



Chiao-Jing Hutung: 1910



*Chiao-Jing Hutung Street: 1983.
Courtesy of Mrs. Lily Fok.*

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF KAIFENG (Part I)

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INTRODUCTION

There are few subjects in Chinese history that are so well documented and yet so shrouded in mystery and myth as the history of the Jewish community in Kaifeng. What I have to say in the following pages will not provide answers to all the questions; indeed, it may give rise to even more. However, what I propose to do here is to address in a general way some basic areas pertinent to the history of this special community in China, such as where they came from, their style of life as a Jewish community in China, and their present situation.

DATE OF ARRIVAL IN CHINA

In the many scholarly studies done on this subject, there are numerous references to the fact that the Jews arrived in China very very early. Some scholars suggest that they actually reached China before the birth of Moses. Others suggest that the "Land of Sinim"¹ mentioned in the Hebrew Scriptures was a reference to the Chinese Empire. But in

terms of documentary evidence the earliest authentic record of any kind indicating the presence of Jews in China dates from 718 A.D. This piece of documentary evidence which was discovered in 1901 by Sir M. Auriel Stein in Tun-huang (敦煌) consists of 379 Hebrew characters written on paper. While the characters are Hebrew, the language is Persian.² Another piece of documentary evidence, of course, is the journal of the Arabian traveller Abu Zaid al-Sirafi who records Huang Ch'ao's seige of Guangzhou in 877.³ When Guangzhou was eventually captured, Abu Zaid wrote that 120,000 Muslims, Jews, Christians and Magians were killed. Both Christian and Arab sources confirm that already at that time there were isolated pockets of Jews living in Beijing (Marco Polo 1286), Quanzhou, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Ningxia, Ningbo, Yangzhou and Luoyang. My friend Professor W.A. Reynolds has also reported the discovery of a disused synagogue in a small town called San Tai (三台), near Chengdu (成都), in 1943.⁴ The Jews in Kaifeng, according to inscriptions on two of three existing steles, arrived during the Han and Zhou dynasties. However, a professor of Chinese history, Professor Chan Yuan,⁵ basing his conclusions on the book Dung Jing Chi (東京記), by Sung Minchiu (宋敏求), argues that the Jews in Kaifeng could not possibly have arrived before the Sung dynasty, i.e. 960 A.D. because Sung did not note the presence of Jews in Kaifeng, while he did note the presence of Nestorian Christians. If we accept the evidence of the stele as valid, then, there is a wide diversity of opinion as to the actual date of arrival, a difference of over a thousand years. Another authority on this subject, Mr. Michael Pollak,⁶ has stated that these earlier dates i.e. the Han and Zhou dynasties were only public relation gimmicks of the Kaifeng Jews, used to impress their neighbours by claiming that their ancestors arrived in the Middle Kingdom many many centuries ago. Mr. Pollak is quite convinced that they did not, in fact, arrive before the Sung dynasty, i.e. not earlier than 960 A.D. Unfortunately, Professor Chen Yuan's theory rests on very flimsy evidence for until very recent times the Han Chinese were not able to distinguish the Jews in Kaifeng from their Muslim neighbours. In fact, many of them thought the two of the same ethnic origin. This is quite understandable as the dietary habits of both races are identical, both came from Central Asia, and most of them wore identical dress. It is also a fact that even today some of the people in Kaifeng distinguish the two groups only by the difference in colour of their skull caps, the Muslims being called the "White Skull Cap Hui Hui" i.e. White Skull Cap Muslims, and the Jews the "Blue Skull Cap Hui Hui." For the above reasons, the absence of any specific reference by Sung Mingchiu is not in itself, conclusive proof that the Jews did not arrive before the Sung dynasty. One further confusion, of course, is that the Zhou dynasty referred to could very well be the Zhou dynasty of Empress Wu which preceded the Sung dynasty, i.e.

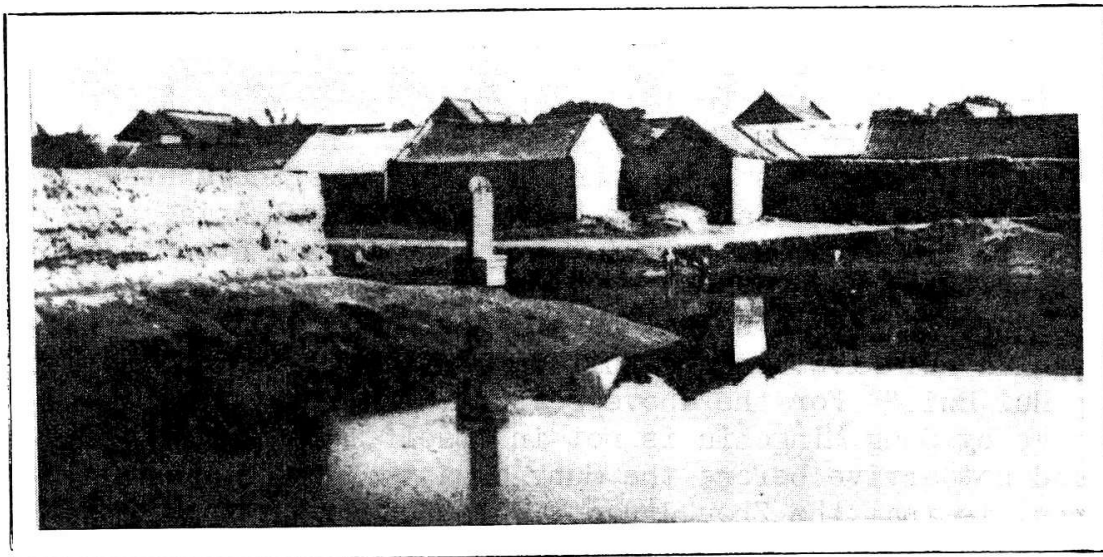
684-705. My own personal interviews with the Jews in Kaifeng have helped to clarify this point.⁷ They, themselves, date their arrival to have been during the Zhou dynasty, not as the Zhou dynasty of 206 B.C. but rather as the Zhou of the Five Dynasty Period (951-960 A.D.). The exact date of their arrival in Kaifeng will probably never be determined with any degree of certainty. In the obverse inscription on the stele dating from 1663, which once stood outside the synagogue, there is the following paragraph:

*The religion had its origin in Tien Chu (天竺).
In the Zhou period it began to be handed down in
the Middle Continent (Zhungzhou). A temple was
established in Ta-liang (大梁) (Kaifeng).....*

Most authors on this subject translate Zhung Zhou (中州) as "Middle Continent" or, literally, to mean the Chinese Empire, or, by implication, the capital Kaifeng. But throughout Chinese history "Zhung Zhou" has referred to either Henan Province (see Lun Heng (論衡) by Wang Chong (王充) 27-97 A.D.) or, more specifically, Xin'an County (新安縣) (a small county near Luoyang) in Henan province. It is, then, highly possible that the Jews first arrived in other parts of Henan Province before coming to Kaifeng, where they eventually built their synagogue.

WHERE DID THEY COME FROM

The stone steles which used to stand outside the synagogue in Kaifeng referred to Tien Chu as the place where the Jews came from



*Site of the
old synagogue.
The pond dates
from 1910; the
remaining
stele bears
silent witness
to the chang-
ing fortunes
of the
Community.*

originally. Tien Chu, of course, is the name traditionally designated by the Chinese for India. The traditional Indian Empire, however, occupied a far wider area than does the Republic of India to-day. The steles also refer to the term "Hsiyu" or "western territory." This term, since Han dynasty days, has been used to describe central and western Asia which, in the past, also included Persia. There is another school of thought that holds that the Kaifeng Jews arrived by a sea route and then migrated inland from the China coast.⁸ In my conversations with the descendants of the original Kaifeng community, they insisted that their ancestors came from Central Asia along the Silk Road. Most of them were itinerant traders, many of whom eventually settled down in Kaifeng as merchants and silversmiths.

As was the custom of Persian Jews, they, too, divided the Pentateuch into 53 sections instead of 54, the Masoretic 52nd and 53rd sections being combined into one. Also like the Persian Jews, they used a Hebrew alphabet consisting of 27 letters rather than 22. On balance, it is almost certain, then, that they came from Central Asia.

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY IN KAIFENG

As we discussed in the foregoing paragraphs, the arrival of the Kaifeng community probably dates from 951 A.D. But its existence became known to the western world only much later. How their existence came to be known has been documented by the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci. In the summer of 1605, a minor official from Kaifeng named Ai Tien, who held the honorific title of Siao Lien (孝廉)⁹ went to Beijing in the company of another Siao Lien named Zhang to seek opportunities for obtaining a more senior government position. Ai Tien had heard of foreigners living in Beijing who were said to be worshippers of the one God. When Ai Tien arrived at the Jesuit Mission, he explained that he, too, was a fellow-believer and had come to pay his respects. Ricci noted that while his dress and manner were typically Chinese, his facial features were not.

It happened to be the feast of St. John the Baptist. Ricci invited his guest to see the chapel. Here, over the main altar, there was a painting depicting the Virgin Mary with the child Jesus on one side and St. John the Baptist on the other. There were also pictures of the Four Evangelists and Ai Tien inquired whether or not these were of "The Twelve". Ricci said that they were. They returned to the guest hall and continued their conversation. It gradually dawned on Ricci that he was talking not to a Christian but to a Jew, a Chinese Jew. Ai

Tien was, in fact, speaking in terms of the Old Testament. The Virgin Mary and the figures of the child Jesus and St. John the Baptist, he had mistaken for Rebekah with her sons Esau and Jacob. "The Twelve" to whom he referred were not the twelve apostles but rather the 12 sons of Jacob. He had never heard of Christ nor of the Christian faith. It was then that he told Ricci of the Jewish community in Kaifeng. He told Ricci that Jews had been living in the Chinese Empire for many centuries but only the Jewish community in Kaifeng still survived. This community, he said, which once comprised 17 clans, had been reduced to seven.¹⁰ They called themselves the adherents of the religion of yi-t'zu-lo-yeh (a Chinese transliteration of the word Israel). Their synagogue, recently rebuilt, housed a number of Torah scrolls. He also explained how the Jews in Kaifeng still observed most of the traditional festivals, how they refrained from eating pork and how they continued to circumcise their infant sons.

In December 1607, Ricci sent two Chinese converts to Kaifeng. One who had taken the name of Antonio Leitam was in fact named Xu Bideng (徐必登), the other, Huang Mingsha (黄明沙), was a member of the literati class. They had no trouble in locating the synagogue and meeting with the rabbi. They also bore a letter from Ricci to the rabbi informing him that the Jesuit Mission in Beijing had in their library all the books of the Hebrew Bible as well as those of the New Testament. Ricci was, in fact, trying to convey to them the Christian message that the long-awaited Messiah who was to redeem the people had already come 16 centuries earlier. While the rabbi did not agree to this point, he did wonder if Ricci would be interested in accepting the position of chief rabbi in Kaifeng, for he was old and in poor health and afraid that he might die without leaving a successor.

In 1609, three Jews came to Beijing from Kaifeng, one of them a nephew of Ai Tien. They met with the Jesuits to report that the old rabbi had passed away and that his son had succeeded him. One of the many mysteries in the history of this community is whether or not any of these three converted to Catholicism. Some Chinese sources¹¹ state that they did, but all western sources are silent on this matter. It is clear, however, that the Jesuits, and subsequently the Protestants, who in the next three centuries made quite a few visits to Kaifeng, were motivated by a desire to convert these Jews to Christianity.

Before discussing some of the eye-witness accounts of these Jesuit and Protestant visitors, let us now retrace our steps to look at some of the primary materials written in Chinese about the Kaifeng

community. Basically, much of the information we have about their synagogue as well as the community itself is culled from inscriptions found on three stone steles, a memorial book, and some of the Torah scrolls. At the height of the community's prosperity, there were two stone steles in the synagogue and a third one nearby. Basically, the inscriptions described the synagogue's history. It was first built in 1163. The text recorded restorations in 1279, 1421, 1489, 1512 and 1663. Two of the steles, though badly defaced, are still in Kaifeng to-day.

The term "Jew" is not very well-known to the ordinary Chinese of Kaifeng. The most common name used by the Han Chinese in referring to the Jews is Tiao-Jin-Chiao (挑筋教) or "the sect which plucks out the sinews". This is related to the Jewish custom of removing the sinews of animals in preparing them for eating. The custom, of course, commemorates the story of Jacob in the book of Genesis where Jacob wrestled with the angel at Paniel and the angel "wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket". The original Jewish settlement, which was immediately behind the synagogue, was called "Tiao-Jin Hutung". But as the name was mildly derogatory, the Jews in 1911 changed it to "Chiao-Jin Hutung" -- "Teaching the Scriptures Huting" (教經胡同). There have been other names used by both Jews and the Han Chinese in referring to the Kaifeng community. The most common is "Blue Skull Cap Hui Hui" (藍帽回回) (Blue Cap Muslims) as distinct from the "White Skull Cap Hui Hui" (白帽回回) (Authentic Muslims). Other names which have been used are Gu Jiao, Tien-chu Jiao, Cheng Jiao, Chin Hui Hui, Chi Sheng Hui Chi (七姓回子).¹² One of the three stone steles bears the title 重建清真寺 "a record of the rebuilding of the temple of Purity and Truth". The date is 1489. On the reverse side of this stele the inscription reads: 尊崇道經史寺記, "a record of the synagogue which honours the Scriptures". This is dated 1512. The second stele is dated 1663. It also bears the title "a record of the rebuilding of the temple of Purity and Truth". The third one, dated 1679, lists the contributions made by the Zhao clan, one of the original Jewish clans, to the community in Kaifeng. It bears the title of "Inscription of the history of the Ancestral Hall". This stele is still in existence in Kaifeng, but the text is badly defaced.

The first of the stone steles was a gift from the brothers Jin Ying and Jin Chung. It was Jin Chung who composed the detailed inscription. But only a small portion of the long text (36 vertical lines each with 56 characters) is devoted to a description of the reconstruction of the synagogue. In the process, Jin Chung provided quite a lot of the community's history. The text states that "the Jewish religion, or to

THE STONE INSCRIPTION OF 1512



use the term Israel religion" came from "Tien-chu", and that there were 70 clans who came to the Chinese Empire originally. Of the 70 stated only 17 are listed in the text by name..... Li, An, Ai, Kao, Mu, Zhao, Jin, Zhang, Shi, Huang, Li, Nieh, Jin, Zhang, Shi, Huang, Li Nieh, Jin, Zhang, Tso and Bai. The number 70 is a definite mistake as the total listed comprise only 14 plus 3 duplicates. The inscription goes on to relate that western cloth was given by the Jews as tribute to the Sung Emperor. In the Kwei-mei (癸未) year, i.e. 1163 A.D., the first year of the Lung-xing (隆興) period of Emperor Sung Hsiao Tsung, the leader of the Jewish community was Rabbi Levi. It was he who built the "temple". The text also tells of the rebuilding of the synagogue in 1279 on its original site at the southeast corner of Earth Market Street. (This street remains today practically unchanged, but its name is now shortened to Earth Street (土街). The stele goes on to state that in 1455 Li Yung (李榮) and Li Liang (李良), both Jews, provided funds for the addition of three new sections onto the synagogue. When the Yellow River overflowed in 1461, the flood levelled the synagogue to its foundations. Ai Ching (艾敬) and others petitioned the government to obtain permission to erect a new synagogue on the site of the old. A fund-raising campaign was launched among the Jews in Kaifeng and the four largest contributors were Li Yung (李榮), Kao Chien (高前), Kao Jui (高瑞) and Kao Hung (高銓). There is also mention of responsible government posts being held by two Jews, Kao Nien (高年) who was a Jisien (知縣) and Ai Chun (艾俊) who held an educational office.

The most interesting information derived from the inscriptions, however, is the description of community rituals. The 1489 and 1663 inscriptions describe the worshipper as stepping forward and backward while reciting portions of the liturgy. At times he also bows and kneels. Apparently, services were held every morning, afternoon and evening. Before entering the synagogue itself, a member was required to wash and to change clothes. The Sabbath was strictly observed. Sabbath rituals are not described in detail, but there is specific mention that no fire is to be lit for cooking and followers must fast and abstain on that day.

There is further mention of an observance of a spring festival, which was probably the Feast of Unleavened Bread. A fairly detailed description of the observance of Yom Kippur is also given. This text states:

At the end of autumn, the Jews close their doors for a whole day and give themselves to the cultivation of purity; they abstain from food and drink in order to nourish a spirit of purity. On that day the scholar suspends his study, the farmer suspends his cultivation and the business man suspends his transactions.... Desires are forgotten....and all apply themselves to nurturing the heart and mind... In this wise it is hoped that while man is at rest, his heavenly nature will make progress.....

The most concrete proof that these people are an authentic Jewish community can be ascertained from the opening paragraphs of two of the inscriptions. The 1489 inscription states:

Abraham, the Patriarch, who founded the religion of Israel, was the 19th in the line of descendants from Pau Ku Adam. From the creation of heaven and earth, the patriarchs handed down successively the traditions which they had received.....

In this manner the religion was transmitted to Moses... He searched for the Scriptures (經) at the top of Mount Sinai.....

The religion was further transmitted to Ezra... another patriarch of the Cheng Chiao (正教).

A most revealing paragraph from the 1512 inscription reads:

From creation, the Patriarch Adam handed (the traditions) on to Noah, Noah handed them on to

*Abraham, Abraham to Issac, Issac to Jacob, and
Jacob handed them on to the Twelve Tribes.*

It is therefore evident that 500 years after their arrival in China, the Jews though sinicised to a large extent, still retained a rudimentary knowledge of the Book of Genesis.

Other than the observance of the various Jewish rituals and feasts, the inscription is heavily laced with Confucian rituals, e.g. offerings of meat, seasonal vegetables and fruit to the memory of ancestors in each of the four seasons. This is a distinctly Chinese Confucian practice, quite alien to Judaism.

The references to Judaism as a religion are unmistakable. But the Chinese text itself always refers to the Torah as "Ching" and to the religion, except at the very beginning, as the "Chiao" or "Tao" - "The Way".

In the 1489 and 1512 inscriptions, there are direct quotations from the Analects of Confucius (Book XVII) (論語), from the Odes, and Mencius, e.g. "The Way of Heaven does not speak, yet the four seas pursue their course and all creatures in sequence are produced" (天道不容, 四時行而萬物生) Mencius II, (道莫大於仁義, 行之自有惻隱羞惡之心, , 道莫大於禮智, 行之自有恭敬是非之心). "In the Way there is nothing greater than Love (Jen), Righteousness or Morality", and when these are put into practice, the "feeling of commiseration" and the "feeling of shame and dislike" will be the natural results...etc.

Such quotes show quite clearly that 500 years after they came to Kaifeng, the Kaifeng Jews were deeply sinicised and under the influence of Confucianism.

Many names are written on the three steles. Scholars, by comparing these names with the gazetteers of Hsiang-fu-Hsien¹³ where Kaifeng is located, have uncovered much information about the achievements of some of these Jews. The 1663b inscription has a total of 241 names, 26 of whom are mentioned in the gazetteers of the Ming and Ching dynasties, a number of them having attained very high positions in the civil service. Out of the 26, ten attained the rank of Juren with Five of the ten becoming Jinxi. Four held the rank of Kung-sheng; one the Tseng-kuang, and one the Pa-kung.

During the Ming dynasty, it is evident that the Li clan was very prominent and prosperous. The inscriptions list nine persons from this clan who were members or religious leaders. Li Yung was affluent enough

to contribute substantially to the restoration of the synagogue on two occasions. Li Ching (李楨) and Li Cheng-shen (李承先) were able to provide fresh copies of the Torah. There are some oblique references to Muslims and Jews who took part in the defence of Kaifeng during the siege. One of the Jews, Li Yao (李耀) whose name appears in the 1665b stele, the Memorial Book or Family Tree, was actually a company commander in charge of a group of Ching-Chen soldiers.

The Ai clan produced two religious leaders: Ai Tuan and Ai Ching. While Ai Tien and Ai Chun were country magistrates, two others of the clan were well-known physicians.

Members of the Zhao clan achieved prominence during the Ching dynasty.¹⁴ One was appointed senior military official in Jiajiang. The most famous members of the entire Jewish community in Kaifeng were, no doubt, two brothers from the Zhao family. Zhao Ying-sheng (趙映乘) attained the rank of Jinxi at the age of 28 and was appointed department director in the Ministry of Justice (刑部郎中) in 1646. His brother Zhao Ying-tou (趙映斗) attained the rank of Kung-sheng, and was appointed district magistrate of Yi-liang in Yunnan. As for the Kao clan, Kao Nien (高年) became a county magistrate, while Kao Chien (高前), Kao Jui (高瑞) and Kao Hung contributed substantially to the rebuilding of the synagogue in 1461.

The Jins were few in number but they were widely spread. Some went as far as Ningxia. Most of them were prosperous and contributed substantially to the reconstruction of the synagogue. One of them, Jin Wu, became a senior military official.

It is evident from the text of the steles that this community in Kaifeng, despite its relatively small number, had attained a fairly high degree of success in the civil service and in commerce. They also integrated quite easily and fully with their Han neighbours and yet maintained contact with their Jewish brethren in other parts of China. But it was probably their very success that sowed the seeds of community disintegration as nearly all senior officials were posted not only outside Kaifeng but also outside Henan province.

FOOTNOTES:

(1) Mrs. Cecilia Shickman-Bowman: Lecture at the Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 25th February 1982.

(2) Journal of Royal Asiatic Society 1903.

(3) Donald Leslie: Survival of the Chinese Jews.

(4) Professor of Industrial Engineering, University of Hong Kong 1973-1980. Professor Reynolds served in the Friends Ambulance Unit in this part of China during World War II.

(5) Journal of Eastern Capital referred to in Pan Guandan's: 'The Historical Question of Chinese Jews' Social Sciences in China No. 3, 1980.

(6) Michael Pollak: Mandarins, Jews and Missionaries: The Jewish Experience in the Chinese Empire.

(7) A Conversation with Shi Yung-yu in Kaifeng, September 1981.

(8) Mrs. Cecilia Shickman-Bowman: Lecture at the Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong on 25th February 1982; and Leo Gabow: Errors and Omissions. South Peninsula Jewish Press, Palo Alto, U.S.A., May 1982.

(9) Zhang Feng-jan: Biography of Matteo Ricci, original version in Chinese, published in Kung Kao Po, a Chinese Catholic Weekly, November 1982; Gallagher, Louis J.; China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journals of Matthew Ricci, 1583-1610; and Lo Kuang: Biography of Matteo Ricci, original in Chinese.

(10) The original 17 clans were: Li, An, Ai, Kao, Mu, Zhao, Jin, Zhou, Zhang, Shi, Huang, Li, Nieh, Jin, Zhang, Tso and Bai. The seven surviving clans are: Li, Ai, Kao, Zhao, Jin, Zhang and Shi.

On the actual number of clans which originally arrived in Kaifeng, there is still some confusion. See Rabbi Anson Laytner's article, China Notes. National Council of Churches, New York, Spring and Summer Issue 1982 and my article in the same magazine, Winter Issue 1982-83.

(11) Lo Kuang: Ibid.

(12) Pan Guandan: 'Social Sciences in China,' No. 3, 1980, original in Chinese.

(13) Kramer, Lawrence: The Kaifeng Jews: a disappearing community.

(14) Leslie, Donald: 'The Kaifeng Jew Chao Ying-cheng and his family' T'oung Pao 53.