FULLY JEWISH
FULLY CHINESE

A Photo Essay

And He shall raise a banner to the nations,
and He shall gather the lost of Israel,
and the scattered ones of Judah
He shall gather from the four corners of the earth.

Isaiah 11:12
A round the 9th or 10th century, a group of Persian Jewish traders traveling through the Silk Road arrived in Kaifeng, the then capital city of China. As with other peaceful traders, they were warmly welcomed; one of the Jewish families was even granted the Emperor’s surname, Zhao. In return, the Jews offered “boundless loyalty to the country and prince” and established a significant community that lasted for centuries.

They identified themselves as Yicileye people, a direct translation of “Israel” at a time long before the modern state of Israel existed. They worshiped G-d and kept a kosher diet though they became accustomed to their surroundings and were absorbed in the local culture. They lived a Jewish life in a Chinese way and thrived for many centuries until their synagogue was destroyed by flood only two hundred years ago. It was never rebuilt.

Since then the community dwindled, many of them dissolved into the larger population. Without a place for worship, many of the religious activities no longer continued. As a result of intermarriage starting around 14th century, they began to look similar to other Chinese. But one thing never changed: they knew where they were from, and longed to go back. Although the Kaifeng Jews have been there for so long, today most Han Chinese are barely aware of their existence.

Some of the Kaifeng Jews believe that it is time to return home. Applications were filed with the Israeli embassy in Beijing as soon as these two countries established diplomatic relations in 1992.

But the road to return home is not as easy as it seems. Different from Jewish matriarchal tradition, the Kaifeng Jews passed down their heritage, as do the Chinese, through the paternal line. The ancestors of the Kaifeng Jews married local Chinese women and then had children. But this created a problem for their descendants. According to the Law of Return, a person is born Jewish only if his or her mother is Jewish, otherwise a conversion is needed.

Further, the road of return has been made more difficult as the Chinese authorities, not recognizing Jews as an ethnic minority, say that there are no Chinese Jews, only Chinese, that they are Han now.

Even with so many obstacles, some have successfully made Aliyah. The preparation process starts in China with learning basic Hebrew and Torah. The final step is a conversion in Israel. On average this takes at least five years. But this does not stop them.

After years of waiting, some of these Chinese Jews have finally been fully accepted and granted Israeli citizenship. They are home now. A small community of the returned Chinese Jews has slowly begun to emerge in Israel and begun to thrive.

Here are the photos that tell the story of their return to Israel.
Gizzon prays by the Western Wall and draws attention from a curious boy.
Feature
by Jason Jia

Shai in class discussion with Rev. Menachem

Building a sukkah

Gizzon in Jerusalem
Jia Shuo (Jason Jia) graduated with a BA in International Journalism from Hong Kong Baptist University. In 2011, he decided to pursue an MA in Photojournalism and Documentary Photography at London College of Communication, University of the Arts London.

In 2012, Jason was selected as the recipient of the Royal Photographic Society Postgraduate Bursary. He was also one of the Ideas Fund Innovators winners, awarded by IdeasTap. With support from RPS and IdeasTap, Jason began working on his ongoing project on the Jewish community in Kaifeng, China and their return to Israel.

Jason is currently based in Beijing, China, shooting personal projects and assignments. You can find him at http://www.jasonjiafoto.com.

All photos courtesy of Jason Jia.
Jin Guangzhong walks with his daughter Jin Jin and Nina Wang. Wang also made aliyah from Kaifeng.