



# Points East

THE SINO-JUDAIC INSTITUTE 中國猶太研究院 מכון סיני יהודי

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## Matrilineality and Female Conversion with Regard to the Chinese Jews

By Jordan Paper

One of the reasons often provided for not accepting the descendants of the Chinese Jews as Jewish is that because of assimilation, they follow the Chinese pattern of patrilineality rather than the Jewish pattern of matrilineality. But when did the question of Jewish identity move from having a Jewish mother to one of “matrilineal descent”? Where did this understanding of Judaism being matrilineal come from? In Chabad.org, we find:

...the biblical inference for matrilineal descent: “You shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughter to his son, and you shall not take his daughter for your son, for he will cause your child to turn away from Me, and they will worship the gods of others” (Deuteronomy 7:3–4).

Yet this quotation from the Torah has nothing to do with matrilineality but solely concerns endogamy.

The Chinese Jews, at least in the past, partially followed this biblical injunction regarding endogamy, as they did not marry their daughters to non-Jews, because in China, women followed the religion of their spouse. This was not a problem, with regard to sons, because of they married out, their wives would follow Judaism, the religion of their spouse.

There would have been little need for young women to find spouses outside of the Jewish community, but for male literati, the situation was different. Jewish literati would probably have had at least two wives, and there may have been insufficient women in the community, given their need to carry out both familial and official duties in two different locations (as Chinese officials could not serve in their home areas). Besides, marrying outside of the community would be necessary to maintain sufficient genetic variety for a healthy small population.

The literal meaning of matrilineal is that descent and inheritance is understood as based on the mother. There is nothing in the Torah to suggest matrilineality in Israelite culture, and the entire work unquestionably points to patrilineality. All descent lines found there are patrilineal. And thus traditional prayers to today refer to the Patriarchs not the Matriarchs, which they must if Judaism is matrilineal. And there is no question that the Chinese Jews revered the Patriarchs, as a wing of the Kaifeng synagogue was dedicated to rituals honoring them.

(continued on page 3)

## Youtai or Yicileye: Jew or Israelite? Kaifeng Judaism Today

By Noam Urbach

Excerpted from his essay “Kaifeng Judaism Today: Revival or Reintroduction?” in *Becoming Jewish: New Jews and Emerging Jewish Communities in a Globalized World*, Tudor Parfitt and Netanel Fisher, eds. (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016).

While there has been much hype over the last three or four decades concerning the prospects for a Jewish revival in Kaifeng—prospects that are hindered by strong political constraints—the extent to which such a revival is, should, or could be a reversion to the sinicised Sino-Judaism that was once a living part of the city, or, instead, that Judaism might flower contemporary Kaifeng on the model of the Judaism which we are familiar with in Israel and North America...

This chapter is based primarily on five months of field work in Kaifeng in 2000, several shorter visits there in 2005 and 2007, as well as extensive interviews and collections of primary sources in China, Israel, the United States and Canada...I will distinguish between two approaches I term Youtai vs. Yicileye: the former concentrates on reintroducing “authentic” Judaism to Kaifeng, while the later would revive the sinified Judaism unique to Kaifeng...I will argue that the latter approach, in addition to having greater historical and cultural significance, stands a better chance of gaining the support of the local government and harmonizing with the Chinese social and political environment.

## Two Approaches to Reclaiming Judaism in Kaifeng

...there is an apparent distinction that may be drawn between two approaches, which I suggest calling the Youtai approach and the Yicileye approach. As noted, both are transliterations: Youtai, the transliteration of Yehudi chosen by Protestant translators of the Bible into Chinese in the 19th century, is the standard contemporary Chinese term for “Jews” as well as “Judaism” (Youtai jiao). Yicileye, a transliteration of “Israel” found only on the historic tablets from the synagogue, is the term for the sectarian Sino-Judaic religion of the past. Youtai is Judaism as known to us today; Yicileye is the sinicized syncretic religion studied by [Irene] Eber and [Andrew] Plaks.

The Youtai approach, I suggest, contemplates a Jewish re-

(continued on page 5)

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Featured Articles:

Matrilineality and Female Conversion with Regard to the Chinese Jews.....	1
Youtai or Yicileye: Jew or Israelite? Kaifeng Judaism Today.....	1

<b>From the Editor</b> .....	2
------------------------------	---

<b>To the Editor</b> .....	3
----------------------------	---

<b>In the Field</b> .....	3
---------------------------	---

### Articles:

Asia and the Jewish World: A Global Leadership Conversation...	6
Jewish Communities in Asia – A New Centre for Global Jewry.....	7
Shanghai Sanctuary: The Musical .	9
Assistance Given to Jewish Refugees .....	9

<b>Book Nook</b> .....	8-9
------------------------	-----

Globalization, Translation and Transmission

Under the Shadow of the Rising Sun: Japan and the Jews during the Holocaust Era

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Total:	220

## FROM THE EDITOR

Reports from China suggest that the underground church movement continues to grow and that governmental actions, such as tearing down crosses, have mostly been for show and intimidation.

We've also had several reports that say Timothy Lerner, the American Judeo-Christian missionary, has been back in Kaifeng, this time to open a church. Although he was picked up for questioning by the authorities, it does demonstrate how easy it is to circumvent governmental policy, if not for foreigners like Lerner, then certainly for Chinese Christians, both those in China proper and particularly those in Hong Kong. China is strongly opposed to the presence of foreign missionaries on its soil, but the Hong Kong Chinese are perceived as less of a threat to Chinese political integrity and appear to operate with relative impunity.

So if it is still easy to open unauthorized churches, how should we consider the situation of the Kaifeng Jews?

The 1953 policy stated that they are to be considered Han Chinese but, at the same time, they were not to be discriminated against. Yet, unlike other Han Chinese, at least some of them retain as well a unique identity as being Jews or Yicileye. (See Noam Urbach's lead article in this issue for a provocative distinction between the two terms.) The Kaifeng Jews remain a distinct group but their culture/religion is being suppressed. I wouldn't call this anti-Semitism, because there is no history or evidence of this in China, but it is certainly seems discriminatory.

I call on the Chinese government to fully implement its longstanding policy and allow the Kaifeng Jews to practice their cultural patrimony. And I call on Israel and Diaspora Jewish organizations to speak up on behalf of the rights of this small but incredibly tenacious branch of our tribe.

Anson Laytner

## Points East

Anson Laytner, Publisher

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## Letter to the Editor

Dear Sirs,

We have read Jordan Paper's article about Longstanding Chinese Policy on Religion in the November issue of Points East. The article is indeed informative.

However, what this paper ignored, which is also instructive, is the Chinese government's attitudes towards Christianity. The most obvious point is that Christianity in China is growing by leaps and bounds. Indeed China may become the country with the most Christians in the world, in the not too distant future. These dramatic events are occurring with the clear consent of the Chinese government. Where in the past, Bibles had to be smuggled into China, they are now printed in China. Churches, including home churches are generally not harried (there are exceptions). Clearly, there is a spiritual and ethical need in China, among the Chinese population, and of course, among foreigners in China.

The point is that while Dr. Paper is largely correct about the policy of Chinese government towards religion in China, including missionary activities in China, he dismissed the winking of Chinese government's eye towards acts, including missionary activity and home churches, that is essentially forbidden.

Similarly, with Judaism, the Chinese government agreed to have the Jewish community in Shanghai register in its own name, recognizing Judaism as one of the accepted religions in China.

While one cannot ignore the crackdown on the Kaifeng Jews, the origin of the crackdown is not as simple as Dr. Paper portends.

Sincerely,

David C. Buxbaum  
Anderson.guangzhou@anallp.com

## In the Field

- StandWithUs Broadcasts to Chinese Audiences

StandWithUs Asia's Chinese-language podcast, "Israel Diaries," recently interviewed Israeli Nobel Laureate, Professor Robert Israel Aumann of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The professor spoke about his breakthrough achievements in game theory and his analysis of the Middle East and Israel-China relations before concluding with a blessing for the Chinese people. "Israel Diaries" is growing fast, recently reaching 30,000 followers on the Chinese podcast app Ximalaya.

- Mazal Tovs

Congrats to Moshe Yehuda Bernstein on completing his PhD in Asian Studies at the University of Western Australia. His dissertation, "Globalization, Translation and Transmission: Sino Judaic Cultural Identity in Kaifeng, China," has just been published by Peter Lang AG. See Book Nook for details.

Rabbi Marvin Tokayer was bestowed with "The Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Rays" award by Japanese Ambassador Takahashi at the Consul General of Japan in New York on 6 February 2017.

## Matrilineality

(continued from page 1)

Patrilineality is often associated with patrilocality. Indeed, Judaism is one of the most patrilineal religious traditions in human history, whereas Chinese culture through the long sweep of its history has never been as absolutely patrilineal. For example, from the standpoint of theology, in China the numinous has always been understood to be a complimentary conjoining of female and male essences, necessary for creation and life; e.g., yin & yang and Sky & Earth. And religious rituals required equal complementarity. When the emperor as chief priest of the world made offerings at the Sky and Earth altars outside of the palace, his consort carried out parallel rituals inside the palace, thus maintaining gender complementarity. There have long been female Daoist priests along with male priests, and Buddhist nuns could be abbots of mixed gender monasteries (males and females each have their own wings). Chinese are as likely to call on nuns for priestly needs regarding masses for the family dead as they do monks.

In Ashkenazi Judaism, the only mode of Judaism I am familiar with aside from Chinese Judaism, descent is clearly reckoned patrilineally:

- 1) One inherits religious roles, such as being a cohan, from the father not the mother.
- 2) One is called to the Torah, etc., by one's Hebrew name, which is so-and-so son of so-and-so (one's father).

The culture is also unquestionably patrilineal, and sometimes misogynist:

- 1) Religious education and study is traditionally for males only.
- 2) Ritual roles in the synagogue are traditionally for males only, and the synagogue at other times functions as a male clubhouse.
- 3) The minyan traditionally is exclusively male—as are many of the mitzvot, especially those that are time-bound.
- 4) All power in a family belongs to the male (e.g., only a male can divorce a spouse).

Matrilineality is usually found in combination with matrilocality and matri-



focality. Prior to horticulture, it seems that descent was not formally reckoned or was bilateral. For example, Northwest Coast indigenous traditions of North America, traditionally dependent on fishing, hunting sea mammals and foraging shellfish and berries, developed a very elaborate culture with complex rituals. Individuals inherited ritual prerogatives from both their mother's and their father's clan.

Matrilineality seems to begin with horticulture, with matrilineal clans controlling the horticultural (female gardening) fields and the matrilineal and matrilineal clan longhouse residences, often under the control of the "clan mother". It is only with agriculture (male farming) and herding that we first come across patrilineal patterns, especially after socio-economic hierarchies develop.

Based on ethnology of the last century, in matrilineal cultures certain patterns seem to be universal, extending beyond its literal meaning of inheritance and descent lines. For example, the role of father that we are familiar with in patrilineal cultures is found in maternal uncles, who relate to their sister's children as fathers do in patrilineal cultures. Hence, if Judaism were matrilineal, then

- 1) One's ritual name would be so&so son of so&so (one's mother – not one's father).
- 2) Ritual roles would be inherited from the mother, such as being a cohan. Indeed, one would expect that cohanim would be women, who would inherit the role from their mothers.
- 3) Uncles would be responsible for their sister's children's religious upbringing not the father.

Moreover, matrilineal cultures are often matrifocal, so that the chief rabbis in Jerusalem would be women not men, and wives not husbands could divorce their spouses. If the above appears un-Jewish, then it merely emphasizes that Judaism is patrilineal not matrilineal.

Identification by having a Jewish mother is now a requirement of membership in the Jewish community; this is not the same as matrilineality. There is no indication that any mode of Judaism is or ever was matrilineal. Thus, if

matrilineality is a necessary aspect of a Jewish community, then there simply are no Jews nor have there ever been Jews, because Judaism is clearly patrilineal.

A second reason often provided as to why the Chinese Jews were never Jewish is that when Jewish merchants reached Kaifeng and took Chinese wives a thousand years ago, the women did not convert according to the halacha, i.e. traditional norms. But it is exceedingly unlikely that there existed in Kaifeng in the 11th-century, three rabbis to form a rabbinic court; indeed, it is most unlikely that there were any rabbis there at all during the early stage of community development. For a Jewish community to seek and hire a rabbi, they would need to have sufficient numbers to build and support a synagogue, and this would take more than a single generation.

Nowhere in the Tanach is there mention of formal conversion, although there are references to Israelites marrying non-Israelites, including Moses, who was given an Egyptian wife by a pharaoh. Ruth is presented as an exemplary woman, yet she was a foreigner married to an Israelite with no consideration of formal conversion, although it is clear that she adopted the religion and ethnicity of her mother-in-law after her husband's death – clear evidence of patrilocality. In traditional Chinese society, which was patrilineal, a woman was never a member of her natal family, but of the family into which she married or even to which she was betrothed, which usually took place at an early age, as it was an arrangement between families.

Since the focus of Chinese Religion is on family itself, including the dead, the living, and those yet born, a Chinese woman was of the religion of the family into which she married. Her filial piety, the major religious imperative, is primarily directed to her in-laws, and only secondarily to her own parents. On her death, her name-plaque will be on the altar of her husband or betrothed's family and she will be buried among the graves of that family. A female who dies unbetrothed or unmarried has no one to care for her, to feed her spirit, and she is understood to become a wandering ghost prone to possessing people. If the possession proves to be beneficent rather than malevolent she may

come to be understood as a deity. Major deities such as Guanyin (in general Chinese Religion, not especially as a Buddhist Bodhisattva) and Mazu (the only deity recognized by UNESCO at the request of the current Chinese government) were unmarried women. For this reason, natal families will pay a poor man to marry a deceased unmarried girl (usually as a second wife), that is, her ghost, so that her spirit will have a family to bury and care for her. The marriage procession is combined with a funeral procession and is a most strange sight to behold.

Hence, a Chinese woman who married a Chinese man would expect to carry out the rituals in the household appropriate to her husband's religion, as well as other rituals expected of her, such as the use of the mikva (ritual bath) after menstruation. (It is interesting to note that purification after menstruation also is not foreign to Chinese customs.) If we lived in China at that time and we perceived a woman keeping a kosher home, preparing for shabbat and properly lighting the candles, and using the mikva when appropriate, would we not perceive her as Jewish? If invited to eat in her home, would we ask to see a properly signed certificate before eating? Would she not be, like Ruth, a Jewish woman without the benefit of modern conversion?

When the Khazar kingdom became Jewish, were there individual formal conversions of the entire kingdom? Similarly, when a kingdom in Yemen became Jewish or when Berber tribes became Jewish, did they undergo individual formal conversions? It is possible, of course, but unlikely. When Jewish merchants went up the Rhine to northern Europe, settled there and married local women, did these women formally convert? How would that have been possible, there being no rabbis before a community grew large enough to build a synagogue and need one? Ashkenazi formed from a synthesis of Germanic, Slavic and Jewish elements and amalgamated with the Turkic Khazars when they were forced northwards out of their traditional region, which later became the Russian Pale. The point of this is that if the Chinese Jews are not Jewish because initially the women were not formally converted, then neither are the Ashkenazim.

One of the primary reasons that the Chinese government does not recognize the current descendants of the Chinese Jews as Jews is because the Jewish community in general, and Israel in particular, does not accept these Jews as Jews. A major reason often given by Jews outside of China is that the Chinese Jews shifted from matrilineality to patrilineality due to assimilation. But this is nonsense; Judaism is not and never has been matrilineal. A second major reason given is that the descendants of the original Jewish settlers in China are not Jewish is because they did not have Jewish mothers, that is, Chinese women were not formally converted, but instead simply adopted Jewish religious practices and entered into their husbands' clan and people. Logically these requirements should apply to all modes of Judaism in their distant past, not just China, so if this is a necessary standard, then none of the Ashkenazim today are Jewish.

If the Chinese Jews could be accepted as Jewish by the larger Jewish community, this would go a long way in helping the Chinese Jews today reestablish their unique mode of Judaism, to the enrichment of Judaism globally.

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1. [http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/601092/jewish/Why-Is-Jewishness-Matrilineal.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/601092/jewish/Why-Is-Jewishness-Matrilineal.htm) [accessed 7 January 2017]

2. For further discussion on this topic, see Jordan Paper, *The Spirits Are Drunk: Comparative Approaches to Chinese Religion* (State University of New York Press, 1995): Chapter 8: "Female Spirits and Spirituality in Chinese Religion."

3. Based on linguistics (re. Yiddish), genetics and the formal clothing of the Haredi. For a number of references in this regard, see Jordan Paper, *The Theology of the Chinese Jews* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012): 5-16.

## Youtai

*(continued from page 1)*

vival in Kaifeng in which Judaism – as understood in Israel, the United States, and other Jewish centres – is the focus. Because Judaism in Kaifeng has disintegrated over the centuries, such a revival requires that "true" Judaism be reintroduced to Kaifeng from the outside.

The Yicileye approach, on the other hand, focuses on reviving the autochthonous Sino-Judaic faith of Kaifeng, where it developed through the meeting, a millennium ago, of the Judaism that came from the West with local Chinese or Confucian culture. It is this unique phenomenon that is worthy of being revived.

I argue that the Yicileye approach carries greater historical and religious significance, is more acceptable politically, and is therefore a more feasible goal. The strong antagonism toward Bishop White and his attempt to take custody of the meager assets of a deteriorated community in the early 20th century expresses something that is not limited to that era. A similar antagonism may be aroused (and to some extent has already been) by a foreign-led Youtai revival today. Historically, foreign-led religious change is regarded in China with suspicion, if not as outright taboo. The case of Buddhism's penetration of China is the most obvious example: rather than being viewed as a religion introduced or an outside invader, Buddhism is perceived in China as a religion that China sought out and imported, which then, by way of sinification, became "legitimately" Chinese. A locally led revival of the Yicileye sect might be far more acceptable than the re-importation of the foreign Youtai religion.

The Youtai approach is continuously challenged by the need to prove to outside Jewish institutions that the descendants are "true Jews," because claiming to be Jewish by descent tends to impress only the most liberal denominations in North America. Conversion is an individual act that does rest on any prior identity as Jews. With the Yicileye approach, on the other hand, revival of sinicized Judaism in Kaifeng does not require and is not dependent on foreign recognition of local Judaism—not by any American Jewish organization or stream, not by any Christian denomination, and not even by the Israeli Rabbinate. Nor does it necessarily have anything to do with Zionism or a fulfillment of prophecies about the exiles' return from the four corners of the world or even particularly from "the land of Sinim," wherever we locate that country today. It can simply be viewed as what it is: the recon-

struction not of Judaism (Youtai), but of the local Yicileye sect.

Viewed this way, a reconstruction of the Hall of Purity and Truth (qingzhen-si), should the plan be revived, would be seen for what it is – the revival of a local tradition, which amalgamated foreign and Chinese religious ideas and traditions. Although the international significance of such a reconstruction need not be denied, it can still be regarded as a wholly Chinese event, as integral to local Chinese tradition as the nearby Xiang guosi Buddhist temple. International political sensitivities need not be aroused. That, rather than immigration to Israel (en masse or individual), would revive the unique Yicileye jiao that was born in Kaifeng. Reconstruction depends completely on the government. As officials argued in the 1910s and again in the early 1990s, the restoration of a forgotten local cultural asset in the public space of Kaifeng is a service to Chinese culture in general and to Kaifeng in particular. Therefore, it is fair to say that the failure to carry through with the reconstruction plan did a disservice to Kaifeng and China.

A focus on aliya is related to the Youtai approach, due to the legal conditions for aliya. Since Shi Lei's failed attempt in the early 2000s to gain recognition by the Interior Ministry as ethnically Jewish, aliya from Kaifeng has been based exclusively on conversion to Judaism. Because conversion is a process technically indifferent to historical background (any non-Jew is free to convert), the aliya of individuals from Kaifeng, regardless of numbers, carries no weight in terms of Israeli recognition of the descendants as Jews. Furthermore, it creates an atmosphere where the more a descendant adopts more purely Jewish beliefs and practices (Youtai), i.e., the more he distances himself from the Sino-Judaism of Kaifeng (Yicileye), the better his chances are of being accepted by Shavei Israel for aliya.

As in any discussion of religion in China, besides the official layer, we must look for the folk religious layer. In my collection of photos taken in Kaifeng, by myself and by many others before and since, the Jin family graveyard is a recurring theme. In some pictures from the 1980s, American Jewish tour groups are seen led by their rabbi in reciting the kaddish mourner's prayer;

in others they are seen picking up a small stone from the ground and placing it on a tombstone, in keeping with a Jewish custom. On the other hand, in several photos from around the same period, family members are seen visiting the same graveyard during the Qingming festival, also known as the “grave sweeping festival,” with no accompanying foreign visitors. Here, they are holding a handful of paper, the type used in China for the ritual of burning paper that is part of ancestor worship in Chinese folk religion.

Clearly, the two rituals practiced in the same small family graveyard are of two different traditions. Their contemporary practice is not mixed. Foreign Jews do one thing; the family members, when on their own, do another. The lure of aliya promotes Youtai culture, which essentially denies all Chinese elements that are central to the sinified Yicileye culture. It is rituals such as the burning of paper at a grave, a Chinese ritual inherent to the Sino-Judaism that developed in Kaifeng through the sinification that Eber and others have written about, that should be maintained as part of the revival of Yicileye culture in Kaifeng.

As the final touches were being made to this chapter, dramatic news arrived from Kaifeng about an apparent government campaign to halt all Jewish communal activity. The Jewish centre was recently ordered to shut down, the Sino-Judaic Institute and Shavei Israel educational programs stopped; descendants report that they are being monitored more closely than before. Tours of “Jewish China” have been denied access to Kaifeng. But the most severe measure, reportedly, is the removal of signs marking the former Jewish area and synagogue. Former SJL president Anson Laytner, who reported this news, posits that the main reason for the crackdown is the recent application for political asylum in the United States, on grounds of religious persecution, by one individual from Kaifeng. If true, it seems reminiscent of the 1995–6 change of policy which culminated in the campaign to delete Youtai as an ethnic group from the residential documents. That measure too was a direct response to the actions of a few individuals who attempted to gain recognition by Israel as Jews. In both cases, a severe measure was applied with a similar goal – to eradicate any quasi-official rec-

ognition of the existence of a group called “Jewish descendants,” Youtai, or any other variant, in contemporary Kaifeng. This also indicates that however lenient the government may seem toward quiet initiatives to rejuvenate Jewish life—Passover seders and Sabbath dinners, teaching stints by foreign volunteers, or even selective aliya to Israel—once an overt step has been taken, even if by a single individual trying to challenge the status quo, the government will have no qualms about introducing measures aimed at delegitimizing any claim of a Jewish presence in Kaifeng. It also demonstrates that the re-establishment of an open Jewish presence in Kaifeng continues to depend on government support. Whether such a presence would be of an imported Youtai type or a localized Yicileye type may impact both its short-term and long-term sustainability.

*Noam Urbach has a Master's in East Asian Studies from Hebrew University, with a thesis on the Kaifeng Jewish Revival in Post-Mao China. In 2005-07, he was a teacher of Hebrew and Talmud at the Centre for Judaic and Interreligious Studies at Shandong University, China. Currently, he teaches Chinese language at Bar-Ilan University and hopes to complete his Ph.D. research at the University of Haifa on the politics of religion in China. His published essays on the Kaifeng Jews include: “What Prevented the Reconstruction of the Chinese Synagogue? Kaifeng Jews between Revival and Obliteration,” in Youtai—Presence and Perception of Jews and Judaism in China, Peter Kupfer, ed. (Peter Lang, 2008). Noam is also founder of ShmoozApp.com, a mobile communications startup. He may be contacted at nurbrach@gmail.com.*

i. See Zhou Xun. *Chinese Perceptions of the 'Jews' and Judaism: A History of the Youtai* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2001), 12-16. The term Youtai also carries a derogatory connotation. The first of its two characters, pronounced you, includes the radical for “dog.” The Protestant translators clearly made reference to the Chinese trend of adding a “dog” or “animal” radical to the names of foreign peoples, to express the view that all non-Chinese are barbarians. Although most people today are not aware of the derogatory connotation of Youtai, this knowledge provides Kaifeng descendants another reason to prefer Yicileye over Youtai.

ii. [Editor: See Irene Eber, “Kaifeng Jews Revisited: Sinification as Affirmation of Identity,” *Monumenta Serica* 41 (1993): 231-47 and Andrew H. Plaks, “The Confucianization of the Kaifeng Jews: Interpretations of the Kaifeng Stelae Inscriptions,” *In The Jews of China. Volume One: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Jonathan Goldstein, 36-49. New York: M.E. Sharpe

Armonk, 1999. To these essays, one should also add Jordan Paper, *The Theology of the Chinese Jews, 1000-1850*, Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2012.]

iii. “Behold, these shall come from far, and lo, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Sinim” (Isa. 49:12), a verse that has repeatedly been romantically quoted as referring to China. The notion is absurd, because the use of “sin” to refer to China was introduced to the west only during the Qin dynasty, centuries after the text was written.

iv. Anson Laytner, “Jewish Troubles in Kaifeng.” *Times of Israel*, April 28, 2016, <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/jewish-troubles-in-kaifeng-china/>.

## Asia and the Jewish World: A Global Leadership Conversation

[A two-day conference was held on October 30–November 1, 2016 at the Fairmont Peace Hotel in Shanghai by the Jewish Funders Network ([www.jfunders.org](http://www.jfunders.org)). It built on the success of previous engagements in Hong Kong 2014 and Singapore 2015, which brought together Jewish business leaders, investors, funders, foundation professionals, and volunteer activists who care deeply about Jewish peoplehood, international networking, and Jewish-Asian relations.

Participants from across Asia, Australia, Canada, the United States, and Israel came together to consider the role China (and Asia more broadly) is increasingly playing in the global Jewish conversation, and its relationship with Israel.

The keynote speakers were:

Dr Robert Lawrence Kuhn, a public intellectual, international corporate strategist and investment banker, and a China political/economics commentator featured on the BBC, CCTV, CNN, Bloomberg, and other media, and a columnist in the *South China Morning Post* and *China Daily*. He recently gave the keynote address at the “China-Israel Cooperation Conference”, hosted by the China-Israel Task Force and Israel’s Prime Minister’s Office.

Amotz Asa-El, the *Jerusalem Post*’s senior commentator and former executive editor, *Middle East* commentator for *Dow Jones’ MarketWatch*; political commentator for Israeli TV’s *Chanel 1 English News*; and a senior editor of the *Jerusalem Report* newsmagazine. He is author of *The Diaspora and the Lost Tribes of Israel* (Universe 2004), a history of the Jewish people’s wanderings.

The following is a report by one of the participants.” Ed.]

## Jewish Communities in Asia – A New Centre for Global Jewry

*This article originally appeared in eJewishPhilanthropy.com and is reprinted with permission.*

By Simone Szalmuk-Singer

Asia is not an obvious location for the development and growth of a global Jewish community. Yet, on the streets of Shanghai, Beijing, Hong Kong and Singapore, Jewish identity and Israel sit centre stage for the increasing number of Jews living in these cities.

The Jewish communities of Asia are growing. Israeli companies are creating successful business ventures across Asia, satisfying an almost insatiable appetite for Israeli technology and innovation. Jews from around the world are pursuing diverse career opportunities in the region. European Jews leaving countries such as France are increasingly choosing Asia as their new home.

At the recent Global Leadership Conversation in Shanghai, the exploration of the evolving Jewish phenomenon in Asia was surprising and inspiring. The outcomes of the gathering reflect brave visionary leadership and a solid conviction to harness boundless communal potential.

This year was the third year in which the Pratt Foundation, the Jewish Funders' Network and the Australian Jewish Funders convened a gathering in Asia to examine the needs and vast potential of the growing Jewish communities in the region. Business leaders, philanthropists and communal leaders from Asia, the United States, Israel and Australia came together as they had at preceding events in Singapore 2015 and Hong Kong 2014.

Attending for the first time, the vibrancy of the Jewish communities in Asia was immediately palpable to me. I was challenged to consider the role and possibilities for Jewish philanthropy in this innovative Jewish environment.

Israel is leading the current Jewish charge towards Asia. The nature and depth of the mutually beneficial relationship between Israel and China illustrates the importance of Asia in a new Jewish landscape. Amotz Asa-El succinctly stated, "While China develops Israel's physical infrastructure, Israel is helping develop China's knowledge infrastructure." Asa-El described the central role that Chinese construction

companies are playing in developing Israel's highways, roads, rail tunnels and mass transit systems. While at the same time, Israeli universities and businesses are providing China with knowledge, technology and innovation.

At the Shanghai event we heard that whilst commercial relationships thrive, cultural differences remain challenging. Israelis traditionally prefer to close deals in a much shorter time frame than their Chinese counterparts who prefer to develop a trusted relationship or *guanxi*. These challenges are not however insurmountable as, in the current climate of bilateral commerce and development, compromise and solutions can nearly always be found.

The gathering hosted a panel of entrepreneurs from all over the world who each described their experiences of living and working in Shanghai and Beijing. The unexpected discovery and development of their individual Jewish identity in China, as opposed to countries with sophisticated Jewish infrastructure such as Australia, the US and Israel, emerged as a striking common theme. Some confessed that they found it easier to be a Jew in China than in Israel or in the US. During a visit to Moishe House Shanghai, residents and alumni passionately spoke of how they connected with people through inclusive events regularly hosted at the house. Their new bonds and connections with Jews from all over the world are deep, genuine and enduring. For so many, their global Jewish family formed at a time and place they never foresaw.

Larger Jewish communities in Asia gives rise to increased needs as well as new potential. A pivotal moment occurred during a robust panel discussion between communal leaders from Beijing, Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore. The panelists shared the challenges and dreams they hold for their communities and spoke candidly of their wish to ensure that their children will grow up aware of their Jewish identity.

It became abundantly clear to everyone in the room during this session that these communities can help each other, learn from each other and benefit from their unique parallel environments. By bringing the different Jewish communities across Asian cities together each year, the consequential connections made have in turn facilitated the discovery of common challenges and shared visions. We arguably witnessed an historical juncture at which true inter-com-

munity collaboration in Asia was born. These annual gatherings have begun to build a community of Jews in Asia, a single conversation at a time.

The precise format of the evolving community is not yet known; it may be a council, community collaboration or simply a regular communication protocol. The communities in Asia working together will determine the ultimate structure that works for them. Whilst this is not the first attempt to connect these Jewish communities, it appears the most promising, as the communities themselves are now ready to take up the challenge. Their collaboration with each other will strengthen their ability to retain and grow a sense of Jewish identity amongst their members, current and future.

Importantly, they are not embarking on this process alone, as they will continue to be supported in their joint endeavors by the experience, networks and infrastructure of their fellow Jews who watched the commonalities surface. The onus falls upon all of us to ensure tangible progress continues.

Developing a strong collaborative relationship between and with the Jewish communities in Asia creates possibilities extending beyond Asia to benefit global Jewry. The pivot towards Asia is bringing together Jews from all corners of the world, creating a new centre for Jewish life and fresh opportunities for traditional and pluralist engagement.

Possibilities are further amplified by Israel's central role. The Jewish State is reaping economic benefits as well as enhancing ties with a broad range of economies, which in turn may assist Israel's international geo-political interests.

Thinking globally provides scope for new and exciting Jewish philanthropic collaborations both into and out of Asia. The power of such partnerships is already visible in the new inter-community structure that is starting to take shape. The process that began three years ago and continued this year in Shanghai is an instructive example of visionary international community-building philanthropy.

*Simone Szalmuk-Singer is a Board member of the AJF and Jewish Care Victoria as well as co-founder and co-editor of Jewish Women Of Words, an online publication for emerging and established Jewish women writers. She may be reached at [sszalmuk@yahoo.com.au](mailto:sszalmuk@yahoo.com.au).*



## BOOK NOOK

### Globalization, Translation and Transmission: Sino-Judaic Cultural Identity in Kaifeng, China

*Globalization, Translation and Transmission*, is the title of a new book by Moshe Yehuda Bernstein published by Peter Lang AG of Bern, Switzerland. Its publication was sponsored by a grant from the Sino-Judaic Institute and is based on his PhD dissertation in Asian Studies at the University of Western Australia.

Bernstein's work is an original and comprehensive historical ethnology exploring the transmission of Sino-Judaic identity in Kaifeng, both in the bygone community of the Yicileye ("Israelites") and their modern descendants. Using the theoretical lens of critical holism, he examines "identity" from both external and internal approaches. Part One first surveys the perceptions of the Chinese Jews by the Han, Hui and Christian missionaries; it then examines the synagogal epigraphy, which reveals the inner, subjective meanings fundamental to Jewish self-identification. In the second part, he investigates the socio-economic factors affecting the contemporary revival of Sino-Judaic identity following China's policy of "Openness and Reform", and then the cultural activism from within the community, negotiating the constraints of an ambiguous 1953 government policy. An intermediary chapter distinguishes between the descendants' authenticity claims and the authentication processes, in Israel and China, which do not recognize their claims to Jewish ethnic or religious status. The book's final chapter is an account of his fieldwork in Kaifeng in September 2013, coinciding with the Festival of Sukkot and China's Mid-Autumn Festival.

Bernstein argues that the linguistic and cultural translation of Judaism into Chinese imbued a blended Sino-Judaic culture with an adaptability that enabled its endurance for eight centuries. The contemporary revival has likewise generated a hybrid identity, as exchanges with outsider individuals and NGOs have shaped the group's cultural sense. A recurrent theme in this ethnology is the need to contextualize Sino-Judaic identity within the broader host culture of China. He maintains the common Chinese practice of ancestor veneration, which resonates with Judaism, is the magnet of Sino-Judaic cultural identity, both in its historic and current forms.

While Bernstein's dissertation foreshadowed the political pressures currently experienced by the Kaifeng community, it was submitted in April 2016, just before orders came out forbidding the

group all foreign contact. On September 25 2016 in the article "Jewish and Chinese: Explaining a Shared Identity", New York Times reporter Chris Buckley interviewed the author on the situation in Kaifeng. Bernstein expressed his view that, despite the repressive measures, Sino-Judaic cultural identity in Kaifeng will ultimately endure:

The recent official pressure has pushed Kaifeng Jewish culture back in time. They are no longer allowed contact with foreigners, as was the case before the "reform and opening up" that began in 1978. As well, they are no longer allowed gatherings in communal venues but instead conduct Friday night services in their homes, like they did in the 1990s.

Although this appears to be a setback, my view is that the current situation could benefit the community in the long run. The support of the foreign NGOs in Kaifeng has always been a double-edged sword. It enabled the community to better develop practical tools to revive their heritage, but it has often been a cause of governmental concern, the likes of which we are witnessing today.

With the tools they have been given, they are now more capable than before of sustaining a kind of grass-roots Sino-Judaic identity. Their Hebrew-language skills, performance of the Shabbat Evening liturgy, celebration of the festivals, Torah study and the aliyah of many of their family members and friends, all ensure that they have the means to move forward independently despite official pressures. The historical Kaifeng Jews displayed ingenuity, resourcefulness and resilience in maintaining their heritage, and the contemporary community has the same traits to persevere.

In his conclusion, Bernstein argues for a re-evaluation of Chinese policy to conform to the 1953 guidelines originally endorsed by Chairman Mao. While denying recognition of ethnic status, those parameters nonetheless called for the government to take initiatives to allow the Kaifeng Jews their cultural activities. He concludes that one such initiative should be the construction of a Kaifeng Jewish History Museum—a project that has remained on the drawing board for over two decades due to the torpor of China's political bureaucracy. Any endeavor to promote Kaifeng's unique Sino-Judaic heritage would confer benefits not only to the Jewish descendants, but to the city of Kaifeng and China as a nation.

"Globalization, Translation and Transmission: Sino-Judaic Cultural Identity in Kaifeng, China" by Moshe Y Bernstein is available for online order at Amazon.com and Peter Lang ([www.peter.lang](http://www.peter.lang)).



### Under the Shadow of the Rising Sun: Japan and the Jews during the Holocaust Era

by Meron Medzini

Academic Studies Press 2016 | 9781618115386 | 290 pp. | \$79.00 USD | Hardcover

Summary: Even before Japan joined Nazi Germany in the Axis Alliance, its leaders clarified to the Nazi regime that the attitude of the Japanese government and people to the Jews was totally different than that of the official German position and that it had no intention of taking measures against the Jews that could be seen as racially motivated. During World War II some 40,000 Jews found themselves under Japanese occupation in Manchuria, China and countries of South East Asia. Virtually all of them survived the war, unlike their brethren in Europe. This book traces the evolution of Japan's policy towards the Jews from the beginning of the 20th century, the existence of anti-Semitism in Japan, and why Japan ignored repeated Nazi demands to become involved in the "final solution".

#### Table of Contents

- Chapter 1: Early Jewish Settlers in Japan
- Chapter 2: Jewish Settlers in Japan at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century
- Chapter 3: Japanese Images of the Jews: Myths, Canards and Fears
- Chapter 4: Nazi Antisemitism and its Influence on Japan in the 1920's and 1930's
- Chapter 5: Japanese Experts on Jews, Judaism, and Zionism
- Chapter 6: Japan and the Jews of Manchuria Beginning in 1931
- Chapter 7: Passports, Entry Visas, and Transit Visas: Japan's policy toward Jewish Refugees (1935-1941)
- Chapter 8: The Jews of Shanghai under Japanese Rule
- Chapter 9: Jews in the Japanese-Occupied Territories during the War Years
- Chapter 10: A Japanese Righteous Gentile: The Sugihara Case
- Chapter 11: The Japanese Policy toward the Jews in Japan's Home Islands
- Chapter 12: "The Jewish Question" in Japanese-German relations, 1936-1945
- Chapter 13: The Japanese, the Holocaust of European Jewry, and Israel

Meron Medzini was born in Jerusalem and received his Ph.D in East Asia Studies from Harvard University. He began teaching modern Japanese history at the Hebrew University in 1964. Since 1973 he has been an Adjunct Associate Professor of modern Japanese history and Israeli



foreign policy at the Hebrew University. Medzini is the author of six books and scores of articles.

#### ADVANCE PRAISE FOR UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE RISING SUN:

*"In this fascinating and highly readable book, Meron Medzini offers a sweeping overview of Japan's ambivalent attitude towards the Jews living in its empire before and during World War II and the controversial treatment meted out to them."*

— Rotem Kowner, Professor of Asian Studies, University of Haifa

*"Japan has been neglected in most literature on the modern history of the Jews. However, Japan was involved in the fate of the Jews at their critical moments. Although Japan was an ally of Nazi Germany during the War, the Japanese gave a refuge for the Jews fleeing from Nazism. This stood in sharp contrast to the case of the "enemy nationals" who were rather inhumanly treated under Japanese occupation. Meron Medzini's book provides a fascinating scholarly insight into the history of Jewish-Japanese relations, adding a new chapter to the works of Ben-Ami Shillony and Rotem Kowner."*

— Naoki Maruyama, Professor Emeritus of Law, Meiji Gakuin University

*"Anyone wishing to learn about the fate of the Jews in Japan during the years of the Holocaust will gain immensely from reading this eye-opening book. Few people know this generally overlooked history as well as Meron Medzini and can tell its story in as authoritative and engaging a way as he."*

— Alvin H. Rosenfeld, Professor of English and Jewish Studies, Irving M. Glazer Chair in Jewish Studies, Indiana University.

## Shanghai Sanctuary: The Musical

Excerpted from The Jewish Week 14 December 2016

<http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/new-york/shanghai-sanctuary-city#m7p8HKvQQScosxPw.99>

By Ted Merwin

When we think of Jews encountering Chinese culture, images of eating Chinese food, playing mah jongg and experimenting with feng shui spring to mind. But that may be about to change, if the producers of a fascinating new Chinese musical, "Shimmer," about the experience of World War II Jewish refugees in Shanghai, have their way.

At a workshop production of the musical last Tuesday night at the Edison Ballroom in Midtown [New York] featuring a mixed Chinese-Israeli cast, many in the audience learned for the first time about a fascinating episode in both Jewish and Chinese history...

First produced last year at an international arts festival in Shanghai, and later staged in Beijing (it will be performed at Bar-Ilan University in March), "Shimmer" has been called the Chinese version of "Les Misérables" for its epic tale of poor Jews who, taken in by the Chinese in the Hongkew district of Japanese-occupied Shanghai (known as "Little Vienna"), then help their hosts to battle against the oppression of the Japanese.

The book, written by Rong Guangrun in a mix of English and Mandarin, centers on a young Jewish engineer, Frank Stern (Shahar Yishay), who arrives on the last ship to enter the port at Shanghai before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor puts an end to immigration to China. He falls in love with a Chinese girl, Ling Yilan (Pan Qi), and helps her and her people build a machine to sabotage the Japanese armaments that the Jews and Chinese have been forced to build. Peter Pui-Tat Kam's music is a blend of klezmer and Chinese music, recast in a modern musical theater idiom; Liang Miang's lyrics are filled with references to the dawning of a new day and other light-filled metaphors.

Among the sponsors of the workshop, which was emceed by the well-known Jewish actor Richard Kind, were Rabbi Arthur Schneider of Park East Synagogue, Phoenix Television Group (which hosts Chinese TV stations worldwide), Hengyuanxiang Drama (which creates original plays and musicals in Shanghainese) and Broadway producer Robert Nederlander, Jr. (The Nederlander Organization has expanded into China in recent years as the global appetite for Broadway-style musicals has risen.)...

## Sino-Judaica Returns with New Volume

Thanks to the extraordinary efforts of SJI Board member Dana Leventhal, SJI's academic publication, Sino-Judaica,

has been revived. Sino-Judaica Volume 5 is devoted to a single academic monograph, "Jewish Religious Observance by the Jews of Kaifeng China" by Rabbi Dr. Chaim Simons of Israel. This work connects the actual observance of the Kaifeng Jewish community in its heyday with their sources in halacha (Jewish law).

It is available immediately at the following stores:

Lulu.com amazon BARNES & NOBLE  
IBN.com

## Assistance Given by the Established Iraqi Jewish Community in Shanghai to Jewish Refugees, 1937-1945

By Yitzschak Keren

Reprinted from Bulletin, Igud Yotzei Sin December 2016, #415

The Iraqi community, established in Shanghai since the 1840s with its wealthy benefactors, was very generous in giving financial and material assistance to the refugees fleeing Nazi persecution in Germany, Austria, Lithuania and Russia. After the Japanese attacked and controlled Shanghai in 1937, not only did the Iraqi Jews recuperate from the damage done by the invading Japanese to their property and businesses, but they began to take active roles in the absorption of the thousands of Ashkenazic refugees. In 1937, when the Japanese bombed the city and many Russian-Jewish homes were destroyed in the battles between the Chinese and the Japanese, both the local veteran Jewish Iraqi and Russian-Jewish

community responded instantly and generously for relief efforts on behalf of the new immigrants. Both groups appealed unsuccessfully for assistance from United States Jewry.

The wealthy property owner of the Cathay Hotel, Victor Sassoon, contributed an initial (Sh) \$150,000 (US \$24,000) at the end of the 1930s, as well as 25 bales of cotton and artificial silk goods to the local relief committee for the benefit of the newly arriving refugees. Even the Jewish Rescue Relief Association of Calcutta donated a third of its 10,000 rupee proceeds from an October 1939 cinema show fundraising event for the benefit of the Shanghai Jewish refugees. At Victor Sassoon's Embankment Building, two floors were given to absorb the new refugees. Not only were offices set up there in the reception center, but refugees spent their first days and weeks residing there. It functioned for about a year as the central welcoming station for the Ashkenazic refugees, supplying good temporary quarters including a pool for several hundred people, despite the lack of prop-

er sanitation facilities. In 1938, with the advent of the Anschluss and the arrival of Austrian and other Jews, more than 1,500 refugees, and the Sephardic Beth Aharon Synagogue was used as a reception center, refugee kitchen, and mattresses were put on the floor and benches, and even in the sanctuary. A public kitchen was organized by the Abraham and Toeg families to serve food to about 600 refugees a day. This served as the main kitchen until it was replaced by the Ward Road Heim Kitchen at the beginning of 1939. As the number of arrivals increased daily, even this proved insufficient.

Realizing that the mission was too large for the local Jewish community, and the previously founded German-Jewish relief organization, the Hilfsfond, formed in 1934, or the International Committee for Granting Relief to European Refugees (known as IC) established by Jewish and non-Jewish Hungarians, Czechs, Austrians, British and Dutch, and headed by Paul Komar, the Kadoorie family arranged for the formation of the CFA (Committee for the Assistance of European Jewish Refugees in Shanghai), which had its opening meeting at the offices of Sir Eli Kadoorie & Sons on October 19, 1938. This was one of the few successful attempts to bring together representatives of all of the local Jewish organizations and relief institutions - Iraqi, Russian and German. Representing the Iraqi community were Reverend Mendel Brown, D.E.J. Abraham and his son Reuben D. Abraham. Initially Michel Speelman was chairman and Ellis Hayim was Vice-Chairman. The Educational and Cultural Committee was led by Horace Kadoorie and Reverend Mendel Brown, and was responsible for enabling the education of refugee children and adults. The Rehabilitation Fund, overseen by the

IC, in an attempt to encourage self-sufficiency and financial independence for the refugees, had collected only (Sh) \$17,000 (ca. US \$2,500) in the initial months, but Sir Victor Sassoon provided 5,000 English pounds (US \$25,000) via the Council for German Jews in London, which enabled the organization to provide rehabilitation for the refugees.

The Beth Aharon Synagogue on Museum Road (now Hu Qiu Road) established by Silas A. Hardoon in 1927, housed the Mir Yeshiva in 1941. Refugee children were invited to the immense Marble Hall of the Kadoorie family mansion in the summer for recreation. Horace Kadoorie organized a 'Summer Club' there to enable refugee children to escape the burning heat and humidity of the city. The Israel's Messenger, the important newspaper edited by N.E.B. Ezra from 1904-1936 until his death in 1937, was a source of employment for refugee journalists until its closure in 1941.

As the established Jewish community, the veteran Iraqi community showed great concern for the welfare of the refugees. It is not known who laid the groundwork for the entrance of the refugees to Shanghai, but the Iraqi Jews were certainly involved if any local Jewish individuals or groups were involved. It was extremely unusual that a Sephardic or Oriental Jewish community bridge tight parochial parameters or 'clannish' behavior and initiated massive Ashkenazic absorption, in particular during the Holocaust. The efforts of the affluent and wealthy Iraqi merchants like Victor Sassoon, the Kadoories, Ellis Hayim, the Abrahams, the Ezras, and Benjamins were invaluable in providing the basic needs for the refugees to subsist on. It was not only the rich, but much of the Iraqi community that organized assistance

for more than 20,000 refugees in the way of housing, clothing, food, education and other needs. Like the Toegs, many Iraqi families housed the refugees and worried over their needs.

Because Victor Sassoon and Ellis Hayim thought the plan of Jacob Berglas, a refugee banker of German and Polish extraction, to settle 100,000 Jews in Yunnan Province in southwest China was ridiculous, the Joint Distribution Committee did not pursue it further. However the two Iraqi Jews were extremely committed to rescue work.

It was a miracle that the recipients of the Sugihara Japanese visas from Lithuania and others from Germany, Vienna and Russia could even reach Shanghai. It was miraculous that the Germans did not compel the Japanese to carry out fully the Final Solution against the Jews in their domain. It was similarly miraculous that a small community of several hundred Iraqi Jews could sustain more than 20,000 destitute Ashkenazic refugees, who left everything in Europe and were not able to readjust financially or culturally in this new foreign Chinese environment. Despite their wealth, the scope of their mission was beyond realistic means, but the Iraqi Jews truly gave of themselves to absorb the masses of immigrants whenever possible.

**Readers:** Visit our website:  
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