Introduction

“In 1795, Solomon [Joseph] Simson [1722 – 1801] and [Rabbi] Alexander Hirsch [Harris] [1727 - 1796] in New York tried to put themselves in touch with the Jews in China. To a Captain Howell who was sailing for China they gave a Hebrew letter to be delivered to the Jews in Kai Feng Fu. In this they reported that the Jews in the United States lived in security, and also that Jews and Christians served equally on the jury in courts of law in both civil and criminal cases.”

The quote above raises a number of questions. Were the “Jews in China” Jews who settled in China or were they Chinese people who had converted to Judaism? If they were Jews who settled in China, when did they come to China and where did they come from? What is the history of these Jews? What happened to the Jews of China and what is the story about their descendents?

Settlement of Jews in China

“Whether China was known to Biblical writers is a matter of dispute among scholars. The majority of Bible commentators identify it with אָרְיֵי סִינִים (‘the land of the Sinim.’), whence the deported sons of Israel shall return to their land (Isa. xlix. 12); others, however, deny the identification. At any rate, the Jews in Persia from early times were connected with the silk trade, and, as a consequence, entered into direct relations with the ‘silk men’ (‘Seres,’ from ‘ser’ = סרמס י = ‘sericum’ = ‘silk’), as the Chinese were called by the Romans.

“At what time, however, the first Jewish settlement in China took place it is difficult to say. In all likelihood Jewish merchants immigrated, or changed a temporary sojourn into a permanent one, at various epochs. Notwithstanding this, it is as hazardous to connect the first Jewish settlement in China with the Lost Ten Tribes as it is an unwarranted skepticism to doubt the correctness of the tradition of the Chinese Jews themselves, which traces the first immigration back to the Han dynasty between 206 B.C. and 221 C.E., and more exactly to the time of the emperor Ming-ti. This opinion is based upon the oral tradition of the Jews, reported by Father Brotier: ‘These Jews say that they entered China under the Han dynasty during the reign of Han Ming-ti [58-76 C.E.].’ And further: ‘Several of these Jews have assured me that they arrived during the reign of Ming-ti.’
certain Sulaiman (Jewish traveler of the ninth century) similarly claims that they entered in 65 C.E.”

Throughout China Jews were called “Tiao Kiu Kiaou” (the sect which extracts the sinews, based on Bereishis 32:33 “Therefore, [even] to this day, the Children of Israel are not to eat the sinew of weakness which is on the upper joint of the thigh, for he gripped the sinew of weakness at the upper joint of Yaakov’s thigh.”).

Little is known about the history 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 abjured their own religion.”

It is very probable that a new colony of Jews came to China during the tenth century. “Professor Chavannes declares: ‘Between 960 and 1126 (Sung dynasty) Jews coming from India brought, for the first time, as tribute to the court of China, stuffs from western maritime countries (si 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.”

Marco Polo [c. 1254 – 1324] mentions the powerful commercial and political influence of the Jews in China in 1286 Ibn Battuta [1304 – 1368 or 1369], a Moroccan Berber Muslim scholar and traveler who is known for the account of his travels and excursions called the Rihla (Voyage), wrote about a place in China called Al-Khansa which he says had many resident Mohammedans, Jews, and Christians.

“The Jews, who were never active participants in Chinese affairs, being taken for Mohammedans (‘Hwei Hwei), are nevertheless mentioned in Chinese annals:

The Jews are referred to for the first time in the ‘Yuen shi’ under the year 1329, on the occasion of the reestablishment of the law on the collection of taxes from Dissenters. Mention of them is again made under the year 1354, when, 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 hu’ (Djuhud)”

**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 community, consisting of about five hundred or six hundred members, in K’ai-Fung-Foo, the ancient capital of Honan; of one at Hangehau-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 history. The following abstracts of these inscriptions give an insight into both the history and the character of the Chinese Jews.

“The inscription of 1489 referring to the immigration states: ‘Seventy families came from the Western lands offering tribute of cotton cloth to the emperor, who allowed them to settle at Peen-lang’ (K’ai-Fung-Foo). In 1163 the synagogue was erected by a certain Yen-too-la; and in 1279 it was rebuilt on a larger scale. In 1390 the Jews were granted land and additional privileges by Tai-tsou, the founder of the Ming dynasty. In 1421 permission was given by the emperor to Yen-Tcheng, a physician greatly honored by him, to repair the synagogue, incense for use therein being presented by the emperor. In 1461 the synagogue was destroyed by flood, but was restored by a prominent Jew. New copies of the Law were procured; and the table of offerings, the bronze vase, the flower vases, the candlesticks, the Ark, the triumphal arch, the balustrades, and other furniture were presented to the synagogue by prominent members of the Jewish community.

“The end of the inscription of 1489 reads:

Composed by a promoted literary graduate of the prefecture of K’ai-Fung-Foo, named Kiu-chung; inscribed by a literary graduate of purchased rank, belonging to the district of Tséang-Fu, named Tsaou-tsò; and engraved by a literary graduate of purchased rank, belonging to the prefecture of K’ai-Fung-Foo, named Foo-joò. Erected on a fortunate day, in the middle of summer, in the second year of Hung-chè, A.D. 1488 [read 1489], in the forty-sixth year of the seventieth cycle, by a disciple of the religion of Truth and Purity.

“In an inscription of 1512 set up by a Chinese mandarin [public official] it is stated: ‘Adam the first man was from Teen-chou in the West.’ (This seems to point to India or Ceylon as the Chinese Eden, as does also, perhaps, a rather obscure sentence in the previous (1489) inscription: ‘Our religion comes originally from T’heen-chuh’ = India.)

“Another inscription dated 1663, by a Chinese mandarin, afterward minister of state, begins in the same manner as the first two, dwelling first on the virtues of Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses, and then on the conformity of the Jewish law and literature with those of the Chinese. After relating the history of the Jewish settlement, it gives a graphic account of the rebellion which caused the fall of the Ming dynasty in 1642 and the destruction of the city, the synagogue, and many Jewish lives, and of the rescue of the sacred writings by a Jewish mandarin, who, with the help of the troops, restored the city, and together with his brother rebuilt the synagogue in 1653. Only one complete scroll of the Law having been recovered from the waters, this was placed in the middle of the Ark; and twelve other scrolls were copied and placed around it. Other holy writings and prayer-books were repaired by members of the community, whose names are perpetuated in the tablet, together with the names of all the dignitaries who took part in the restoration.”
Initially the Jews of K’ai-Fung-Foo remained loyal to the Torah. They maintained contact with the Jews of Persia who supplied them with the teachers and books necessary for Jewish religious education and helped them maintain their distinctive Jewishness. They lived apart from non-Jews, did not mingle in Chinese society, and used only Jewish names. However, things began to change in the 15th 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 Su. Part of Hassan’s reward included being given the Chinese name Chao Ch’eng or Chao the Honest. 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 Kai 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, master’s, and doctorate. The exams tested a student's knowledge of and ability to interpret Confucian scriptures. They were open to all Chinese citizens. The system was tailor-made for Jews, as similar systems would later be in the United States and other Western democracies. Education and interpreting scriptures were longstanding Jewish values. Within a generation of Hassan’s breakthrough, Jews in Kaifeng began passing the exams and becoming mandarins [government officials].

“The next three hundred years (c. 1421-1723) were their Golden Age. Jewish mandarins attained a wide variety of positions: among them district magistrate, supervisor of schools, assistant editor of the Kaifeng gazetteer, senior secretary of the Board of Punishments, annalist of the household for the emperor’s second son, and court president of imperial entertainments. When the synagogue was destroyed by a flood in 1461, the community already included several mandarins (including one with a master’s degree) who rebuilt it ‘on a very spacious scale so that, glittering with gold and variegated colors, its splendor was complete,’ according to one inscription. At one point Kaifeng’s Jews included twenty Confucian degree-holders, fourteen military officers, and four official physicians - an extraordinary achievement for a community whose population is estimated at less than one thousand.

“But at the same time that they were rising in Chinese society, 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 ‘capping’ (a rite of passage analogous to the Bar Mitzvah). The examination system left little time for other interests-least of all, [for the study of] scriptures in a foreign tongue. And Chinese officials were required to take positions away from home, to prevent corruption and nepotism. This made it difficult for successful Jews to keep the commandments.”
Forgotten by the Jewish World

The Jews K’ai-Fung-Foo lost contact with the outside world for several centuries. In short, they were forgotten by the rest of the Jewish world. It was not until the beginning of the seventeenth century that outsiders found out about them. In June of 1605 a Jesuit missionary named Matteo Ricci was visited by Chinese mandarin from the city of Kaifeng named Ai T’ien. “According to Ricci, ‘his face was quite different from that of a Chinese in respect to his nose, his eyes, and all his features.’”

“Ai told Ricci that he belonged to a small religious sect which believed in only one God. Other Chinese, unable to distinguish his people from the far more numerous Moslems, called them ‘the Moslems who pluck the sinews from their meat’ after their unusual method of butchering animals. But his people were not Moslems, Ai said, and in fact disliked the larger sect. They were an altogether different religion with many adherents abroad.

“Unfortunately, they had not been in touch with those fellow believers for generations. This was what brought Ai to visit Ricci while in Peking. He told the Jesuit that he had read about him in a Chinese book which described Europeans as believers in one God, but not Moslems.”

Both Ai and Ricci mistakenly thought that they practiced the same religion, but they soon learned that this was not the case. Ricci realized that Ai was a Jew, whereas Ai realized that Ricci was most certainly not a Jew.

Ricci recorded his meeting with Ai in his diary and in a letter, both of which were eventually published. He also sent a Chinese Jesuit to Kaifeng who reported back to him about the Jewish community there. During the first part of the eighteenth century a number of Jesuit missionaries visited Kaifeng and attempted, without success, to convince the Jews there to convert to Christianity.

“These missionaries catalogued symptoms of the Jewish decline. Kaifeng’s Jews used their Scriptures for Chinese-style fortunetelling (drawing lots), they reported. A few tried to sell Torah scrolls, but their leaders prevented it. Only forty to fifty men came to the synagogue for holidays, and barely a minyan for the Sabbath. Rich Jews avoided attending synagogue by donating new copies of the weekly readings. Their pronunciation of Hebrew, added one missionary who spoke that language, was so unusual that ‘if I had not seen the Hebrew before my eyes I would not have believed it was Hebrew.’ Another explained: ‘They pronounce [Hebrew] in a Chinese manner, somewhat as our lay [Chinese] readers of the mass pronounce Latin. As I appeared surprised by this and as I intimated to them that their pronunciation was poor, they told me that it was a very long time since they had any [visitor] from the west, and that they had lost their Grammar, or as they say in Chinese, the book for studying scripture.’

“Another remarkable piece of evidence confirms this picture. It is a bilingual ‘memorial book of the dead’ - perhaps the only Chinese-Hebrew manuscript in the world. In it
Kaifeng's Jews registered the names of their deceased. It was compiled in the mid-seventeenth century, apparently from memorial books of the individual clans (there were seven Jewish clans in Kaifeng). Nearly a thousand names are listed, some from as far back as the early 1400s. Abandoned altogether around 1670, the manuscript was sold to Europeans in 1851.

“The memorial book provides vivid testimony of Jewish assimilation in Kaifeng. Some Jews are listed in Hebrew and others, presumably those who did not use Hebrew names, in Chinese. The entries have been analyzed by Donald Daniel Leslie, a noted Sinologist who has devoted his career to studying Kaifeng’s Jews. His analysis reveals a steady decline in the use of Hebrew. Many Jews who had Hebrew names had sons who used only Chinese ones, but hardly any Chinese-named fathers had Hebrew-named sons. The movement was in a single direction: away from their traditions.”

**Contact Lost and Then Reestablished**

The last Christian missionary in Hunan province (where Kaifeng is located) was thrown out by the Chinese government in 1724. The result was that the outside world again lost contact with the Jews of Kaifeng.

In 1843 a young Englishman by the name of James Finn published a book called the *Jews in China*. “Finn had never been anywhere near China himself, but based his book on documents he found in the British Museum while researching Jewish history for the London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews.

“No new information had come from Kaifeng since the expulsion of the missionaries. Everything written in the interim had been based on the Jesuit accounts, often with a healthy dose of imagination. Jews in Europe and America had written letters to Kaifeng in Hebrew, but with no response. No one knows if they were received; if so, it is not likely they could have been understood.

“With typical English doggedness Finn set out to close that gap. He made the rounds of China-bound travelers, giving them copies of his book and urging them to contact the Jews. Among them was a diplomat on his way to a new post as British consul, who agreed to translate a letter to them into Chinese. Finn wrote the letter himself in English and Hebrew and mailed it to the consul, who forwarded it to Kaifeng. It was addressed to ‘The Honorable Sinew-Plucking Sect, Kaifeng.’

“Miraculously, Finn's letter was not only received but answered. A Chinese Jew named Chao Nien-tsu sent a reply to the consul in 1850. His letter was a poignant cry for help from Jews who, for all they had known, might have been the only ones left in the world. ‘The receipt of your present letter,’ Chao wrote, ‘assures us that the holy religion contains still a germ of vitality, and that in the great English nation the history of its origin has not been lost.’
“Chao painted a gloomy picture of Jewish life in Kaifeng, on the verge of disappearing entirely. He described himself as one of the few Jews who still cared about their religion. ‘It is well that your letter reached the hands of the present writer,’ he wrote. ‘Had it been carried to others it might have remained unnoticed.’ But not even he understood the Scriptures, and only one old woman in her seventies remembered any of what their people once believed. ‘Morning and night,’ Chao wrote, ‘with tears in our eyes and with offerings of incense, do we implore that our religion may again flourish. We have everywhere sought about, but could find none who understood the letters of the Great Country.’

“Chao reported that the synagogue was crumbling. ‘Our temple in this place has long been without ministers; the four walls of its principal hall are greatly dilapidated, and the compartments of the hall of the holy men are in ruins. The water-chamber [mikveh] and the treasury are in ruins likewise.’ To make things worse, some of the Jews were pulling it down. Chao named eight men who were mortgaging or selling parts of the building. ‘If any person be deputed hither,’ he said, ‘measures should be taken to put a stop to the scandalous proceedings of these people.’”

**Attempts to Revitalize the Community**

A number of attempts were made to send Jews to help revive the Jewish community of Kaifeng. They were made in the middle of the nineteenth century by Jews living in the United States and England but failed due to political unrest and war in China. When the first Westerners were able to visit Kaifeng in 1866, they found that the synagogue had been torn down.

By 1900 the Jewish community of Kaifeng numbered about 140 souls, who had no religious leader, no synagogue, and no well-defined system of religious education. In that same year the Jews of Shanghai became interested in the plight of the Kaifeng community and started a Shanghai Society to Rescue the Chinese Jews. The society wrote a letter to the Jews of Kaifeng begging them not to sell any more of their scrolls, and offered to help them rebuild their temple. However, nothing came of this effort.

By 1910 only one stone inscription remained at the synagogue site which was now covered by a stagnant pond. Today the Chinese Medicine Hospital stands on the site of the Kaifeng Synagogue.

A UPI reporter who visited Kaifeng in early 1980 said that she had found a few dozen people who claimed to be descended from Jews, but they were in all respects indistinguishable from the other Chinese inhabitants of the city. Sadly, this is what the once vibrant Jewish community of Kaifeng had come to.

**Postscript**

There are lessons for all of us to learn from the history of the Jews of Kaifeng. The most important is what can lead to assimilation and how it can be prevented. At a certain point
in their history the Jews of Kaifeng lacked any real knowledge of Judaism. They had no religious leaders who could instruct them in Judaism. This lack of Torah education combined with the openness of Chinese society led to the demise of this Jewish community.

Today we also live in an open society. However, if we want our children to remain Torah true Jews, we must make sure that they receive an excellent Torah education. But this may not be enough. Even someone who possesses a good knowledge of Yahadus may not be immune to the temptations of the outside world. Thus, we must always be on our guard regarding the opportunities that are offered us, and, it may well be, that we have to forgo some of these opportunities to insure are commitment to Judaism.

Post Postscript

The reader should not think that the story of the Jews of Kaifeng is over and finished. Amazingly, there has been a renewed interest on the part of some of the descendents of Kaifeng’s Jews in their Jewish heritage. A few hundred of them have immigrated to Israel and converted k’halacha. They are now living their lives as observant Jews. One such person is Shoshana Rebecca Li, a descendant of the Jewish community of Kaifeng, China, who made Aliyah a few years ago. On January 28, 2008 she married Ami Emmanuel, an American who had also made Aliyah. A video clip taken during the wedding shows a Chasana that conforms to all aspects of Halacha, including a mechitza that separates men and women.

The spark of Judaism may be faint and nearly extinguished, but one can never know when it will ignite and again burn brightly.


2 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes in this section are from The Jewish Encyclopedia, China. Ktav Publishing Company, New York, 1905, pages 33 - 38. This article is available at http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=461&letter=C&search=china#1532


4 This book may be downloaded at no cost from http://books.google.com/books


6 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Emmy82tFT30
Pictures to go with this article.

**Caption:** Bird's-Eye View of the Temple Buildings at K’ai-Fung-Foo, China.  
**Source:** (From “Jewish Quarterly Review.”)

![Bird's-Eye View of the Temple Buildings at K’ai-Fung-Foo, China.](JewishEncyclopedia.com)

**Caption:** Interior of the Synagogue at K'ai-Fung-Foo, China.  
**Source:** (From “Jewish Quarterly Review.”)

![Interior of the Synagogue at K’ai-Fung-Foo, China.](JewishEncyclopedia.com)
Caption: Jews of K’ai-Fung-Foo, China.
Source: (From a photograph.)

Chinese Jews reading the Torah from a "chair of Moses."