The Jews of China

Settlement of Jews in China

It is not clear when Jews first knew about the existence of China. The majority of Bible commentators identify it with Ezrat Sinim ("the land of the Sinim"), whence the deported sons of Israel shall return to their land (Yehiyyah 49:12); others, however, deny the identification. At any rate, the Jews in Persia from early times were con¬ nected with the silk trade, and, as a consequence, entered into direct relations with the "silk men" (Severs, from sev = sarim = silk), as the Chinese were called by the Romans. "It is difficult to say, however, at what time the first Jewish settle¬ ment in China took place. In all probability, the Chinese, who had immigrated, or changed a tempo¬ rary sojourn into a permanent one, at various epochs. The tradi¬ tion of the Chinese Jews traces the first immigration back to the Han dynasty between 206 B.C.E. and 221 C.E., and more exactly to the time of the emperor Min¬ ti."[1]

Throughout China, Jews were called "Tiao Kiu Kiao" (the sect that extracts the sinews, based on Gen. 23:12). Therefore, [even] to this day, the Children of Israel are not afraid of the upper joint of Yaakov's thigh. Little is known about the his¬ tory of the Jews in China during the Middle Ages. Two Mohammedan travelers who were in China in 851 wrote, "Many of them, for the sake of riches and preferment, have abandoned their original religion. It is very probable that a new colony of Jews came to China during the tenth century."[2] Professor Chavannes declares: "Between 906 and 1526 [Song dynasty], Jews coming from India brought, for the first time, as tribute to the court of China, stuffs from western maritime countries (yi yang poo). The Jews came to China by sea, and not by crossing central Asia; they were members of the Jewish colonies settled in India. Lastly, their arrival does not appear to have been prior to the end of the tenth century C.E.iii

The Jews who were never active participants in Chinese affairs, being taken for Mohammadians (Hevi Hwei), are nevertheless mentioned in Chinese annals.

"The Jews are referred to for the first time in the "Yuen shi" under the year 1239, on the occa¬ sion of the re-establishment of the China tax-route from Dissenters. Mention of them is again made under the year 1534, on account of several insurrections in China, rich Mohammedans and Jews were invited to the capital in order to join the army. In both cases, they are named 'Chu ho' (Djubudh)."

The Jews of K'ai-Fung-Foo (Kaifeng Foo)

"Throughout the Middle Ages, the European Jews had no knowledge of the existence of Jews in China; even Benjamin of Tudela, who mentions China, seems to know nothing about them. It was through Catholic missionaries in the seventeenth century that the first information reached Europe of a Jewish com¬ munity, consisting of about five hundred or six hundred mem¬ bers, in K'ai-Fung-Foo (Kaifeng), the ancient capital of Honan; of one at Hanghahou-Foo; and of others in other Chinese towns. But owing to the existence of an ancient synagogue at K'ai-Fung¬ Foo, which, though rebuilt several times, had preserved the oldest records of Jewish settlements, the interest of the historians was centered upon the Jews there; and the inscriptions in the Chinese language found on its marble tablets, dating from the years 1489, 1512, and 1663, which have been often translated and published, have cast unexpected light upon a hitherto entirely unknown chapter of Jewish histo¬ ry. The following abstracts of these inscriptions give an insight into both the history and the character of the Chinese Jews."

"The inscription of 1489 refers to the immigration states: 'Seven families came from the Western lands during the 'Yuen shi' under the year 1239, on the occa¬ sion of the re-establishment of the China tax-route from Dissenters. Mention of them is again made under the year 1534, on account of several insurrections in China, rich Mohammedans and Jews were invited to the capital in order to join the army. In both cases, they are named 'Chu ho' couple of statements from the stone inscriptions indicate how rigidly they observed the Sabbath and Yom Kippur. They practiced circumcision. Chinese Jews observed Kosher rules with respect to meat so meticulously that they earned the nickname, Tiao Chiong Chiao, i.e., religion that plucks sinews. During the worship service, the men regularly yawned and faced west during prayers to the direction of Jerusalem, as Jews did elsewhere."[iv]

For several centuries, these Jews apparently maintained con¬ tact with the Jews of Persia, who supplied them with the teachers and books necessary for Jewish religious education. They lived apart from non-Jews in a tightly¬ knit community, did not mingle in Chinese society and used only Jewish names. In this way, they were able to maintain their Jewish distinctiveness and a Turan way of life. However, things began to change in the fifteenth century.

In 1421, a Jew named Hassan (An San) was rewarded by the Chinese Emperor for reporting an act of attempted treason against the Emperor by Kaifeng's Prince Ruo. Part of Hassan's reward included being given the Chinese name Chao Chiu (Hassan) and Chao Chieh. This paved the way for the Jews of Kaifeng to become full-fledged members of Chinese society. It was not long before the rest of the community took Chinese names, although they continued to use Hebrew names in their communal records. A number of K'ai Fung's Jews began working for the Chinese government.

"China's civil service was far more egalitarian than any in the West at the time. It recruited officials on the basis of examinations leading to three successive degrees, roughly corresponding to the Western bachelor's, mas¬ ter's and doctorate. The exams tested a student's knowledge of and ability to interpret Confucian scriptures. They were open to all Chinese citizens. Within a gener¬ ation of Hassan's breakthrough, Jews in Kaifeng began passing the exams and becoming mandarins. The next three hundred years (c. 1421-1723) were their Golden Age. Jewish mandarins attained a wide variety of [impor¬ tant government] positions."

"But, at the same time that they were rising in Chinese socie¬ ty, Kaifeng's Jews were beginning to drift away from Judaism. They lost all contact with foreign Jews. They adopted Chinese customs for marriages, funerals and 'cap¬ ping' (a rite of passage analogous to the Bar Mitzvah). The exami¬ nation system left little time for other interests — least of all, for the study of scriptures in a for¬ eign tongue. And Chinese offi¬ cials were required to take posi¬ tions away from home, to prevent corruption and aspirations. This made it difficult for successful Jews to keep the command¬ ments."

Inevitably, participation in the civil service transformed "the Jewish intellectual into Confucian literatus. And being a Confucian literatus signified much more than a mere academ¬ ical and status achievement, for it affected the person's whole char¬ acter and his philosophical as well as religious perspective. Once a Jew became a member of Confucian literati, he was expect¬ ed to (and he invariably did) con¬ duct himself as a Confucianist, with¬ in the framework of Confucian thought pattern. In other words, a

The Decline of the Jews of K'ai¬ Fung-Foo

Initially, the Jews of K'ai-Fung Foo remained loyal to the Torah.

"In their heyday, the K'ai-feng Jews, following the Talmudic pre¬ scriptions, observed most of the Jewish ceremonies, holidays and festivals such as Sabbath, Yom Kippur, Feast of Unleavened Bread, Shavuoth, Succoth, Purim, Hanu¬ mma and Simchat Torah. A

Bird's-eye view of the Temple Buildings at K'ai-Fung-Foo, China.

By Dr. Yitzchok Levine

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HAMODIA
Belonged to a small religious sect in the city of Kaifeng.

Their synagogue was located in a ‘chair of Moses.’

Chinese Jews reading the Torah from a ‘chair of Moses.’

Forgotten by the Jewish World

At some point, the Jews of Kaifeng, China, were received; if so, it is not documented in any quotes in this section are from the Jewish Encyclopedia, China. Ktav Publishing Company, New York, 1905, pages 13-38.

Interpretation of the text...