand Jews are being given a hard time, even Laytner is stumped.

“Why? That is the big question.”

Historically, Jews have been tolerated in China, he says. But it was only in the past few decades that Jewish life became more and more vibrant in Kaifeng. That didn’t sit well with authority figures.

“Even though their knowledge of Judaism was very low, they still retained great pride that their ancestors were Jews; it was something they nourished and passed down to later generations,” Freund says.

Upon until the latter half of the twentieth century, the Kaifeng community was bereft of a proper house of worship, a Torah, or even a spiritual leader. But that ignorance began to swiftly change when China opened up more to visitors, who became aware of this isolated population, and offered assistance.

For its part, the Sino-Judaic Institute touts itself as an international non-profit organization “devoted to the study and development of cultural connections between the Chinese and Jewish peoples.”

As Laytner describes it: “We went in to help them reconnect to their heritage.”

Today, the penetration of the Internet has made it possible for information about Judaism and Israel to be accessible to Jewish descendents of Kaifeng that pre-

viously was impossible to obtain. “Close to a year now has passed, and people said to keep quiet so things will pass. Now, it is time to shine a light,” he says.

If these issues are left to fester, “they (Kaifeng’s Jews) could melt away into the larger fabric of Chinese society.”

When asked why, out of a billion and a half Chinese, with presumably so many other prob-

viously was impossible to obtain.

The community aims for a middle-ground “Conservadox” approach to ritual observance, according to Laytner, though typically they are still learning about their Judaism from the ground up.

Whether it was the Kaifeng Jews or foreign Jews, Jewish relationship with China’s bureaucracy has historically been mixed: at times unpredictable, at times risky, and at times based on misunderstandings.

Kaifeng’s Jews believe they are descended from twelfth century Jewish merchants traveling the Silk Road trade route.

According to Laytner, two Kaifeng Jews represented the community in the 1952 National Day celebrations in Beijing, where prime minister Zhou Enlai called

the Kaifeng Jews one of 46 ethnic groups attending the banquet.

In the census of that year, with the municipal government’s sanction, Jews received residence cards and identification cards that indicated they were Jews.

Despite this, China’s United Front took a U-turn in 1953.

That government position, from municipal all the way to federal levels, has maintained since that time that Chinese Jews belong to the Han nationality.

It thus robs the community of any official minority status as Jews.

“As long as activity is garbed in cultural clothing, there is less chance of there being a problem; whenever activity crosses the line and is perceived as proselytizing, it has tended to provoke a critical reaction,” Laytner wrote recently.

Still, in the 1950s, there were some religious accommodations made for the community; the non-pork-eating Jews were provided extra rations of mutton—similar to the Hui Muslims.

Their identification papers at that time still identified them as Jews.

Three decades later, Western Jews began connecting with Kaifeng Jews, beginning with the first American tour in 1983 led by Dr. Wendy Abraham, as the American Jewish Congress decided to place Kaifeng on its China tour itinerary.

Scores of tourists, journalists and organizations have introduced themselves to Kaifeng's Jews since then.

These connections have helped Jewish education there thrive, and extra tourist dollars were a treat for the city's economy.

But Chinese authorities weren't wild about Western media calling attention to the local Jewish population's hopes for growth, in an environment generally suspicious of religious practice.

A February 1985 feature in *Time* magazine entitled "New Hope for the Jews of China" expanded on the notion that the Kaifeng Jews desired to rebuild their synagogue and thrive in their practice.

In what appears to be a bitter response to the article, in July of that year, a decree released by the Religious Affairs Bureau of the State Council of China stated that the country refused to recognize the Jewish population, and thus would not necessitate any synagogue to be built.

The municipal government that September elaborated, by saying the idea of a synagogue's construction, as reported in the article, was all a lie. These motions, however, were a façade for the true subtext, Laytner posits: that of the 1953 decree that delegitimized the Jews, only recognizing them as a subset of the Han.

Meanwhile, the series of ups and downs continued.

Israel established full diplomatic relations with China in January 1992.

But in May of that year, when the Jewish Agency asked Israeli ambassador to China Dr. Zev Suffot if Israel would help Kaifeng's Jews, he called their Jewish claim "absurd," among other choice words.

It didn't help, adds Laytner, that Kaifeng Jews have focused primarily on patrilineal descent as their traceable link—against the mainstream *halacha* of matrilineal descent.

Laytner, however, believes there's more subtext to the Israeli response: Israel fears an influx of non-Jewish Chinese abusing the Right of Return, a subsequent "rupture" in Israel-Sino relations, or another

storm over the definition of "Jewish."

Despite it all, these new diplomatic relations were the springboard for the Kaifeng municipal government's move to greenlight the creation of its Society for the Research of Jewish History and Culture, headed by both the Prof. Zhao Xiangru, and scholar of the community and curator of the Municipal Museum, Wang Yisha. Zhao soon afterward proudly boasted in a *Jerusalem Post* article that his homeland was Israel, and he hoped to restore Kaifeng's Jewish cemetery, among other growth plans for his community.

Again, the spotlight backfired, when the United Front condemned his behavior, thus removing him from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, forced him into early retirement, and placed him under house arrest.

In another event from the mid-1990s, two Kaifeng Jews visited the Israeli Embassy in Beijing to find out if their community was eligible for the Israeli Right of Return. (The staffers refused to meet.) Several months later, in what Laytner believes was a related reprisal, the mayor of Kaifeng issued an order to close all Jewish construction projects and conduct intensive police surveillance of all Jewish activities.

Increasing international attention to the Kaifeng community may have also been a factor in the government's recent restrictions on the community's Jewish activities, Laytner said, including a *New York Times* article about a Kaifeng *seder* and media stories about Kaifeng immigration to Israel.

Fighting a bureaucratic battle as well as a religious one, so-called "messianic" Jewish groups have been also known to seek converts, preying upon the community's ignorance.

And yet Kaifeng Jews' ties to their city—as well as their faith—are deep-seated.

"They generally do not want to leave. They want to live as Chinese Jews in Kaifeng," says Laytner. And even if they could, though, nowhere else in the country could offer them a comfortable place to nurture

their Judaism, he says.

"Jews in places like Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong are all Western non-Chinese citizens. Only in Kaifeng are there ethnic-Chinese of Jewish descent. It would be hard for them to move to another city, due to many obstacles. It wouldn't be their fault, either. They couldn't approach a synagogue without a Chinese guard questioning them, and they would be refused entry for not belonging there."

Security on every street corner is the norm, he says, extending to hospitals, schools, businesses—any place people congregate.

Notwithstanding these issues, Laytner believes there is still a ray of hope. "China has a good history with the Jews. I see these problems as an aberration."

Freund emphatically agrees.

"China is a country that historically did not have anti-Semitism and certainly not in the classical Western sense. Jews lived there for well over a thousand years without experiencing anti-Semitism, and that is a claim few countries in the world can make. We also know that in World War II, China provided refuge to Jews fleeing the Holocaust," says Freund.

"I have no doubt that the relationship will continue to grow and flourish."

In fact, Freund says there's a hidden holy proof text for such, in Sefer Yishayahu, where "G-d speaks about the ingathering of the exiles." The last three words of the pasuk are *v'ele m'eretz sinim*—the last word being a Hebrew allusion to "Chinese." (The word for China in Hebrew is *Sin*).

"I'd like to think and believe that the *aliyah* of small numbers of Kaifeng Jews in recent years represents the beginning of the fulfillment of that verse."

The hope among Freund, Laytner, and others, is that the status quo will be restored with little fanfare and even less disturbance.

"It doesn't sound like a huge thing to ask the Chinese government: let them explore their Jewish identity," sums up Laytner. ●