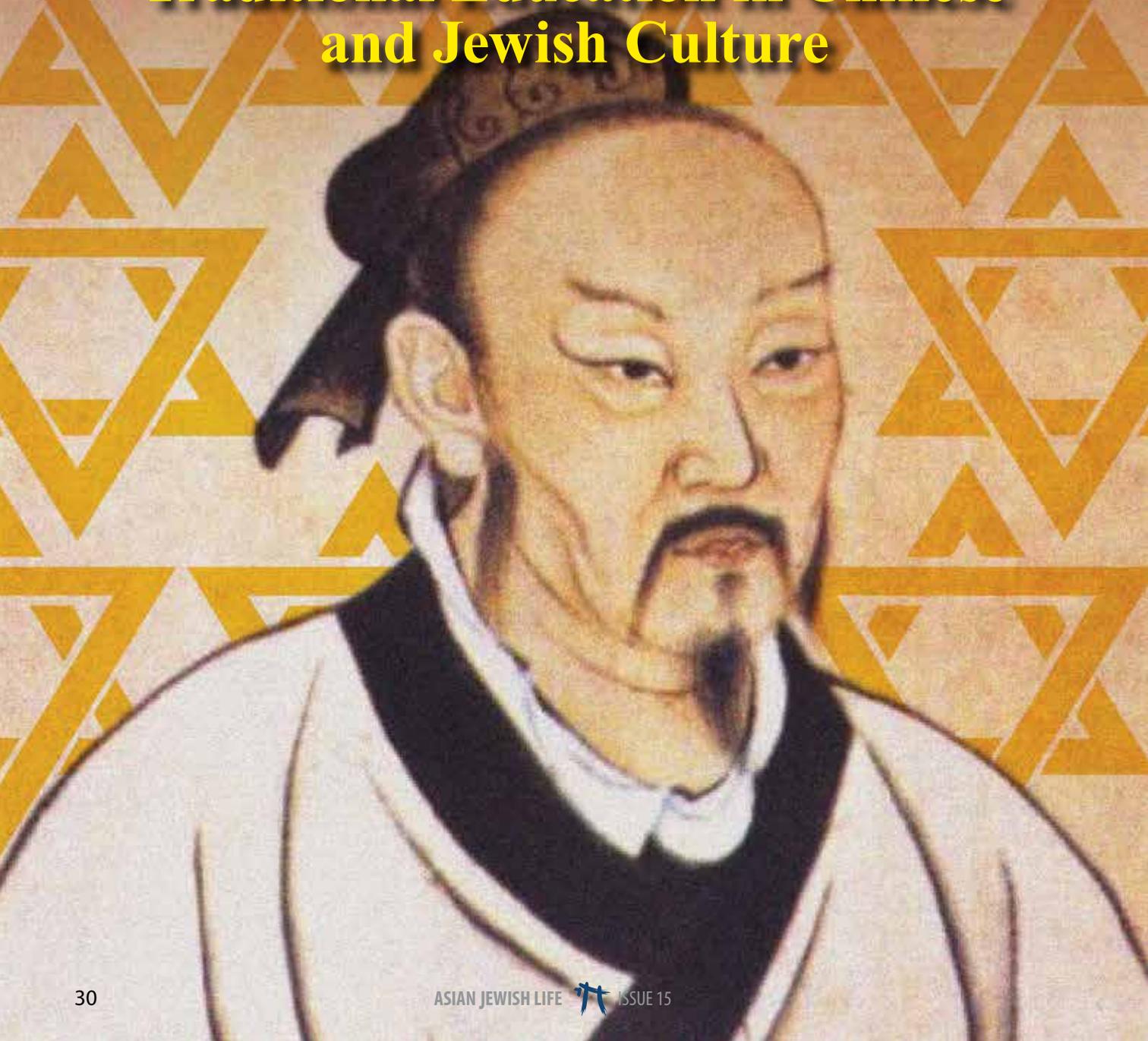


# **No Bread No Torah - No Degree No Honors**

## **Traditional Education in Chinese and Jewish Culture**



At the Passover seder night, Jews ask: “*Ma nishtana...* Why is tonight different from all other nights?” Within the cultural setting of Judaism the question basically sums up the Jewish way of thinking: we want to know why. Irrespective of the topic or task, whether or not it is theoretical or practical, Jews want to know the reason behind issues or tasks. This mental attitude dominated Jewish thought from biblical times when Jews interpreted the Torah to adjust to the local circumstances, to the hairsplitting debates of the Talmud, with it all culminating in modern Israel with the “why not” of common parlance.

Similar to the *ma nishatana*, is the ancient Chinese quest for “how can I know [to obtain it],” that in modern times implies: “how can I become wiser and more clever?” “Day alternates with night but how can we know where is its origin?” The wise searches for the “roots” of things, while the clever want to know how to put knowledge to practical use. Those who can understand, analyze and judge matters are considered wise. And those who can utilize, deal with, and control tasks are considered clever.

In traditional Chinese education, learning started with the “investigation of things”, or finding the source, that theoretically was in the surrounding nature. In reality however, they were in pursuit of the “roots” in their ancient writings. They looked for precedents. Once precedents were investigated, they wove the old with the new, the outcome of which indicated that knowledge was complete, and most significantly, everything could be put to practical use, every matter or task could succeed and nothing would go to waste. This method of aligning the past with the present led the Chinese to connect history to the present and

future. It also provided continuity to China, and at the same time, instilled a high degree of pragmatism and elasticity in interpreting issues. Since antiquity Chinese education was geared toward these two goals, the search for the “roots” and how to take advantage of them.

Contrary to these goals, learning in Judaism was focused on theoretical, often abstract debates and to lesser extent on practical issues. The emphasis was on analyzing and exhausting the possibilities of each issue.

Comparatively speaking, the Chinese pragmatism is the yin to the Jewish yang of idealism, or in a narrower sense, the Chinese how is the yin to the yang of Jewish why, the anchors of their respective educational philosophy. Chinese sages in antiquity determined that the “investigation of things” was fundamental to Chinese education, and they believed that the past held the answers to the present and future. Furthermore, they believed that since history repeats itself, Chinese education must teach the past.

In contrast, the Jews believed that the Torah was the ultimate source of knowledge, and within the commandments of the Torah were the answers to their survival. Unlike the Chinese classics, the Torah referred to neither history nor precedents, it only provided the tenets as a general guide. Consequently, the words of the Torah contained subtleties that could be explained only through analysis and common sense; it left each and every Jew to find his way according to its laws.

These two opposing views contained the fundamental traditional epitome of education in both cultures. At the most basic level, children in both

cultures started to study at an early age. Traditionally, Chinese children as young as two years old were encouraged to recite a certain poem and write each character without error. By the age of four a child was expected to memorize the entire 250 lines of the *Premier One Thousand Characters* and by age of five his vocabulary was greater than the average villager used in his entire life.

As they grew older, at least until age of ten, children spend hours upon hours in the never ceasing quest to conquer the art of calligraphy. First they had to master the right technique of holding the brush, vertical against the page and fill it with quick, confident strokes without blotting the ink once. At the same time the student labored hard at composing essays and poems. Each form of essay required special rules. A rule governed the number of words in a paragraph, the number of paragraph and their length, the type of language used – either highly formal or conversational. Other rules determined the stages of argument to be developed according to patterns of debate a thousand years old.

More flexible was the Jewish learning that started at age of five, or six in Mizrahi communities. The Babylonian Talmud did not consider age five ripe for learning: “Do not accept a pupil under the age of six; but at the age of six, stuff him with knowledge like an ox”. Irrespective of the starting age, children went to heder, study hall, to start with the study of the Torah. The Jewish child faced completely different circumstances than their Chinese counterparts. Living in the Diaspora, children were exposed to at least two different cultures simultaneously: the Jewish one at home and the culture of the country they lived in the Diaspora, in essence growing up bicultural at an early age. In addition to their native

# Feature

by Tiberiu Weisz

tongue, Jewish children learned Hebrew at heder, the language the Torah. Equally important however was the perception that from the day that a Jewish child was brought to heder, he took the first steps in his journey toward manhood.

At age of ten children started to learn reasoning with the reading of the Mishna, a primary companion to the Torah. Children learned the code of ethics including daily behavior under various social, economic, and religious conditions. Once a Jewish child reached Bar mitzvah (obligated to mitzvah) at age thirteen, the pupil joined the adult community. He could attend a minyan (the quorum needed to pray). It was also the beginning of independent and in-depth learning. They started to study the Talmud, also called the Oral Law. Students discussed and debated questions of law, ethics and morality in minute detail from every possible angle until all the “what ifs...” and “whys...” were exhausted.

To solve Talmudic riddles, students needed a lot of imagination, scholarship, memory, logic, wit, and above all, the courage to offer solutions to seemingly often-insoluble problems. Ultimately it provided each Jew with the tools to face ethical problems as they rose, and to adapt to the constantly changing circumstances in the Diaspora. The history of the Jews is full of ingenious enough interpretations that solved immediate dilemmas, and at the same time, remained true to the spirit of the law.

Chinese children of fifteen were considered mature enough to be able to fully use their reasoning power. The Confucian litmus test in antiquity was simple: “If a student is told that one corner is a square and he cannot reply that the other three are also squares it is no use of repeating to him”. Those who figured this out could start with kai jiang “paraphrasing and explaining,”

acquiring the basic knowledge and common sense, a premier to more profound learning.

Reasoning however was not necessarily among the forte of the Chinese education. The learning of the Classics was so uniform and predictable that one could ascertain the teaching of a person by what one read. When one read the *Book of Songs*, he was gentle and honest. When one was thorough and farsighted he read the *Book of History*, When one read the *Book of Music*, he was profound and good, when one read the *Book of Changes*, he was pure, quiet and subtle. When one read the *Book of Rites*, he was frugal, grave and respectful. When one read the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, he compared events and deeds. When one read the *Book of Filial Piety* one was compassionate of human relations. All these classics constituted the knowledge of virtue and perfection by the learned man.

According to Confucius (c. 551-479 BCE), self-cultivation and studying the past led to developing new ideas. In practice however, the old was so embedded into the system that new ideas were extremely hard to advance. Yet, in the course of a lifetime a Chinese underwent significant, but predictable changes, and accumulated wisdom that taught the Chinese to be resourceful.



The Chinese Way was like a pyramid of different perspectives built one over the other. In antiquity they believed in different spirits. Their earliest book of divination, *The Book of*

*Changes* taught the Chinese that every story has a yin and yang side. Confucianism taught about ethics, knowledge and cultivation of the self. Daoism was about following the natural way;

Legalism instituted ruthless pragmatism and order; Buddhism preached about letting go. Thus a Chinese person underwent a transformation from Confucian when everything went well, to a Daoist when things were falling apart to Buddhist when he approached death.

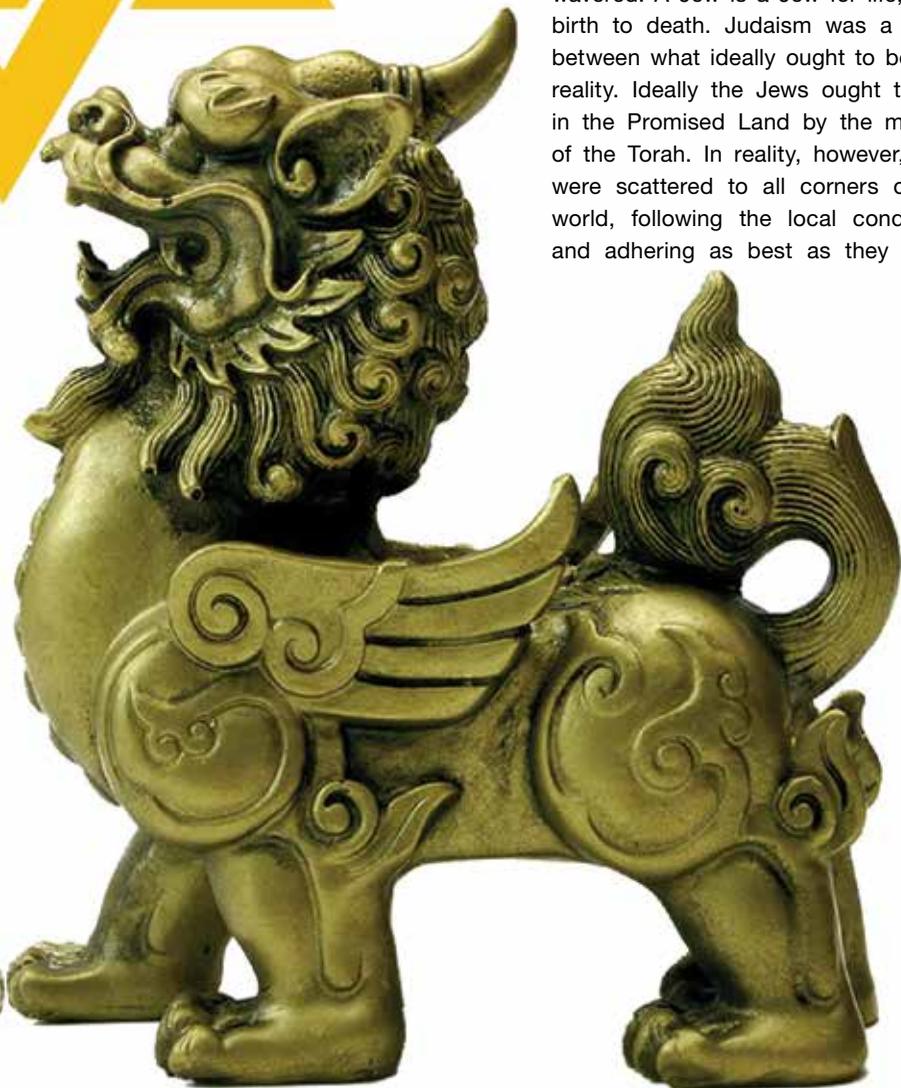
Jews also underwent profound transformations in a lifetime but they were contingent on local circumstances and individual cases. Each community or individual needed to adapt to their unique and constantly changing situations. Historically, kingdoms rose and fell and so did Jewish allegiance, but the faith of Jews in the Torah never wavered. A Jew is a Jew for life, from birth to death. Judaism was a clash between what ideally ought to be and reality. Ideally the Jews ought to live in the Promised Land by the mitzvot of the Torah. In reality, however, they were scattered to all corners of the world, following the local conditions and adhering as best as they could

to the tenets of the Torah. Every Jew faced everyday common dilemmas that required locally based solutions, such as how to separate the Sabbath from weekdays activities, or how to interact with local non-Jewish population, or, even more important how to reconcile the precepts of the Torah with the power of money. Fortunately, the Talmudic sages solved some of these issues by agreeing that the Torah is best, money is good and the adherence to local laws is required.

Both cultures strived to attain moral self-perfection, and enlightenment, but for different purpose. Chinese were practical, they studied for recognition and honors, and expected to earn a living from their studies: No degree no honors. For Jews, learning the Torah was part of their daily routine, and they did not expect any material gains from the study of Torah. Nevertheless, Jews needed to be creative enough to provide for their families.

Studying the Talmud did not lead to wealth, it rather boosted the confidence, pride and recognition of the scholar (*talmid hacham*) and the family. Yet the Torah also recognized that learning alone was not enough to survive, therefore included a *mitzva* (good deeds) that required scholars to make a living, a *parnasa* in Yiddish. Without *parnasa*, daily activities cannot be fulfilled; there can be no study, no Sabbath dinner, no proper education, no "social justice", and no donation to charity or as the Yiddish proverb said: *Ein Kemach, Ein Torah* - If there is no flour (bread), there is no Torah.

In China the notion of work had little to do with education, unless one studied for a civil service job. When Confucius, considered the first teacher in China, had asked: "Is it not a pleasure to practice what one has learned?" he implied that people should join *shu yuan*, book halls, to learn the basic tenets of the Chinese



classics. *Shu yuan* offered employment and a somewhat elevated social status to aging teachers, to candidates who repeatedly failed the examination, and to retired minor officials. Students attended a *shu yuan* to acquire the basic skills of writing, reading and memorizing sayings from the classics. In practice however, *shu yuan* had little to offer to students who wanted to use education for employment or to take the examinations for a civil service job.

By and large, education was not for everyone, and those who pursued it needed to conform to the rigid educational system. Even higher education was geared toward the civil service examination. The requirement followed a centuries old format, composed in poetical composition of five or seven characters and determined style. It discouraged personal initiatives, creativity and “out of the box” thinking. Chinese acquired new knowledge by studying the old. Not surprising that the public took little interest in schools. The ultimate goal of classical Chinese education was to pass the examinations that brought not only high honors to the candidate but also to his immediate and extended family. The candidate got instant recognition and began upward social mobility.

Jews on the other hand, were more modest, more idealistic and self-contained in their studies. They had never intended to make any material gains from reading the Torah. Historically Jews earned a living from manual labor, agriculture and trades unrelated to the Torah. They did not aspire to high positions, or to become civil servants. But the unintended consequence of meticulous Talmudic study was that while it inadvertently prepared Jews for positions requiring a high degree of literacy and the ability to think creatively and critically, it also transcended to the

non-Jewish world. Western societies adopted many Jewish ideas but officially denied the Jew the contributions and recognitions they deserved. Instead they used the Jewish wisdom to inflame anti-Jewish sentiments.

Only in China, Jewish wisdom was equated with achievements and success. The Chinese perceived Judaism as an ancient culture just like their own with an education that produced many famous Jewish people like Freud, Einstein, Marx and many other Jewish Nobel Laureates to name a few. Chinese pragmatism admired fame, recognition and wealth, and for that reason they respected Judaism. Unfettered by racial and religious prejudices, Chinese Jews in antiquity attained high position in the Chinese bureaucracy; many of them held PhD degrees. Such degrees entitled them to the highest honors, high ranks, and utmost respect in the Chinese social ladder. And indeed educated Chinese Jews were appointed to Commissioners [Governors], held titles of Daifu (the highest title below nobility), and a Chinese of Jewish descent served as Prime Minister.

Unfortunately both sides have little more than a superficial understanding of the other’s culture. The Chinese study Judaism primarily to focus on the wisdom and success of the rich

and famous Jews. They want to know how to translate the Jewish success to their advantage. For some reasons, the Chinese rarely mention the high price Jews have paid for their survival. Historical events such as the Inquisition, the expulsion from Spain or the Russian Pogroms are generally omitted in Chinese writings. By the same token Jewish perception of China derives from anecdotal observations and is based on animated communications and economic opportunities. How many Jews are aware of the profound influence of the Chinese mindset of how can I know [to obtain it]?

Lack of cultural depth lead both sides to liberally interpret each other’s intentions. The Chinese flatter the Jews with words of recognition for their wisdom and wealth, while Jews praise the Chinese for not being anti-Semitic. Jews aggressively promote Holocaust studies to the Chinese, but the Chinese translate it as Datusha or the Nanjing Massacre, in memory of the atrocities committed in the city of Nanking by the Japanese in 1937. The Jews applaud the restoration of the one hundred five years old synagogue in Harbin, but the Chinese use it as a concert hall. China welcomes the Jews just as Confucius said rhetorically: “Is it not a pleasure to have friends coming from afar?”... as long as they come to pay tribute to China. 

*No Bread No Torah/ No Degree No Honors* is Part I of a two part series looking at Chinese education and Jewish education. Part II (in the next issue of AJL): “Tiger Mom and Yiddishe Mame” addresses the issue of how traditional Chinese education served as the driving force behind the Chinese Tiger Mom and how the Diaspora shaped the Yiddishe Mame.

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