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Center of Jewish Studies Shanghai

המרכז ללימודים יהודיים בשנגחאי



A Strange Foreign Import
Jewish Studies in China

Steve Hochstadt and Pan Guang at the Center of Jewish Studies Shanghai

All over China, the Torah is studied and the Holocaust is taught. Never before has interest in Jews, Jewish culture and Jewish history been so widespread in the world's most populous nation.

Jews have lived in China for nearly 1000 years. Well before European Christians discovered the Middle Kingdom, Jewish traders from western Asia had settled in Kaifeng, the capital of the Northern Song dynasty, and perhaps the largest city in the world in the 12th century. The small Kaifeng Jewish community survived floods and wars, but was gradually absorbed into Chinese culture. By the 19th century, there was no longer a synagogue and the descendants had lost their Jewish identity, although they still practiced some customs unusual in China, such as avoiding pork. Only a few recalled their long history.

Since the late 19th century, waves of Jews again entered China. After the Opium Wars of the 1840s, Jews of Baghdadi origin accompanied British colonists into Shanghai. Around 1900, a few thousand Russian Jews escaped Tsarist persecution, settling in Harbin, Tianjin, and Shanghai. More followed in the wake of the 1917 Revolution and later Stalinist anti-Semitism. By the 1930s, about 5000 Jews lived in Shanghai, and perhaps another 10,000 in Harbin and elsewhere in China. Then in little less than one year, from late 1938 until September 1939, 16,000 Central European Jews fleeing the Nazis flooded into Shanghai.

Like the Jews themselves, anti-Semitism was a strange foreign import to China. Educated Chinese admired Jewish love for learning, commercial success, and respect for family. Even when the Japanese military took over Shanghai in the wake of Pearl Harbor, Jewish life was never threatened. The Japanese, too, brought into China a traditionally high regard for Jews.

After the Japanese were defeated in 1945, Chinese began to express hostility to the foreigners who had dominated their ports for over a century. Nearly all the Jews in China left within five years, scattering across the globe in the US, Israel, Australia, Europe, and Latin America, while a few stayed close in Hong Kong. Although Israel was one of the first nations to recognize the People's Republic of China, Chinese support of the Muslim nations of the Middle East led to a breakdown in relations with Israel.

By 1978, after Mao's death, the government initiated far-reaching economic and political changes, now officially referred to as the period of "reform and opening up". One door that was reopened in the 1980s was to Jews: the Jewish past in China and the Jewish present, represented by Israel, became subjects of discussion. First military, then economic, and finally diplomatic ties between China and Israel evolved, until formal relations between the two were announced in 1992. Communities of Jewish foreigners reappeared in Shanghai and developed in Beijing.

Jews again became a subject for academic study. Some scholars followed traditional Communist ideological lines: one of the first publications about Jews in China was Xu Zhucheng's biographical condemnation of Silas Hardoon as a foreign bourgeois exploiter. Others, like Xu Buzeng in Shanghai, after years of research, published more sympathetic articles on the Shanghai refugees. His translation of the standard work on Shanghai's Jewish refugees by David Kranzler was published in 1990.

At the same time, an institutional structure for Jewish studies was being created. The Shanghai Judaic Studies Association (SJSA) was founded in August 1988, with a Constitution printed in English. One of its purposes was to establish an academic research center, and soon the Center of Jewish Studies

Shanghai became the first institution in China devoted to studying Jews. From the outset, studying Jews in China was linked to trading with Jews outside of China. Among the "Academic Activities" listed in the Constitution was the "establishment of economic cooperation between Chinese and foreign industrial and business enterprises".

Another step was the first official return of former Shanghai Jews, when a small group arranged for the first public Seder celebration in Shanghai in April, 1989. The Chinese government rolled out the red carpet, offering Mao's former residence as lodging. The Jewish visitors met the scholars of the newly formed SJSA; Jin Ying-zhong, the Secretary-General, proclaimed: "We all are Shanghailanders." Xu Buzeng, already in his 60s, presented an overview of Jewish cultural figures in Shanghai, his special passion.

At a 1992 conference at Harvard University on "Jewish Diasporas in China", a younger generation of scholarly leaders appeared. Their ability to speak English allowed them to connect Chinese scholarship to Jews across the world. Xu Xin from Nanjing University talked about the development of Jewish studies in China. Pan Guang, formerly one of 4 Vice-Chairmen of the SJSA, now the Dean of the Center of Jewish Studies Shanghai, addressed Zionism within the Shanghai Jewish community.

Since then, Pan Guang and Xu Xin have become the leading figures in Chinese Jewish studies. Working closely with the municipal government, Pan Guang organized China's first Jewish studies conference in Shanghai in April 1994. Along with the usual scholarly papers, a monument commemorating the Central European refugees was unveiled in Huoshan Park, formerly Wayside Park, in the center of refugee settlement in the 1940s. At the dedication ceremony, Jewish speakers stressed the past: the survival of thousands of endangered

Jews in Shanghai and the hospitality of the Chinese to these desperate foreigners. Chinese speakers looked to a prosperous future, based on improving relations between Jews and Chinese.

Pan Guang has been remarkably successful in forging international relationships around the Shanghai Jewish experience. He was the lone Chinese scholar at a Salzburg conference on “Flight to Shanghai”, organized by the Austrian Gedenkdienst (Holocaust Memorial Service) in May 1995. The Gedenkdienst, created in 1992 for Austrians with academic and historical interests who seek an alternative to military service, now regularly sends volunteers to his Shanghai Center. In 2006 Pan Guang became the first winner of the Gedenkdienst’s Austrian Holocaust Memorial Award.

Xu Xin has followed a slightly different path. In 1992 he founded the Institute of Jewish Studies at Nanjing University as a training ground for future generations of Chinese teachers and scholars. Since then Professor Xu Xin has single-handedly made Jewish studies into a significant subject in Chinese universities. He is a prolific scholar, writing about many Jewish historical and religious subjects in Chinese and English. He has raised a million dollars to support the Institute, which now has spacious offices in a new building on the Nanjing campus. The biggest contributor has been the Diane and Guilford Glazer Foundation in Los Angeles, after whom the Institute is named, but Xu Xin has also given lectures across the US, collecting hundreds of smaller contributions. His students lead Jewish studies at other universities.

The career of another pioneer of Jewish studies exemplifies how much has changed in the past 20 years. Zhang Qianhong’s interest in the Holocaust was awakened as a student by the *Diary of Anne Frank* in Chinese translation. Finding few other books about Jews, she



Guo Yan in Teaching the Torah Lane, Kaifeng

went to the library at Beijing University, where a librarian said, “Here are many books, but nobody looks at them.” After post-doctoral study in Israel, she founded an Institute of Jewish Studies at Henan University in 2002. When she sent an article about the concentration camps, based on the work of Raul Hilberg, to a magazine editor in Beijing, he asked her if Hilberg’s book was a novel. That article was one of the first in a Chinese magazine about the Holocaust.

Her student, Zhang Ligang, represents the next generation of Chinese scholars of Jewish history. He received a PhD from Xu Xin at Nanjing University and returned to Henan University. When Zhang Qianhong became Vice President of Zhengzhou University, he became the director of Jewish studies at Henan. Newer Jewish studies programs have sprung up, such as the Center of Judaic and Chinese Studies at Sichuan International Studies University, under the direction of Professor Fu Xiaowei, and the Center for Judaic and Inter-Religious Studies at Shandong University.

The history of Jews in China provides edifying narratives for the Chinese. While Christians in medieval Europe were preaching that Jews were children of the Devil, massacring them during the Crusades, and expelling them from their countries, a Jewish community found a

home in Kaifeng. When Europeans once again began wholesale killing of Jews in Russia and then everywhere else in the 20th century, tens of thousands of refugees found unique safety in China.

Alongside a national academic Jewish studies program that would rival any European nation’s, the Chinese government has encouraged the development of a more public form of Jewish studies. In the restored Ohel Moshe Synagogue in Shanghai, the Jewish Refugees Museum, under the direction of Chen Jian, presents a unique exhibition of photos, artifacts, and films about the Central European refugees, the only group of former foreign residents to have its own museum. A similar exhibit featuring the history and culture of the Jews is also located in a rebuilt synagogue in Harbin. The Sino-Israel Research and Study Center was established there in 2002 at Heilongjiang University.

The story of the refugees is useful to other nations, too. Germany and Austria seek opportunities to display their historical responsibility. The German Consulate General in Shanghai and the Jewish Refugees Museum collaboratively created an exhibition and public program around the stories of former German-speaking refugees, timed to coincide with World Expo 2010. “Remembering the Past and Creating a New Future,”



Jewish Refugees Museum in Shanghai

expresses the major motivations of the partners. The Germans are determined to remember and the Chinese are ambitiously shaping the future, notably in Shanghai.

In the Chinese academy, historical Jews have become an interesting and useful subject. The decline and disappearance of these communities makes their study amenable to positive interpretations.

But there has also been a surprising internal revival of the Chinese Jewish community in Kaifeng. In 2009-10, Eric Rothberg, a young Jewish man from Minnesota studying at Henan University, taught a weekly class of Chinese how Jews around the world celebrate the Sabbath. Unlike the Jewish studies classes in universities, these citizens are making a personal journey into their families' past. Although by traditional Jewish matrilineal laws, they would not be recognized as Jews, they wear their identity as Jews proudly. In Teaching the Torah Lane, Guo Yan has hung a banner with menorah and large Star of David advertising the Kaifeng Jewish History Memorial Center, a small room displaying photographs and artifacts. Above the Li family's front door hangs a banner that says "A House for Jewish People". But their meetings for prayer are strictly private as Judaism is not one of the five officially recognized religions of China.

There is still a deep divide between academic and personal Judaic studies in China but I believe that the two forms of Jewish studies will eventually mingle much more freely. Jewish studies itself has become much more worldly and diverse. Lihong Song, a young scholar at Nanjing University, wrote that "the locus classicus of all Chinese Jewish studies is the Jewish diaspora in China." His research on Jewish identity in the Roman world represents a broadened definition of Jewish studies. In Henan University's Institute of Jewish Studies, where the older faculty focus on the Kaifeng Jews, Hu Hao studies modern themes: the beliefs of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, about Judaism as a community.

Last year Pan Guang organized the First Young Scholars Forum on Jewish Studies, at which 22 academics from 12 cities presented papers, only one of which was about Jews in China. The MA thesis topics of Nanking University students cover the whole range of Jewish studies, from the Torah to Jews in medieval England to the development of Zionism to the Israeli-Arab conflict.

As Jewish studies has expanded beyond the researches of a small group of scholars into public spaces in China, especially the university classroom, its scope has been broadened to cover the

world. Henan University's annual essay competition, supported by Len Hew, a Chinese Canadian, has awarded prizes and scholarships to 200 students since 2003, based on the most varied essays about Jews. Lihong Song's course on Jewish civilization attracts 400 students each year.

In 2000, Xu Xin published "Some Thoughts on Our Policy Toward the Jewish Religion - including a Discussion of Our Policy Toward the Kaifeng Jews," in Points East, the newsletter of the Sino-Judaic Institute, a non-profit organization which supports nearly all of the Chinese programs discussed above. He argued that the Chinese government should accord Judaism recognition as a Chinese religion, as it does with Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. Although the government has not yet accepted this idea, it has been more accommodating to foreign Jews who wish to have religious services in China. A year ago, the first ever bat mitzvah was held in the Ohel Moshe Synagogue. During World Expo 2010, the Ohel Rachel Synagogue in Shanghai's former French Concession was opened to Jewish worship, also for foreigners.

This is another step in the ever-widening tolerance for Judaism, which has followed in the wake of the opening toward Jewish studies. That appears to me to be the consensus of students, academics, university administrators and official central government policy. I too expect this process to continue. ✧

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