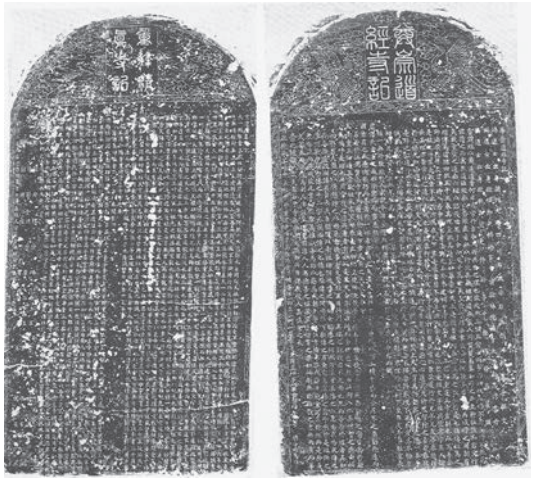
Encounters Between Chinese and Jewish Civilizations

By Shalom Salomon Wald

Comparing Two Civilizations

Comparison of Chinese and Jewish civilizations does not seem an obvious choice. At first glance, the differences between Chinese and Jewish history, numbers, language, religion, and more are enormous. Yet since 1605, when Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci in Beijing encountered for the first time a Chinese Jew, meetings between Chinese and Jews, as well as thoughts about their similarities, have fascinated the Western mind.[1] Belgian–Australian sinologist Pierre Ryckmans called China "the oldest living civilization on earth." He explained its long duration by spiritual memory, language, and the written word, and added an interesting afterthought: "only the Jewish tradition may present a significant parallel to the phenomenon of (China's) spiritual continuity."[2] This essay will discuss encounters between Chinese and Jews in old and recent times, both inside and outside of China, and add a reflection on a religious similarity between the two civilizations that has had enormous historical consequences for both.



Composite of two eighteenth-century ink rubbings of the 1489 (left) and 1512 (right) stone inscriptions left by the Kaifeng Jews. They are featured on pages 34 and 50 of *Chinese Jews* (1966) by Bishop William Charles White. These same rubbings were first published in *Inscriptions juives de K'ai-fong-fou* (1900) by Jerome Tobar. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at https://tinyurl.com/ya29azh9.

The Jews of Kaifeng

The first long-lasting encounter between the Chinese and Jewish civilizations took place in Kaifeng, Henan Province, the ancient capital of the Song dynasty. Jews traveled and traded on the Silk Roads to China during the Tang dynasty, but a small, stable Jewish community could be found in China only since the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127). These Jews came from the Middle East, mostly Persia, but when exactly they arrived—allegedly invited by a Song emperor—is not known. They built a synagogue and were prosperous, and a relatively large number passed the difficult Chinese civil service exams under the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and became Chinese officials, serving also in the military. Kaifeng synagogue inscriptions list eighty Jewish officials between 1489 and 1679. One of them, Zhao Yingcheng (1619–1657?), achieved the high, very rare *jinshi* rank. He held senior positions (Ministry of Justice Director, Emissary to Fujian to fight outlaws, and more). Late in his short life, he returned to Kaifeng to rebuild the synagogue that had been devastated by the 1642 Yellow River flood.[3] In the nineteenth century, Kaifeng's economic misery, civil wars, and assimilation greatly reduced and impoverished the community. Traveling out of Kaifeng through the bandit-infested Henan Province was dangerous, and in contrast to Kaifeng Muslims who suffered no less, the Jews had no coreligionists anywhere else in China who could have helped them. The Jews were a minuscule local island, barely visible in the vast cultural ocean of dynastic China. They incorporated China into their culture; China's culture did not incorporate Judaism but gave the Jews a place to live and prosper. The Jews developed over 700 years what has been called a "creative cultural interaction" with their Chinese environment.[4] The Jews took Chinese lifestyles, dress, names, and sometimes concubines. They adopted the Chinese family lineage system through which everyone traced his or her origin to an ancestor, name, and location. If the ancestor was a Jew, the whole family was Jewish. The Jews' accommodation to Chinese tradition allowed them to be Chinese without ceasing to be Jews. For the Chinese, they were just one of China's numerous religious sects with a leader, a holy book, celebrations, and dietary customs. They were not seen as a small branch of a much larger global religion. The Jews of Kaifeng adapted the biblical story to Chinese understanding and wrote that their laws were handed down by a long line of wise men. All this was perfectly acceptable to Confucians. Equally acceptable were the Jewish laws of ritual observance, because this was exactly what Confucius had demanded when he said that spiritual cultivation required the *li* (ritual observance). On one issue—the notion of God—Judaism could accept no compromise and no accommodation: in Judaism, God is One; he has no visible corporal form and no pronounceable name. The Kaifeng Jewish texts scorn idolatry, which should have pleased Confucian intellectuals because they too looked down upon the superstitions and widespread popular image worship of the Chinese masses. And which term did the Jewish texts use for "God"? *T'ien* or *Tian*, "heaven," which in Confucianism is the supreme source of goodness and virtue or the supreme law ordering the world. The corresponding Hebrew word for heaven, *Shamajim*, can often be found in rabbinic scripture as a synonym for God. "Everything is in the hands of Heaven (=God) except for the fear of Heaven (=God)," says the Talmud.[5] Is the semblance of Tian and Shamajim a simple coincidence?

The Kaifeng experience is unique in Jewish history. It shows that Jews could build bridges to Confucianism, China's dominant ethical value system. They could not build such bridges to any other belief or religion during the same periods. Confucianism never asked the Jews to convert or worship foreign gods or prophets. Also, the Confucian rites of ancestor worship were compatible with Jewish religion: on their main holy days, observant Jews still say the *Jiskor* (rememberance) prayer to commemorate their deceased parents and families.

Only in the nineteenth century did some Jewish intellectuals in the West hear of this remote city where Jews were not discriminated against. During these years, the expanding colonial powers despised a weak, conflict-ridden China. The Jews who knew the Kaifeng story did not. Ironically, when Kaifeng's Jewry was thriving, it was virtually unknown in the wider Jewish world. Only when it was dying did it become a link between China and the Jewish people.

The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Chinese Views of Jews and Jewish Impacts

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Chinese travelers for the first time discovered that there were Jews across the world, and more importantly, they noted that in the West and Russia, Jews were often discriminated against. Some of them responded with sympathy because they saw the perceived oppression of the Jews as similar to the oppression of China by Western powers. One of China's leading reformers, Kang Youwei, wrote in 1909 that the Jews were thrown "into abuse and difficulty" because they had no country of their own.[6] Similar feelings of affinity animated the founder and first President of the Chinese Republic, Sun Yatsen. In

1920 and 1924, he drew parallels between the fate of the Chinese and Jews, and supported the right of the Jews to restore their nation in their ancient homeland. Shortly after, China gave its support to the Balfour Declaration, the 1917 document that opened the way to the creation of the modern state of Israel.

During the twentieth century, literature and languages of the Jewish people became known to Chinese intellectuals. The first complete and accurate translation of the Hebrew Bible appeared in modern Chinese.[7] Chinese writers, e.g., Mao Dun, appreciated the Bible not for religious reasons, but as great literature and history. However, until World War II, the national Jewish language spoken by the greatest number of Jews was not yet Hebrew, but Yiddish—a dialect of ancient German with many Hebrew words. Yiddish had a rich literature of which a few dozen works were translated into Chinese during the 1920s and '30s. The appearance of these books in China coincided with heated debates about the need to reform the Chinese language. Some language reformers saw in Yiddish the right model of a language that could be understood by the large masses of the people—a model that China should follow. However, the main Jewish contribution to China—if this is what it was—was indirect. A historian called the twentieth century "the Jewish century."[8] The contributions of Jews to the civilizations of the world changed China, too. But are they "Jewish" contributions? Karl Marx was a German Jew, and Chinese Communists still respect him greatly, but Chinese communism had enough indigenous features not to be labeled as a "Jewish" development. Another example: author Franz Kafka can be read in Chinese translation. Kafka is "*the* Jewish writer . . . who may yet redefine Jewish culture for us," wrote one historian of literature.[9] Many interpret Kafka's work as a metaphor for the alienation of Western Jews, but one of his Chinese translators proposed that his work describes the alienation of the working classes from the capitalist system—he converted Kafka back into Marx.[10] Albert Einstein is another great name of the twentieth century, widely admired in China. Does Chinese admiration for Einstein create a point of connection between the Chinese and Jewish civilizations? There are no simple answers to these questions. The answer is easier for American Jewish writers, such as Isaac Bashevis Singer, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth, who first became available in Chinese in the 1980s. They introduced Chinese readers to some aspects of Jewish life and thought. Today, large numbers of Chinese have become aware of Jews and Judaism through the Jewish refugee communities that survived the Second World War in Shanghai.

The Jews are not always the best judges to understand Chinese views pertaining to Judaism. Rabbi Adin Steinsalz, widely respected in the Jewish world for his work on the Talmud, wrote after a visit to China "what [the Chinese] found in Judaism, most Jews don't see."[11] For example, one of China's main Judaic scholars justified teaching and research about Judaism as essential for China. He asserted that the Jews have modernized their civilization successfully while remaining loyal to their ancient roots, whereas the Chinese, in contrast, have failed to do so.[12] His statement is obviously tailored for a Chinese audience. Many Jews do not see it, particularly when they watch the tensions and clashes between the ultraorthodox and the secular in Israel and elsewhere.

The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Jewish Views of China and Chinese Cultural Influence

First modern Jewish reactions to China were sympathetic, as noted above. Already in 1911, in Ottoman Palestine, a Jewish author, S. M. Perlmann, published the first Hebrew book about China, *Ha-Sinim* (The Chinese). The book was translated into other languages, including Russian and English, which testified to a more widespread Jewish interest in China. In Eastern Europe, there were many Yiddish books and newspaper articles about China. Little is known about this because the great majority of their authors, readers, books, and articles were destroyed during the Holocaust.

European interest in China is old. It began at least with Marco Polo's Asian travelogue in the thirteenth century and reached a peak in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when Jesuit missionaries and the leading Enlightenment philosophers, e.g., Leibniz and Voltaire, wrote extensively about China. European Jews joined the discussion much later, after the old political, social, and academic discriminations against them had begun to weaken. Thus, only in the twentieth century did German, French, and British Jews, as scholars and art collectors, play a significant role in introducing Chinese culture to the European public. In the latter half of the century, American Jews played an equally important role.

One of America's leading China scholars, the late Benjamin Schwartz of Harvard, said that his and other Jewish scholars' interest in China's relationship to its past was intimately linked to their own relationship to their Jewish past. Schwartz saw a historical affinity between Chinese and Jews.[13] The role of Jewish art collectors cannot be overestimated. Visual art is one of the most effective ways to present China to a larger public. Some of the great Chinese art collections in the museums of New York, Washington, Berlin, Paris, and London bear the names of their Jewish donors.

China and Israel

Even before Israel's creation in 1948, and again several years later, Israel's founding father, David Ben-Gurion, called on the Jewish people and Israel to seek links of friendships with China and India. He called them the great civilizations of Asia and predicted that they would become the world's leading powers. Ben-Gurion used the term "civilization" deliberately: he looked at long-term historical trends, not at immediate economic or other material interests, and this at a time when very few in the West believed that China or India would ever rise to great power status.[14] The relations between China and Israel since 1949 are too complex and multifaceted to lend themselves to quick review. Economic, cultural, and personal relations are growing. Book translations, exhibitions, TV shows, and more than ten major universities with Jewish and Israeli study centers keep increasing the number of Chinese with knowledge of Israel and Judaism.

Looking toward the future of Sino–Jewish relations, "The sky is the limit," as they say. And what is the sky? Most of what the Chinese want to learn from the Jews and Israel is utilitarian and short term, from water technologies to fighting terrorism, or at the most vulgar popular level, how to get rich quickly. On the other side, Jews and Israel are looking for business and market opportunities, like everybody else, but there is also a strong intellectual Jewish interest in China's culture and history.

Both sides should reach higher and look further. The Chinese might want to reflect on the ethical and spiritual factors that allowed a people as small as the Jews to maintain its identity and exert its civilizational influence in the wider world. In contrast to China, the Jews were for a long time without "hard" power or a territorial base. In turn, the Jews could benefit from reflecting on a core concept of Chinese thought, the notion of change. As *The Book of Changes* (I Ching) and Laozi's *Daodejing* show, change is permanent and inevitable. All phenomena are dynamic; all situations are continuously transformed. When life and history move in one direction, the movement will stop short before it reaches an extreme and swing back into the opposite direction. This notion of inevitable change still influences Chinese thought and policy.

China's old philosophy of history is cyclical. Dynasties rise and fall; they come and go. The universe has neither beginning nor end. In Jewish religious philosophy, in contrast, history moves forward in one direction—from a beginning to an end. Of course the Jews knew major changes, more than they asked for, which were often triggered by major catastrophes, but they were less inclined to see them as an inevitable part of life and history.

The Tension between Universalism and Particularism in Nonmissionary Religions—Parallels between Judaism and Confucianism

There is more that the Chinese and Jews could learn from each other's history. Are there similarities in the historical fate of Judaism and Confucianism linked to their religions or philosophies? Whether Confucianism

is a "religion" in the Western sense or a philosophy continues to be debated in the West, as well as in China. No simple answer is in sight, least of which is because the Chinese term for religion does not mean exactly the same as in the West. Suffice it to say here that Judaism and Confucianism are two nonmissionary belief systems accompanied by ethical precepts and practical rituals. The two beliefs do not try to convert the rest of the world to their own dogmas. During some periods, Jews as well as Chinese did try to force their beliefs on minorities (e.g., the Hasmonean/Maccabean King of Judea, John Hyrcanus, who reigned 134–104 BCE, conquered the Idumean tribe and converted it by force to Judaism). Rabbinic Judaism condemned him for this. Herodes (Herod), Roman-appointed King of Judea who ruled from 37–4 BCE, was Idumean. These were exceptions, not the rule. In contrast, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam are global missionary religions that seek deliverance from suffering for all humans in the first case, and salvation through conversion in the other two cases. The defining characteristic of a nonmissionary religion or philosophy, at least in the two cultures addressed in this essay, is a strong degree of particularism. The Jews are the "chosen people"—chosen by God to be an ethical model. China is the "middle kingdom"—the most significant country and the center of the world. However, to be nonmissionary does not mean indifference to the rest of the world. There is a universalistic component in nonmissionary religions as well, and a concealed or open tension between particularism and universalism. The balance between universalistic and the dominant particularistic impulses is changing through history, often in response to external events.

On the other hand, missionary religions are never free of particularistic elements. Buddhism and Islam claim to bring deliverance or salvation to all humans, but India and Arabia enjoy an exalted place in the memory of the two religions simply because the founders were Indian in one case, Arab in the other, and their holy books were written in their respective national languages.

Judaism is the religion of one man, Abraham; one family; one group of tribes; one people. Traditional Judaism does not seek but accepts converts, and promises salvation to non-Jews who follow a number of Jewish laws. But universalism is woven into the Hebrew Bible from the first page on and followed up in the Talmud. The Bible starts not with the creation of the Jews but with the creation of the human race.

The self-definition of the early Chinese was apparently less ethnic than that of the early biblical Jews. During the Shang and Zhou dynasties (estimated 1556–1046 and 1046–256 BCE, respectively), the borderline between the Chinese and the "Barbarians" was not seen as ethnic or racial but as cultural. This is what allowed early China to expand by slowly absorbing and acculturating these "Barbarians."[15] The Chinese belief that their culture was superior to all others implied also a claim of universality. In *The Analects*, Confucius formulated succinctly his conviction that the borders between Chinese and "Barbarians" were not closed: "The Master expressed a wish to live among the nine barbaric tribes of the East. Somebody said: 'But they are so ignorant. How is this possible?' The Master said, 'Where a man of culture resides one cannot speak of ignorance!'"[16]

However, Confucian universalisms probably did not extend beyond East and Central Asia—the regions the Chinese knew and controlled during the time of their greatest geographic expansion. In later periods of Chinese history, particularistic, ethnocentric, and xenophobic positions became more prominent. When the barbaric tribes threatened the borders of Southern Song dynasty China in the 1120s, ethnic antagonism against them became a patriotic duty. Now culture could no longer override ethnic boundaries. Generally, ethnic hatred was expressed against the Mongol conquerors who destroyed the Song and ruled China during the Yuan dynasty, and again against the Manchus who created China's last dynasty, the Qing (1644–1912). The Manchus' eagerness to adopt Confucianism did not make them less foreign in the eyes of Chinese patriots. Over time,

although Confucian intellectuals did not abandon all their universalism, popular Chinese ethnocentrism and particularism became more similar to that of the Jews. It made no difference whether particularism was primarily ethnic or cultural; in either case, it was not missionary.

Chinese Buddhists did sometimes proselytize, but in general, Chinese and Jews abstained from global missionary propaganda and expansion during most of their history. However, this did not protect them from encroachments and invasions by missionary religions—quite the contrary. It seems that nonmissionary religions are particularly susceptible to invasion by their missionary competitors. Here, some similarities between the fate of the Chinese and Jewish civilizations can be noted. In South Asia, Buddhism became missionary from Buddha's time on (fifth century BCE or later), but it entered China only approximately in the second century CE, hundreds of years afterward. Exact dates remain controversial. From then on, the two most dynamic missionary religions of the time, Buddhism and Christianity, attacked the two nonmissionary civilizations, those of China and the Jews, with irresistible force. Buddhism spread in China and became dominant in the sixth and seventh centuries. The outward-looking pluralistic attitude of the ruling Tang dynasty certainly helped Buddhism gain adherents, but there were more compelling spiritual forces at work. Buddhism was at odds with China's traditions and indigenous wisdom. The latter apparently no longer satisfied the spiritual longings of large numbers of people. The new universalistic faith from India promised all humans liberation from suffering, and this did satisfy the longings of many. The Sui dynasty (581–618 CE), among others, strongly encouraged the spread of Buddhism. Generally, during these centuries, Buddhism was sometimes courted and sometimes attacked, both in north and south China. Finally, in the mid-ninth century, the Chinese state felt so threatened by the success of Buddhism that Emperor Wuzong of the Tang launched an anti-Buddhist sweep across the country, closed most monasteries, and expelled its monks and nuns. His edict of 845 CE on the suppression of Buddhism is a harsh indictment of the harm the new religion is accused to have done to China. The state's persecution did not extinguish Buddhism, but the new religion never regained the wealth and power it had enjoyed before.

There are parallels and also a major difference with Jewish history. When the Apostle Paul discarded the Jewish religious laws that protected the Jews' particularism, he turned Christianity into a universalistic faith comparable to Buddhism. Christian universalism and lack of ritual restrictions exerted great attraction for the pagan populations of the late Roman Empire, and Judaism could not compete. The new faith soon enough attacked Judaism with lethal intentions. From the fourth century on, Christianity became the state religion. The anti-Jewish edicts of Roman Emperor Constantine (of 329 CE and the following years) and later emperors aimed to humilitate and constrain Jewish religion, close or limit Jewish houses of worship, prohibit conversion to Judaism, and more. In spite of very different historical contexts, and without any direct link, the anti-Jewish hostility in Constantine's edicts sounds strangely similar to the strong anti-Buddhist feelings in the Tang Emperor's edict of 845. In other words, state power was essential in Chinese and Jewish religious history during the same centuries. However, in the Jewish case, the state, Christian as it was, fought for the new religion against the old; in the Chinese case, it fought for the old, against the new. The Jews could not fight back to defend the old religion. They had lost their state and independence.

In later centuries, the Chinese and the Jews had to cope with additional universalistic religions with missionary intentions. Christianity entered China while in Europe, and it continued its pressure on the Jews. From the seventh and eighth centuries on, Islam tried to convert both the Chinese and the Jews. But these efforts did not shape the history of the Chinese and the Jews as profoundly as Buddhism had for the Chinese and early Christianity had for the Jews. Only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did new universalistic creeds arise that had deep, history-shaping effects on Chinese and Jews: communism and socialism. Both are universalistic creeds that have their roots in the Jewish Bible's quest for social justice and equality.

The Chinese and Jewish civilizations are broader and older than the two states that are their main centers today: the People's Republic of China and the state of Israel. These two states will help decide for their nations the balance between particularism and universalism, between the pursuit of national interests alone and outreach to the wider world. If history teaches us anything, it is that it can be dangerous to ignore universalism and outreach. This is what the Chinese and the Jews could learn from each other. ■

NOTES

1. Salomon Wald, "Chinese Jews in European Thought," in *Youtai: Presence and Perception of Jews and Judaism in China,* ed. Peter Kupfer (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008), 217. This book also has many chapters on Jews in old China. There is substantial scholarly literature on this subject. See *The Chinese Jews of Kaifeng: A Millennium of Adaptation and Endurance*, ed. Anson H. Laytner and Jordan Paper (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), and *The Jews of China: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, vol. 1, ed. Jonathan Goldstein (Armonk, New York; London, England: M. E. Sharpe, 1999), mentioned in later endnotes. The pioneering study on this subject was Michael Pollak, *Mandarins, Jews, and Missionaries: The Jewish Experience in the Chinese Empire* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1980). See also Irene Eber, *Chinese and Jews: Encounters between Cultures* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2002); and *From Kaifeng to Shanghai: Jews in China*, ed. Roman Malek (Nettetal: Monumenta Serica Sankt Augustin, 2000).
2. Pierre Ryckmans, "The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past," *Papers on Far Eastern History 39* (The Australian National University, Department of Far Eastern History, Canberra, March 1989): 1, 2, 7, 13, footnote 1.
3. Moshe Y. Bernstein, "Zhao Yingchen from Fact to Fiction," *The Chinese Jews of Kaifeng: A Millenium of Adaptation and Endurance,* eds. Laytner and Paper (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 97.
4. Andrew H. Plaks, "The Confucianization of the Kaifeng Jews: Interpretations of the Kaifeng Stelae Inscriptions," *The Jews of China,* vol.1, ed. Jonathan Goldstein, (Armonk, New York; London, England: M. E. Sharpe, 1999), 39.
5. Babylonian Talmud Berachoth, 33.
6. Shalom Salomon Wald, *China and the Jewish People: Old Civilizations in a New Era*, (Jerusalem; New York: Gefen, 2004), 48. Other Chinese voices on the treatment of European Jews are quoted in this chapter.
7. See Irene Eber, *The Jewish Bishop and the Chinese Bible: S. I. J. Schereschewsky (1831-1906)*, (Leiden: Brill, 1999).
8. Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2004).
9. Harold Bloom, foreword to Y. Ch. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1996), xxii.
10. Irene Eber, "The Critique of Western Judaism in *The Castle* and Its Transposition in Two Chinese Translations," *Kafka and China*, ed. Adrian Hsia (Bern-Berlin: Peter Lang, 1996).
11. Adin Steinsalz, "Talmudist Meets Puzzled Jews in Russia's Far East," *The Forward,* June 28, 2002, 1.
12. Fu Youde, University of Shandong in Jinan. Other Judaic scholars of China, e.g., Xu Xin, Pan Guang, and Zhang Qianhong, have put forward similar arguments.
13. Benjamin I. Schwartz, "Concluding Essay: Jews and China—Past and Present Encounters," *The Jews of China,* 299.
14. Yitzhak Shichor, "My Heart Is in the West and I Am at the Ends of the East: Changing Israeli Perceptions of Asia," *The World facing Israel–Israel facing the World,* ed. Alfred Wittstock (Berlin: Frank and Timme, 2011), 242.
15. Yitzhak Shichor, "Konfuzianismus in *einem* Land: Einige Betrachtungen zur universalistischen und partikularistischen Kollektividentitaet in China," *Kulturen der Achsenzeit II*, ed. Shmuel Eisenstadt, (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1992), 91.
16. Lun Yu IX, 13.

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