
THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF KAIFENG (Part II)

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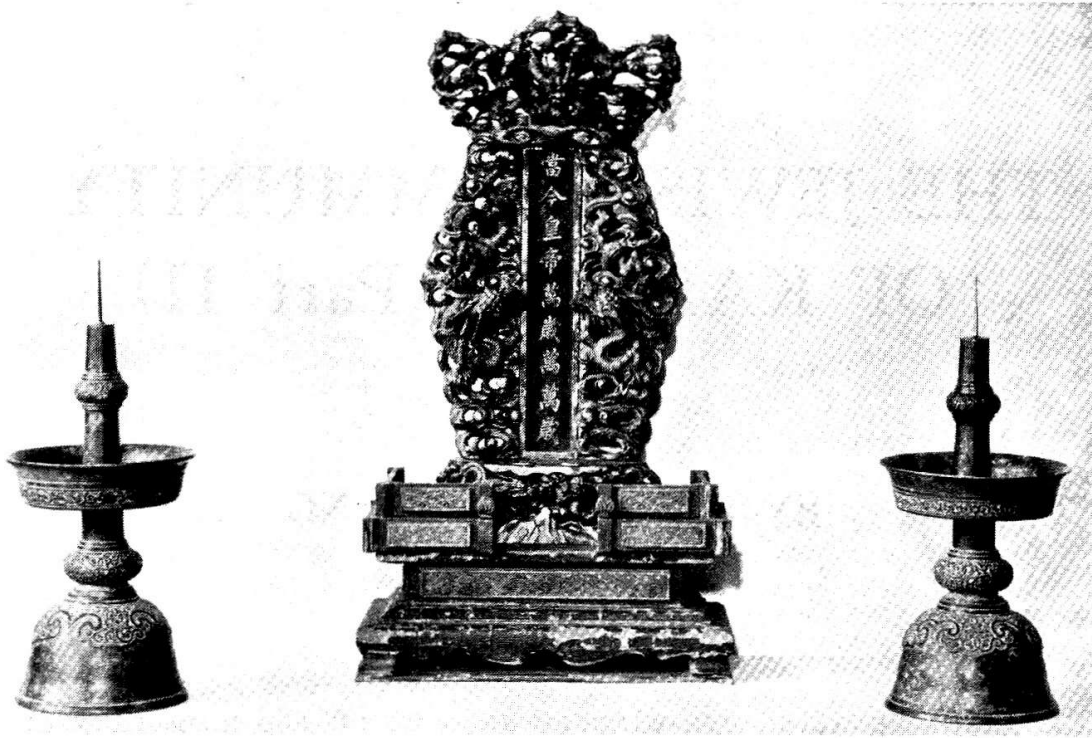
The first detailed eye-witness account of the community and its synagogue was provided by an Italian Jesuit, Jean-Paul Gozani. Gozani visited Kaifeng twice, once in 1701 and the second time in 1704.¹⁵

By 1704, the Jesuits already had established a mission in Kaifeng. Jean-Paul Gozani, who was stationed there, had no difficulty in establishing contact with the Jewish community and their chief rabbi. Actually he was given free access to the synagogue and examined their Torah. He was even allowed to enter the Bethel, the sanctuary in which the Torah was kept, normally reserved to the rabbi alone.

The Jews explained to him that 12 of the Torah Scrolls were dedicated to the Twelve Tribes of Israel and the 13th, the oldest, was dedicated to the memory of Moses.

Inside the synagogue, there was a plaque honouring the emperor (萬歲牌). (It was suggested that this was the one condition laid down by the Emperor in granting his permission to rebuild. However, there are similar plaques in other churches of different faiths, for example, there is one in a Catholic Church in a suburb of Taipei.) There was also in the synagogue a pulpit which the Jews called the "Chair of Moses" from which public readings of the Torah were made during worship services.

In a separate hall, there were incense bowls, the largest in memory of Abraham. Behind this one stood those of Isaac, Jacob and



Imperial Tablet

his 12 children.

Gozani also observed that the Jews continued to practise circumcision, observe the sabbath, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and ate the Paschal Lamb at the Passover Feast which was in remembrance of the Jews coming out of Egypt and their passage through the Red Sea.

These Jews worshipped the creator of Heaven and Earth, and called Him Tien, Shang-ti, etc. From the original 17, they were now reduced to seven clans i.e. Zhao, Jin, Shi, Kao, Zhang, Li and Ai. But in addition to their own saints, they also venerated Confucius, just like their Han Chinese neighbours.

Whenever they read the Torah, they covered their faces with a transparent veil, in memory of Moses who came down from Mount Sinai with his face covered. Subsequent to Gozani's visit, two other Jesuit Fathers visited Kaifeng: Jean Domenge in 1722 and Antoine Gaubil in 1723. It was Domenge who did a rough sketch of the synagogue.

Jean Domenge spent some eight months in Kaifeng. He went to the synagogue more than once and observed that the Jews called their synagogue their Li-pai-ssu (禮拜寺). He saw no censer, i.e. incense burner, nor musical instrument, nor ceremonial robes used in their worship. He noted that worshippers removed their shoes on entering the synagogue and everyone had his head covered with a blue cap. At the Feast of Tabernacles, the man who carried the Torah wore a red sash over his right shoulder. He did have a chance to examine their Torah. From various bits of evidence, Domenge speculated that their Bible was the Eastern Bible of Jacob Ben Nephthali. On the whole, Domenge found the Jews ignorant of actual Jewish teachings and of the Hebrew language. The most skilled of them understood only a few passages of the Pentateuch. The Jews admitted their ignorance and excused themselves by saying that it was more than a century since there came to them a "Doctor" from Hsiyu (西域) and that they had long ago lost their Tuching Pen (讀經本), which was their glossary.

After Domenge, Antoine Gaubil¹⁶ visited Kaifeng on the 23rd of March 1723. Gaubil was taken to the synagogue by Gozani. Gaubil talked to two supposedly knowledgeable Jews. But Gaubil was disappointed that they knew so little. They explained to Gaubil that their ancestors came to China 1,650 years earlier from Hsiyu. They showed Father Gaubil the oldest Torah Scroll that they used in their services, which they said, had been given to them by a Jew from Hsiyu, i.e. Central Asia, after the fire at the synagogue during the Wan Li period (1573-1619). All the Pentateuchs now in the synagogue were copied from it. He reported that the Jews still practiced circumcision; observed the Sabbath, the Passover, Purim and other Festivals. He was told that the community consisted of seven clans, comprising 1,000 people. It was Gaubil who managed to bring to the West the first copy of the full text of the two Inscriptions of 1489 and 1463.

Other than the three already mentioned, there were at least 11 Catholic priests¹⁷ who made trips to Kaifeng to try to convert or to study this community. One Portuguese priest, Rodriguez de Figueiredo, actually chose to stay on with the Jews during the seige by Li Tzu-chang (李自成). He eventually perished with some of the Jews in the flood of 9th October 1642. There are also some oblique references to Muslim soldiers and Jews, who took part in the defence of Kaifeng during the siege. One of the Jews, Li Yao¹⁸ (李耀) whose name appears in the Memorial Book or Family Tree, was actually a company commander in charge of a group of Ching-chen (清真) soldiers.

All of the visiting priests mentioned above uncovered only bits and pieces of information that were of no great consequence. And subsequent to Gaubil's visit, the Jesuits in China were restricted in travel and activities by the Emperor. After China lost the first Opium War in 1839-40, prospects for traveling into the interior of China improved. At that time there was in London the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews. Among its members, there was an idealistic diplomat and scholar called James Finn. It was he who directed the Society's attention to the Jews after reading the Jesuit compilation: Les Lettres Edifiantes et Curieuses de Chine 1720-1776. Based on his research of some of the relevant material, he wrote a small book, The Jews in China.

In 1844, Finn took the first step in re-establishing contact with the Kaifeng Jews. Learning that a British diplomat Temple H. Layton was to become the British Vice-Consul in Ningbo, he planned to get some missionaries to relay a letter to the Jews in Kaifeng. He wrote a letter in Hebrew with both a Chinese and English translation. But it took five years before Layton managed to track down Kaifeng through a Muslim soldier in the Chinese Imperial Army, Tieh Ting-an, (鐵定安) who was a native of Kaifeng and whose home was only half a mile from the synagogue. What he told Layton was not significantly different from what was recorded by the Jesuits in the 1700's except for the fact that he (Tieh) estimated that the total population of the Jews to be about 1,000. Of the eight clans, Kao and Shih, though the smallest in number, had remained intact since they married only their own kind while the other six had intermarried with the Han Chinese. Some also had married their daughters to Muslims. In the meantime, a letter was entrusted to a fur dealer who was going to Kaifeng. In April 1870, a reply which was dated the 20th of August 1850 was received by Finn through Mrs. Layton (Temple Layton had passed away in Amoy in 1851).

The letter came from a Chinese Jew, Zhao Nien-tsu (趙念祖). The letter gave some very interesting and yet sad details of the decline and disintegration of the community and its religion in Kaifeng.

During the past 40 or 50 years, our religion has been but imperfectly transmitted. Although the Scriptures are still in existence, there is none who understands so much as one word of them... (The only one Jew who retained some knowledge of the Scriptures was an old woman of over 70....) Morning and night, with tears in our eyes and with offerings

of incense, we implore that our religion may again flourish.



*A Lotus Shaped Purification Bowl
From The Kaifeng Synagogue .*

Tien-seng (邱天生). They left for Kaifeng on the 15th November 1850. They were under specific instructions to acquire some of the Torah Scrolls from the synagogue and to bring back as much information about the community as possible. They were also asked to keep a detailed diary of the trip, which they did. Eventually they arrived in Kaifeng on December 9th, 1850. They had no difficulty in locating the old synagogue which was still standing but it was in a very dilapidated condition

Within the presence of the temple were a number of people who had spread out a great quantity of cabbages in the open area on both sides of the temple; the residents there were mostly women, some of whom were widows.

The letter went on to say that the synagogue (寺) has long been without ministers; the four walls of its principal hall are in ruins, so is the ablution chamber and the repository of the Scriptures. Zhao pleaded and hoped that one day they could again procure ministers and rebuild their synagogue.

But the most interesting information is that Zhao stated that they still observed the following: Simchat Torah, The Feast of Unleavened Bread or Passover, the Day of Atonement, and the Jewish New Year.

In 1850, the Anglican Bishop of Hong Kong Rev. George Smith along with Dr. W.H. Medhurst and missionaries connected with the London Society planned to send a ministry to Kaifeng. The two gentlemen who eventually became known as the Chinese delegates were Chiang Jung-chi (蔣榮基) and Chiu

Four or five very poor Jewish families actually lived inside the synagogue compound. The Yellow River flood in 1849 apparently hit Kaifeng very hard and the Jews were badly affected. Some of them were in such a desperate situation that they had to sell some of the bricks and tiles of the synagogue in exchange for food. A Jew by the name of Chao Chin-cheng (趙金城) agreed with the Chinese delegates, helping them to obtain a fair number of small inscriptions. Chao Chin-cheng, together with his younger brother Chao Wen-kuei (趙文魁), took them to the synagogue and into the sanctuary where the Torah was kept. There he sold eight of the Torah Scrolls to the two delegates. The delegates arrived back in Shanghai in January 1851. The books they brought back were analysed and found to be of considerable antiquity, containing portions of the Old Testament. The eight Torah Scrolls are written on thick paper bound in silk and bear internal marks of form, probably of Persian origin. Six of the eight were parts of the Pentateuch: Exodus 1-6:1, Exodus 38:21-41, Leviticus 19-20, Numbers 13-15, Deuteronomy 11:26-16:17, and Deuteronomy 32. The remaining two were Siddurim.

A few months later the two Chinese delegates went to Kaifeng a second time, eventually returning in July 1851. On this occasion, not only did they bring back more material, they also brought the two Jewish brothers Chao Chin-cheng and Chao Wen-kuei with them. In their report they also described the present condition of the community. Apparently circumcision was still being practised, though the origin of this practice was not known. Among the forty other smaller Hebrew manuscripts that they returned with were about 40 Parashioth, plus a dozen or so prayer books, two Passover Haggadahs and a memorial book from which was derived considerable information regarding the history of the Jewish community from about the beginning of the 15th century to the later part of the 17th.

Chao Chin-cheng, the elder and less educated of the two Jewish brothers returned home after a brief period. Chao Wen-kuei, a teacher, stayed in Shanghai permanently. After he died, he was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Shanghai. A portion of the manuscripts acquired by the two delegates was sent to the London Society in Chatham Place, Blackfriars. As for the Torah Scrolls themselves, it was reported that one was deposited in the Library of the Missionary College in Hong Kong.

After Antoine Gaubil's final visit, the first Caucasian to arrive in Kaifeng was an American Missionary Rev. W.A.P. Martin. Martin left Beijing in either late January or early February 1886. Eventually, he arrived on the 17th of February. Upon arrival he made his way to the

site of the synagogue and, to his dismay, found that the synagogue was no more. It had been torn down between 1851 and 1866. However, the stone steles dated 1489 and 1512 were still standing. Eventually, he met up with six representatives of the seven families which still survived. They told him that it was they, themselves, who had the synagogue demolished. They had no money to make repairs; they had lost all knowledge of Hebrew and had ceased to observe ritual worship. They were so poor that they had to use the timbers and stones of the synagogue in exchange for food. On the following day, two more Jews came to see Martin. From what they told him about the members of the community, he established that, one was a money changer and others were peddlers of food and cakes, some were dealers in old clothes or handicrafts while a few were soldiers. They told Martin that there were still three to four hundred left in their community but they kept no registers and never assembled for any occasion to worship as a congregation. The last tablet, which once stood outside the entrance of the synagogue bearing the characters of the name Israel, had been sold to the Muslims. The last rabbi had died 30 or 40 years previously in the Province of Kansu. Because the community's knowledge of Hebrew died with this last rabbi, the Jews had recently considered displaying their sacred writings in the Market Place in the hope that they might catch the attention of some wandering Jews who might be able to instruct them in the language of their forefathers.

At the turn of the century, some wealthy Jews of Shanghai formed the Society for the Rescue of the Chinese Jews. But their efforts met with very little success. A handful of Kaifeng Jews actually went to stay in Shanghai, but very few among them expressed any interest in Judaism.

In March of 1910, the Canadian Church of England established a mission in Kaifeng. By 1912, Bishop William White, who has probably done more research on this subject than the combined total of all his predecessors, established contact with the Jews. By then, even the soil on which the synagogue once stood had been dug up and sold. What was left on the site was a pool of stagnant water. With the help of a Muslim neighbour, the heads of seven Jewish clans signed an agreement to hand over the 1489, 1512 and 1679 steles to the Canadian Mission. No money changed hands. The two conditions laid down were, first, that should the Jews decide to rebuild the synagogue, the steles would be returned, and second, that the steles always remain in the province of Henan. In 1914, the site itself was sold to the Mission. The pond was drained and the site was made into a playground. Bishop White had hoped that one day he would help build a hospital on the site, suitably called

the Mount Sinai Hospital.

Bishop White took an immense interest in this community. In 1919 he convened a meeting of the Jews in Kaifeng with the following aims:

1. To help them re-establish mutual fellowship in community;
2. to acquaint them with their own history;
3. to acquaint them with the religion of their forefathers and Scriptures;
4. to help them realize their connections with their co-religionists throughout the world; and,
5. to teach them about Jesus Christ who was a Jew and came to save the world.

The results were disappointing. Only a small number turned up at the meeting. In Bishop White's own words: "The conference went on for three days of discussion and social friendship. But it failed to achieve its purpose, and not a spark of interest in the glorious past and the prophetic future of Israel could be evoked." Some of the Jews who attended the conference brought along their "three-generation" tablets which listed their parents, grand-parents and great-grand-parents. What they told Bishop White was nothing new. However, they did mention one item of historical interest previously unknown and that was that up to the year 1642 they had had their own Jewish cemetery outside the East Gate of Kaifeng, and they clothed their dead in cotton as distinct from the Han Chinese custom of clothing their dead in silk.

In 1932, an American Jew, David Brown¹⁹ went to Kaifeng to investigate the status of the remaining Jews there. Five clans, Zhao, Ai, Li, Shi and Zhang, were present at a meeting with Brown. Brown asked the Jews what was their most pressing need. "A school for our children," Ai replied, "So that they may learn who they are and in what respects they are different from the other Chinese. We know we are Jews, and that our people came here many centuries ago."



David Brown with members of the Chao family in Kaifeng, 1932

Of the Jews present, one was a painter, one was a postal clerk, Zhao owned a small tea and sweets shop, and one member of the Shi clan was a teacher.

The Present Situation of the Jewish Community of Kaifeng

What is the situation of this tiny community since Brown's visit? What are the conditions of the synagogue site and how many Jews are still in Kaifeng?

There were a few more visitors who went to Kaifeng after Brown. But what they found is not significantly different from what Bishop White and Brown had already found, except, perhaps, that the whole community was in an even more depressing situation. Various people who made the trip to Kaifeng could not even find the site. According to Rabbi A. Laytner, a Jewish Canadian professor, Rene Goldman, was one of the exceptions. He managed to reach the Chiao-jin Hutung. In 1957, Professor Goldman was in Kaifeng and met with a Jewish couple from the Li clan. Because of the presence of a communist party official, the conversation was formal and restrained. Goldman somehow managed to communicate to this couple that he himself was a Jew, and he was very well received.

The cadre who accompanied Goldman stated that there were still 2,000 persons in Kaifeng who could trace their backgrounds to the Jewish community there.²⁰

Since the fall of the Gang of Four, China has opened up considerably. Since 1980, there were at least six American Jews who made their way to Kaifeng. A Jewish American physician, Ronald Kaye, said that he even held a Passover seder with the Chinese Jews there. This is a very interesting piece of information as the seder is the retelling of the Exodus in a liturgical drama, enacted by the family and guests around a festive table. There are spoken parts for children as well as adults, chorus recitations and songs. If what Dr. Kaye reported was accurate, then a lingering doubt that I have is how it came to be that the Chinese Jews still had copies of the Hagada?

I visited Kaifeng in September 1981 and was taken to the synagogue site. The stagnant pond has been drained and filled. A hospital was built on the site in 1953. The Chiao-jin Hutung remains and there are still a few Jewish families living there.

A municipal official in Kaifeng, Dong Qi-bao (董其寶), whose own

brother married a Kaifeng Jewess, told me that in the 1953 census a few hundred of the Kaifeng Jews registered their ethnic origins as Jewish. They were recognised as a racial group different from the Han without being given the formal national minority status. However, this official did tell me that before the Cultural Revolution, these Jews were given extra meat ration coupons on their festive days. What is most interesting is that the Kaifeng Jews still trace their ancestry through the maternal side which is, after all, a distinctly Jewish custom.

While the Chinese Government certainly had taken a much more relaxed attitude to this tiny community and its rituals, few of these rituals were still being practiced. It was also reported that official leave was granted to Jews on Rosh Hoshanah and Yom Kippur.²¹

From my conversation with two members of the Zhao and the Shi clans, I was told that some of the older Jews still observed a limited version of the Sabbath, such as the lighting of white candles and refraining from work. Shi Yung-yu remembered when his father used to celebrate Passover and a festival in the autumn. From his description of the rituals, I surmised it to be probably the Feast of Tabernacles. On the Passover, he remembered that his father would bake some Chinese version of Unleavened Bread and rubbed chicken blood on the doorway of the family home which is a corruption of a unique Jewish custom.

The 1489 and 1512 inscriptions are still extant on stone in Kaifeng. They are stacked one upon the other along with the 1679 stele, in a very dilapidated house in Kaifeng.²² But the Chinese official to whom I spoke obviously realized the value of these steles and I was not allowed to take photographs.

Now after a long interlude of silence, there is a tremendous revival of interest in the history of this community not only overseas but even in China itself. The Chinese Government has definitely taken a more relaxed attitude towards academic research on this subject. Professor Jin Xiao-jing wrote a short article in the Shehui Kexue Zhanxian (Social Science Front, No. 1, 1981) not only admitting her Jewish ancestry but also giving some definite news about the presence of other Jewish communities in China. According to Jin, in addition to those in Kaifeng, who still number 200, there are Jews in Shaanxi, Kansu, Qinghai, Xinjiang, Sichuan, Yunnan, North East, Jiangsu and Zhejiang. Of these communities the one in Yangzhou is the most populous. As for her own Jewish relatives, they live in Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Chengdu, Kunming, Xian, Lanzhou, Luoyang and Yangzhou.

An even more encouraging piece of news is the appointment of a distinguished Chinese Christian leader Dr. Jiang Wen-han as special Research Fellow of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences in 1979. He is assigned to write a definitive history of Judaism and Christianity in China. At the same time there continues to be an upsurge of interest overseas on this subject. Within 1982 alone, I came across at least seven newspaper articles in the United States, U.K. and Australia written by their own correspondent reporting their visits to Kaifeng to investigate this subject specifically. However, concerning this particular subject, there are still many questions left unanswered, e.g. actually how many in Kaifeng still claim to have Jewish ancestry? What happened to the Torah Scrolls which were not taken out of Kaifeng? What happened to the title deed of the synagogue site? What happened to the genealogical record of the Shi clan which Bishop White once possessed? Furthermore, there is a Chinese Jew in Taiwan, Samuel Stupa Shih, who claims that the Jews actually came at least 400 years before the Sung dynasty. As recently as 1945, he discovered a Jewish cemetery in Hangzhou. When I interviewed him last year, he was able to give me a detailed description of its location. All these questions could easily engage the energy of a team of scholars, both Jewish and Chinese. So, in closing, may I echo an appeal first made by Rabbi Anson Laytner of Seattle; namely, that Chinese and Jewish scholars come together to cooperate on a comprehensive research study to help resolve some of the many mysteries that still surround this most interesting of communities in China - the Jews of Kaifeng. (Text of lectures delivered at the Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong on 14th January 1983 and at the Asian Centre, University of Philippines, Diliman, Manila, on 25th February 1983.)

FOOTNOTES:

15. Gozani, J.P.'s letter to Father Joseph Suarez: Lettres edificantes 1707. A condensed English translation is found in Bishop W.C. White's Chinese Jews.

16. Lettres edificantes.

17. For details, see Michael Pollak, Ibid.

18. Leslie, Donald, Ibid.

19. Michael Pollak, Ibid.

20. Rabbi Anson Laytner.

21. Parks, Michael: Los Angeles Times, 23rd November 1982 and San

Francisco Chronicle, 28th February 1983.

22. Various visitors have referred to this building as the Museum of Kaifeng. In fact, there was no museum in Kaifeng after it ceased to be the provincial capital of Henan in 1929.

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