What bound Judaism and China into a seemingly yin and yang cultural relationship? The more I researched these two cultures, the more they seemed to revolve around the perpetual changes created by yin and yang. Initially, I thought that the key might lie in mastering the Chinese language. But, once I felt proficient in Chinese (I was already proficient in Hebrew) I realized that even the two languages were following the yin yang pattern. Both languages are built on a similar system, the root words. Hebrew uses three letters for the “root” called shoresh, while Chinese uses 214 basic “radicals” called bushou. But the similarities in terms of language end here.

In Hebrew we form words by adding to the “root” words either with declinations of parts of speech or by conjugating the verbs in various tenses. Hebrew has a complex grammar. In contrast, Chinese is a very simple language. It is based on seven basic strokes to form 214 “radicals” and a combination of radicals with the basic strokes forms complex characters. For all practical purposes, Chinese has no grammar. And herein lies the difficulty. While Hebrew grammar tells us “who, what and when”, in Chinese we have to deduce these questions from the context. Such ambiguity makes any Chinese text, especially ancient writings, very difficult to translate. Historically, Chinese characters changed meaning significantly during their long history and when reading Chinese texts one has to know in what period of time it was written.
It is not surprising then, that Chinese and Israelites in antiquity did not have anything in common and knew nothing about each other’s culture. Israelites might have known about the “land of Sinim” from the Prophet Isaiah. But for the Chinese, Israelites were just one of the unidentified tribes of the uncivilized yi “barbarian” tribes. In biblical times, the Chinese called every non-Chinese “barbarians”. In this respect, they did not distinguish between the Mongols or Hun raiders. Nor did they distinguish between the peaceful tribes and settlers, traders, and monks who occasionally intermixed with the Chinese in the north and west of China. Chinese annals portrayed the “barbarians” as raggedy looking, long red hair, dirty, unshaven and with repulsive body odor.

Yet, a sharp-eyed Chinese sage had indeed described in one sentence a tribe with a strange custom. He talked about a tribe that fasted, bathed and cleaned themselves before praying to God. This description puzzled Chinese and Western scholars alike. Who they were eluded an answer for a long time. It puzzled me too, but for a different reason. The description seemed familiar, I just could not identify where I had seen that before. Only when I worked on the translation of the Kaifeng stone inscriptions and came upon a similar Chinese sentence, did I realize that those exact words originated with a very influential Chinese sage.

**Who was that sage?**

In my book *The Kaifeng Stone Inscriptions*, I traced the journey of a group of exiled Levites and Cohanim (priests) from Babylon (6th century BCE) to the Kingdom of Ferghana (north Afghanistan today) to the Western Regions and ultimately their migration into China in the second century BCE. The migration from exile to the Western Regions took perhaps as long as four hundred years. Of course, the exiles themselves were not the original settlers in China but the descendants of their descendants were. They were sighted at the outskirts of China in the second century BCE, and accepted the Chinese offer to come and settle in the Western Regions in return for the protection of the Chinese. The Western Regions (xiyu in Chinese) stretched from northern Afghanistan to Dunhuang (the Pass in Chinese) in the northeast of Gansu Province today. Here ended the main trade route, the so called Silk Road that ran from Syria to Central Asia, to Northern India, and to the Western Regions. The Western Regions served as a buffer zone between China proper and the Mongol/ Hun raiders who frequently invaded and plundered China. To avert or minimize the impact of these raids, the Chinese encouraged “barbarian” tribes to settle at the outskirts of China in the Western Regions.

We know very little about these Israelites who lived in the Western Regions, at the outskirts of China for centuries. Most of our information was based on what the Chinese Jews inscribed in stone. Amazingly, after many centuries in isolation, the Jews in China (Kaifeng) still observed the precepts of the Torah!

Journeying in the vast desert land of the Western Regions, were two Chinese sages who had great influence on China. During their travels they might have come in contact with Israelites, and only a careful reading of their writing hinted at such an encounter. One of the sages was Mencius (372-289 BCE). His influence was second only to Confucius. His biography mentioned that late in his life he left China and had spent twenty years “beyond the Pass” in the Western Regions. We know very little of his whereabouts or what he did. Most of the information is deduced from his writings.

Apparently, he encountered a tribe during his journey that “fasted and bathed, and then they sacrificed to Shangdi.” Shangdi was the Chinese Almighty equal only to Elohim. Mencius, like most Chinese of his time, did not have a high opinion of the “barbarians” and this tribe was no exception. His exact words were rather unflattering. He said: “[If] Xi’zi had been covered in such a filth [alternative translation: “with filthy head dress/clothes?”], people would hold their noses when passing by. Although [those] people were ugly, if they fasted and bathed, then they could sacrifice to Shangdi.”

It is not coincidental that Mencius used the word *xizi* (pronounced *shee-tze*). It means: “Son of the West.” And here lies the controversy. Who was Xizi? The Chinese suggested that it was the name of Lady Xi. But Lady Xi was female and the suffix *zi* (son, master) would indicate a male. The Chinese offered a simple solution; they replaced the character *zi* with the character *shi* (clan) thus clearing the name for a female name. This explanation is plausible, though I think it is far fetched. Alternatively, Mencius might have used the word *Xi’zi* as a derogatory term for the tribe that fasted and purified themselves before sacrificing to Shangdi in the Western Region.
Incidentally, the above description coincided with a biblical ceremony performed by the Levites (Numbers 8:21) and Cohanim (Leviticus 16:3-4) during the Temple period: “Wash yourselves, cleanse yourselves, put your evil deeds out of my sight!” before sacrificing. Reinforcing this commandment was the Prophet Isaiah (1:16) who reminded the Levites and Cohanim to purify and cleanse themselves before making their offerings to Elohim: “For this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you, of all your sins before the Lord. And when the priests and the people… hear the name of the Elohim come from the mouth of the high priest, in sanctity and purity, they bow down and prostrate themselves.”

Evidently during his travels to the Western Region, Mencius came upon a tribe that according to his description followed almost identically the rites of Israelite priests. Perhaps this was the first sighting of Israelites in the vicinity of China as early as the 4th century BCE!

**Biblical Influence on Daoism**

While Mencius perhaps left us a description of an Israelite tribe, another Chinese sage had displayed biblical influence in his writing. The legendary Laozi (6th century BCE), the founder of Daoism, better known in the West for his mystical Book of the Way and Virtue (Daodejing) wrote about topics that would have been more familiar to an Israelite than to a Chinese person at that time.

Laozi spent twenty years traveling in the Western Regions. Legend says that when he reached the Pass (Dunhuang today), Yinxi, the Keeper of the Pass, asked him to write a book. Evidently, Laozi obliged and wrote the Daodejing a five thousand-character book of wisdom that rivals only the bible in its depth and wisdom. Whether or not this legend is true is beside the point, what is important is that the Daodejing has greatly impacted China. Even though it has been translated into almost every language in the world, each translation is more of an interpretation than a translation. The Daodejing is extremely difficult to translate, if not impossible. Its language and concepts can be hardly matched in any other language.

Essentially, the Daodejing is full of concepts that would delight, and at the same time challenge, any biblical scholar. They would have to face text like: “Dao is [a] Dao but not [the] Dao, Name is [a] name, but not [the] Name…” or : “Dao is One…(we) see it, but it is unseen, it is called Invisible; (we) listen to it, but it is unhearable, it is called Inaudible; (we) touch it, but it is unreachable, it is called Intangible”(ch. 14).

A simple translation of Dao is the Way. Yet, we in the West have no single word that is equal to the Chinese Dao. Even though some translators translated it as the Way, others as Heaven, and yet others as God, disappointingly, none of these terms is equal to the Chinese Dao. Invariably we still wrestle with the basic questions: What is Dao? Or, how did Laozi come up with the idea of monotheism? Or, better yet, where did Laozi hear about “the land of milk and honey”? I will focus on the last item. Daoism was both new and strange to the Chinese in the 6th century BCE. At the time different schools of thought fought for the mind of the people. There were so many ideas vying for followers, that the Chinese called them the “hundred schools” of thought. Most of these schools faded from the Chinese mind and only Daoism and Confucianism prevailed. Confucianism dealt with government and ethics; while the Daodejing dealt with mysticism, monotheism and one chapter dealt with, …well, nobody is sure.

Unusual in style and content was chapter 80 of the Daodejing. Due to the lack of details about Laozi, both Chinese and Western historians thought that this chapter reflected his political ideology. Yet, it is not clear what his political philosophy was, let alone the source of this chapter. We only know for a fact, that the conditions described in this chapter were non-existent in China at the time.

It described: “…a small country with few people that makes weapons but do not use them… Although they have ships and carriages they do not ride them. Though they have armor and soldiers, they do not display them… They sweetened their food, adorned their clothes, were content in their homes and delighted in their customs… people grew old and died of old age.” In other words, Laozi described the Chinese version of the “land of milk and honey.”

There is no doubt that Laozi had come in contact with “barbarian” tribes during his travels in the Western Region, where he might have heard stories of such a country. He probably heard a story of a “land of milk and honey” (Exodus 33:3; Deut. 27:3) that in the Chinese version in his book became a county where people sweetened their food. Both milk and honey were luxuries for the few...
in China, even though milk was not commonly consumed. Such a country according Laozi was a peaceful place where “people sweeten their food, they do not engage in wars... they live in prosperity, grow old and die of old age.” Realistically, such conditions did not exist in China at the time, and I think that in this chapter, Laozi described a utopian country about which he might have heard during his travels.

Furthermore, the description of “the small country that made weapons but do not use them...” resembled the conditions prevalent in Jerusalem at the time of King Solomon (c.a. 960 BCE). Solomon built the Temple with labor that had no blood on their hands, he encamped his army in Jerusalem to discourage aggression; his ships were manned by non-Israelites and reached the shores of India. People of Israel lived in peace and prosperity (1Kings 9:26).

It is evident that chapter 80 of the Dao de Jing differs substantially from the rest of the book. But if we read this chapter in a historical context of both ancient China and Israel, we can see that biblical stories had been circulating in Central Asia in the form of oral tradition, and some of them seemingly had made into ancient Chinese literature. ❧

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