

The Dao of Being Jewish: Lessons from China

By Irene Shaland



“Judaism is ... a precious stone which needs to be discovered, mined, and delicately carved into an intricate masterpiece”
- Aaron Nankin

For the Chinese, the “Dao” or “Tao,” is a fundamental concept of cultural philosophy, and signifies the way or the path to life-long self-discovery. During our recent trip to China, our way led us to Henan province in the central part of the country. My husband and I came in search of a Jewish story, and the story we found was much more than we could have anticipated. It made us feel overwhelmingly blessed and nourished by the unique perception and value of Judaism we discovered in this Chinese culture, a culture much different than ours.

Kaifeng, Henan province

By Chinese standards, Kaifeng is a small town of 600,000 people in a 100 million-people province of Henan, one of the poorest in the country. There ancient capitals of the great civilization rose and fell over many centuries, nourished and ruined by the moody Yellow River. Don't look for Beijing-style skyscrapers in Kaifeng; deep foundations for these buildings would destroy ancient cities below. Not far from Kaifeng, you can find China's oldest Buddhist temple, White Horse Temple, and one of the world's most precious



collections of Buddhist cave carvings, Longmen caves. It was in Henan, not far from Kaifeng, that the philosophy of peace – Buddhism, and the “Dao” of martial arts - Kung Fu, forged an unlikely partnership and made the Shaolin Temple the world-famous center of Kung Fu. Kaifeng served seven dynasties as a capital and became one of the world's biggest cities during the Northern Song (10th to 13th century). Kaifeng is also the capital for Jewish history pilgrims. Many Jewish tours center on Shanghai as a safe haven during the Holocaust. In Shanghai, you learn about the Jews in China. To learn

Previous page left: The Great Chinese Wall.

Previous page right: The stellae in front of the Mr. Jin's memorial

Above right: Author with Mr. Jin in front of his marble memorial



about the Jews of China you find no guidebook to provide you with a ready-made itinerary. No site survived to showcase that fascinating aspect of Chinese history, and modern China does not recognize its Jews as one of the country's minorities. You have to come to Kaifeng to find and meet them.

Mr. Jin's family tomb

Mr. Jin is a middle-aged man with a shy, kind smile. He gets into our car on one of Kaifeng's busy streets and in rapid Chinese, shouts to our driver, "This is the way." And away we go. The smoke-laden city disappears and a narrow bumpy road brings us into what seems to be a different world altogether. It is not just countryside, but some silent place lost in time, dipped in a strange glow; yellow dust on the road, yellow clay on small houses, and yellow grass surrounding

them. Dogs and goats slowly cross the street and join the children playing in the middle of it and without moving an inch from an approaching car, all are enveloped in yellow light and golden-colored dust. "This is where," Mr. Jin says through the interpreter, "the Jews of Kaifeng, who settled in this city during the Song Dynasty (10th to 13th century), buried their dead for centuries." We arrived at the oldest Jewish cemetery in China, Guang Zhong Jin's family burial place!

We follow Mr. Jin to the small wooded area surrounded by fields and come to a black marble stela, about three-feet tall, with an engraved menorah on top. "The First Monument of Jews," announces the stela in Chinese and English. Behind it, on a pedestal of cement is a massive, five-foot tall, memorial wall, also constructed of black polished marble. "Jin Family Pedigree," reads the title at the top. This marble wall is a memorial book which presents – engraved in English on one side and in Chinese on another – the 900-year story of Mr. Jin's family within the context of Chinese history. "Chronological" (narrative) and "Genealogical" (family tree) records, written there large and flamboyant, and in stone.

This is what we learned from Mr. Jin and his marble book. Sometime in the beginning of the 12th-century, Mr. Jin says, his first forebear, a Jewish trader on the Silk Road, entered China via India, and settled in what was then called Dongying or Bianliang (Kaifeng). He was not a pioneer by any means: there already was an established small but thriving Jewish

Above: The oldest Jewish cemetery in China: Mr. Jin and his family's burial place

community in Kaifeng. A rich person, that first patriarch bought a family plot south of the city walls, in a place called Caizhuang. The family's original name is lost in time. But this was how Jin's ancestors along with other Chinese Jews got their current names: the first Emperor of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), who liberated China from the Mongols and hated all foreigners, forced Jews to assume Chinese surnames; the family's name became Jin. It is an occupational name, explained Mr. Jin, an equivalent of Goldsmith. Also, at that point, Jewish men started to intermarry with their Chinese neighbors and paternity began to determine the Jewish origin. We continue to follow Mr. Jin family's illustrious story and read about an "Honorable Minister of Salaries" – in the 1300s; high-level army officer, a "Vanguard Commander" – in the 1400s; and a Confucian scholar in the 1600s. One ancestor financed rebuilding of the Kaifeng Synagogue when it was ruined by a flood, another paid for the repair of its ancient Hebrew scrolls. The Nationalist era (1912-1949) and the Revolution saw the family's fortune reversed: there were opium addiction and a suicide, an inheritance was squandered and land lost or taken by the government. The Jews of China, officials and merchants; generals and scholars; shop owners and farm laborers; some rising to great success; some swept away and destroyed by the current of history, they all became alive in our imagination, reaching out to us through the letters engraved on marble and Mr. Jin's voice.

"Here are my immediate family members," says Mr. Jin, pointing out numerous unmarked little mounds around us. "My father is here and my brother is over there." While most of his family members immigrated to Israel, Mr. Jin chose to stay in Kaifeng, dedicating all his life savings and indeed

most of his life to building this monument. "In our tradition," he says, "older generation has to pass family history to the young ones. So, my siblings and I always knew that we were Jewish."

And so did the Chinese government. Every family in China is required to have a household register, called a Hukou. This system has its origins in ancient China: family registers were in existence since the 3rd century BC. In modern China, these registers were mandatory since 1958, and Jin's family always registered their "nationality" as Jewish. In 1985, says Mr. Jin, the government took Hukou books away from those who considered themselves Jews and changed their nationality: in case of the Jins, to Han Chinese.

In a country that neither accepts Judaism as one of its official religions nor includes Jews among its other 56 minority groups, and in a city where the last Rabbi died over 150 years ago and no synagogue exists, Mr. Jin's family lights candles on Shabbat and abstains from pork. Sometimes on Jewish holidays they get together with other families of similar background. Proud of their Jewish origins, considering themselves Jewish to the core, the Jins continue telling their story. True to the Confucian culture of their country, Jin's family kept their genealogical records for many centuries. When the government confiscated records, a secretly made copy of it was securely hidden. And then – reborn as Mr. Jin's marble monument to his ancestors and to the eternal Jewish spirit.

The Story of Esther, a Kaifeng Jew

This is exactly what Guo Yan Zhao prints on her business card: Kaifeng Jew. In large bold letters, she announces to the world both her identity and her occupation. Above this brave proclamation, is a required qualifier in small letters and almost unnoticeable: “a descendant of.” Guo Yan chose Esther as her Jewish name because Chinese Jews think of her



as a prophetic, matriarchal figure from the Bible. Esther’s card also has her photo wearing Mogen David-shaped earrings and dressed in a traditional Chinese gown made of blue and white (Israeli colors) silk and decorated with Jewish stars. Two ancient cultures seamlessly blend together and become both- Esther’s personality and her life’s work. For every Jewish pilgrim coming to Kaifeng, this petite vivacious

Above left: The street signs on the site of the ancient Jewish neighborhood: the synagogue was located behind this wall

young woman is an institution by herself.

Esther meets us in the heart of medieval Kaifeng on a narrow street called “Teaching the Torah Lane.” This was a neighborhood where Jews of Kaifeng used to live and pray for almost 800 years. Now the hospital and the nursing facility stand

where the ancient synagogue, first built in 1163, used to be. But this is not the end of the Kaifeng Jewish story. Not - as far as Esther is concerned. The copper plaque next to the street’s name proclaims “Here live Kaifeng Jews (the Zhao residence).” Zhao is Esther’s family name.

“I love both of my cultures,” says Esther as she leads us along the old street to her family house. “You know –why? Because we are the two oldest civilizations in the world and



Above right: In the heart of medieval Kaifeng: this is where the Jews lived and prayed for over 800 years

we share a lot in common.” As Esther puts it, both Jews and Chinese have large diasporas outside of their homeland; both peoples emphasize the high importance of family ties and education (a “sacred pursuit,” says Esther), and both are marked by an entrepreneurial spirit. And a talent to survive and persevere, she adds.

The Chinese government does not recognize us as Jews, continues Esther, and the rabbis don’t consider us Jewish either. She looks at us almost defiantly: “But we are THEY, the Chinese Jews, the Kaifeng Jews.” Out of her handbag, she takes out a worn photocopy of DNA test results done in the late 1980s when about 90 Kaifeng Jewish decedents were tested. “See here,” she says. “We are as Jewish as you are.” Learning that my husband and I are both former Soviet émigrés, she cannot resist: “More so than the Soviet Jews who intermarry both ways. Not just along the male line like us.”

Like her Biblical namesake, Esther is on a mission. “It is my job,” she proudly states, “to bring back a strong sense of Kaifeng Jewish tradition and not let it get lost in history as it did before.” And Esther has a plan. Long-term, she promotes to the government her ambitious proposal of re-building a synagogue and creating an Israeli-Chinese Cultural park and short-term, she educates visitors, one person at a time.

A small house where Esther was born and raised, and where her family lived for generations, used to be a part of the ancient synagogue structure. Throughout the entire history of Jewish Kaifeng, Esther says, her family was charged with maintaining the synagogue, and when it was ruined by recurring floods, with supervising its reconstruction.



Above: The Kaifeng Jewish History Memorial Center in Esther’s ancestral home: this ancient building used to be a part of the synagogue structure



Now her house bears a proud name: The Kaifeng Jewish History Memorial Center. The centuries-old door frame has a mezuzah and the door - a small Israeli flag. The first thing one sees when entering the house is a large banner with the Shema prayer, a central statement of Jewish theology, written in golden letters: “Hear O

Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.” Esther explains that during the Ming Dynasty, around the 14th or the 15th century, the Chinese Emperor demanded that his portrait be placed in every house of worship. So the Kaifeng Jews had no choice but to obey and they placed the portrait in the entryway to the synagogue, but above it, they hung a Shema: in Kaifeng, the God of the Jews was above even the all-powerful Emperor of China!

The Jewish history center we enter is a one-room display of numerous family pictures and documents, and booklets and articles on Chinese Jewish history in Hebrew, Chinese and English – all surrounded by menorahs, Shabbat candlesticks, and Israeli flags. A large framed rendering of Kaifeng Synagogue by an 18th-century Jesuit is proudly placed in the center of the back wall. Underneath it is a wooden model of that synagogue as it is shown in the Tel Aviv Diaspora museum. We buy a nicely-illustrated brochure authored by the “Kaifeng Jew Esther” about that synagogue and the History Center she created.

Esther starts her story with the Name, not her family name, but the names the Jews were called in their new home country: for how your neighbors call you, says a lot about how you are perceived and accepted. (Growing up in the Soviet Union, we remember being called “Zhudy” (Kikes) or “Israeli aggressors,” so we could not agree with her more).

The sinew- plucking religion

Chinese people never had prejudice against foreigners coming down the Silk Road or those settling in their midst. Whether they were Jews or Muslims from Persia or Christians from the West, the Chinese called them all “people with colored eyes.” When the Jews settled in Kaifeng, they were called “Lan Ma Hui Hui,” which meant “Blue Hat

Above: Author and Esther in front of the entrance to Esther’s house. Shema is visible on the opposite wall



Muslims” because of the blue hats they wore when going to the synagogue. “White Hat Muslims” was the name for those who wore white hats when praying at the mosque. To add to this confusion, both Muslims and Jews gave the same Chinese name to their houses of worship: Qing Zhen, “Pure Truth.” Though neither ate pork, the Jews also prepared their meat in accordance with the kashrut law: removing the thigh muscles (sinews) from hip sockets of the slaughtered animals. It was done in reference to the Biblical story of Jacob sustaining a thigh injury while wrestling with an angel; and that was so peculiar to their Chinese neighbors that the Jews became “Tiaojinjiao” – the religion that removes the sinew. All these names were given just to describe the people

with different customs and to distinguish between them – never with animosity or violent hostility. The Chinese word for Jew, “Youtai,” was not used in China until the Jesuits introduced it in the 17th century. “But we,” says Esther, “always called ourselves “the Children of Israel” and since we were comfortable and prosperous in Kaifeng, we built our synagogue here.”

The Confucian-looking synagogue

It is not known how the first Kaifeng Synagogue built in the 12th-century looked. What we know is based on much later descriptions and drawings made by the Jesuits in the 17th century. For anyone who visited the Forbidden City in Beijing and at least a temple or two elsewhere in China, the synagogue rendering reminds of the country’s typical residential or religious compounds. The synagogue was built according to the Confucian principles of architecture, explains Esther, and that legitimized both Jews and their faith for the country that had never known organized religion. Just like many buildings in China, stone lions flanked the entrance to the synagogue complex consisting of enclosed courtyards and halls. The pathway to the Front Hall was also guarded by two large marble lions on pedestals. A giant iron incense tripod, like in Taoist or Buddhist temples, stood between the lions. The entire compound is described as being four hundred feet in depth. Unlike Chinese temples that face south, the synagogue gate looked eastward while the worshippers faced

Above: Esther tells the story: on the wall, is the 18th- century rendering of Kaifeng synagogue



westward toward Jerusalem. The synagogue was designed to offer full-service life style: kitchen, ritual bath mikva, study halls, meeting rooms, lecture halls... There were the Hall of the Founder of the Religion - Abraham, Hall of the Patriarchs, Ancestral Hall... The Main Hall was forty by sixty feet in size and like any other Chinese main hall, it was raised on a platform and surrounded by a balustrade. In the middle was a large table for an incense burner and candlesticks with a Chair of Moses behind the table. The Torah raised up high

Above: Kaifeng Municipal Museum: this is where the ancient stone stelae are kept

was read from that place. The name for Torah in Chinese, says Esther, is “Daojing” with Dao meaning “the Way” and the “jing” – the scriptures: The Scriptures of the Way.

The stories told by stones

Kaifeng Jews were not the first ones to arrive in China. Historians believe that Jews already lived there during the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE). Jews and their synagogue are mentioned by name in a poem written during the Tang Dynasty (618-906). In Luoyang museum (also of Henan province), we noticed a half-a-dozen figurines made of famous Tang period tricolor ceramic: they were peddlers, bakers, and merchants with clear Semitic features. They could be Arab traders, of course, arriving via the Silk Road. But they could be Jews, also. To us, they seem quite Jewish in appearance. “Yes,” says Esther, “there were other Jewish settlements in ancient China.” But, “we,” she states with pride, “we were the largest in China and the one that lasted the longest and the only one which left substantial records of its own.” These records are the three large stone stelae erected to commemorate the rebuilding of the synagogue in 1489, 1512 and 1679. The fourth stela dated 1663 was lost but the remaining ones are kept in a small, controlled-environment, no-photography-allowed room in Kaifeng Municipal Museum and could be visited by appointment with a private guide. Esther takes us there and after a long steep climb up the stairs, we are facing three large limestone stelae. Centuries old and badly damaged by rain, wind and

floods, they are telling their stories through the protective glass. These stories are of Jews first entering China and the Imperial welcome, of their long history in Kaifeng and the interpretations of Jewish beliefs and practices. The stories are written in Chinese, says Esther, and when she reads us excerpts from a hand-out, it is clear that the authors tried really hard to stress the similarities of their faith and practices to the Chinese Confucians. The founder of the Jewish religion, Abraham, is called there a descendent of Pangu, a mythological Chinese character who created the universe. It is said that Abraham established the Jewish religion in the “146th year of Zhou dynasty” (10th century BC) and then this religion was given to Moses, a “Patriarch of the True Religion, in the 613th year of Zhou” (5th century BC). “Jewish way of worshiping God, “continues the text of the 1489 stela, “fully manifested the mysteries of the Ancestral Dao...Dao has no shape or form but above all else.” The same stela recounts that the Jews arrived in China during the Song Dynasty (10th-13th centuries) from India (or the Middle East in general); and the Emperor, who most probably was interested in cotton sold



by the Jews, told them to preserve their ancestral customs and to settle in Bianliang (Kaifeng). The names of the first settlers’ 70 clans are listed in Chinese, including the Rabbi LeiWei (probably a Levite). The remaining two stellae mention other Jewish communities in China, emphasize the “boundless loyalty” of Jewish soldiers to their new home country, and commemorate the rebuilding of the synagogue.

By the time the last stela was created in 1679, the Silk Road was only a memory and Kaifeng was no longer a capital: its economic importance of an international trade center ended and prosperity deeply declined. So did the wealth of the small Jewish community. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Kaifeng Jewish community all but disappeared. Destroyed and rebuilt many times, the Kaifeng synagogue never recovered from the 1840s flood, and by the 1850s, it was a ruin. By then, no Jew in Kaifeng could read Hebrew,

and there was no Rabbi. It is known that at that time, a Torah scroll was displayed in the Kaifeng market together with a sign offering a reward to any traveler who could interpret

Above: Tang period (618-906) ceramic figurine: this peddler has clear Semitic features.
Luoyang Museum, Henan Province

its text for local Jews. Ancient scrolls from the synagogue were sold to Westerners and now could be seen in various museums around the world: from the British Museum and Cambridge University in the UK, to Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Hebrew Union College in New York, and Jewish Theological Seminary in Cincinnati. The synagogue ruins were cleared and the land was sold. All that is left of it are the remains of the mikva inside the hospital built on its site and the story-telling stone stelae in the museum.

Why did the Kaifeng Jewish community disappear?

There is no single answer. Were the Chinese Jews dispersed by natural and man-made disasters, recurrent floods and wars, or rebellions and economic decline? If we look at the history of European Jewry over the centuries of persecutions and pogroms, these reasons alone could not fully explain the disappearance of the community. Was it then a historic circumstance of a community being small in numbers, isolated geographically, and overpowered by strong Chinese culture? If we look at India, there the Jews, the tiniest of India's communities, managed to live in prosperity and freedom for 2500 years while preserving their religious and cultural identity without being overwhelmed by the large Hindu-Muslim society they lived in. Was it that the cultural atmosphere in China, though hospitable and tolerant

to foreigners, was not conducive to practicing Judaism? Indeed, we know of the early symptoms of dilution: in the Confucian-style synagogue, incense was burned to honor biblical heroes, sacrifices in the Chinese style (but of kosher food) were offered on some Jewish holidays, and boys studied Confucian texts instead of the Torah.

The existence of the Jews in China was unknown to the Western world until 1605, when Jesuit Matteo Ricci met a Kaifeng Jew in Beijing who arrived there to take Confucian examinations for a prestigious government post. As described by Ricci, that young man was dressed and looked Chinese but considered himself Jewish, a believer in One God. Perhaps by that time, an overwhelming number of young ambitious Jewish men – instead of dedicating their lives to Torah - preferred to study Confucius, a requirement for any promising government position. By the early 1600s, the Kaifeng Rabbi was already struggling with the lack of young men knowledgeable in Jewish law because, as Ricci recorded, the rabbi offered him a job as his successor: if the Jesuit joined the Jewish faith and stopped eating pork, of course.

“Yes,” says Esther, while we smile at a Rabbi-and-a-Jesuit story, “We lost our ancestral language, traditions, even blood line. But we kept our memories and pride in being Jewish. We told stories. We survived.” There are probably a few hundred people in Kaifeng now who consider themselves

Jewish either through a family line or marriage. A growing number of young people discover their Jewish roots and make aliah to Israel; Hebrew classes are highly popular in Kaifeng, and Esther tells us of frequent Shabbat gatherings with a communal service, song singing, and a potluck kosher (Halal) meal. At the conclusion of Shabbat, they sing Hatikva in Hebrew. Often – by memory. “I don’t like the word assimilation,” Esther says. “Are you a Jew only if you go to the synagogue and read Torah there? Do you think there is only one Dao of being Jewish?”

What we learned from the Jews of China

For Esther and Jin and their families, the Dao to being a Jew is built on family memories, understanding of Judaism as a precious treasure and a strong sense of identity handed from generation to generation. And they are prepared to uphold this ancestral heirloom against any powerful force, whether cultural, political or economic. The Jews of China helped us to see that we, Western Jews, are not just one among many

minority cultures in the large societies where we live: we are an integral part of a unique, millennia old tradition with its own historic and geographic trajectory.

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