The Jews of China
The Jews of China:

*History of a Community and its Perspectives*

By

Caroline Rebouh

Cambridge Scholars Publishing
Dedicated to the memory of my dear parents, of blessed memory.
“We cannot live here among these people and remain separate, Father,” David argued. In the countries of Europe, yes, for there the peoples force us to be separate from them by persecution. We cling to our people there because none other will accept us, and we are martyred and glorified by our martyrdom. [...] But here, where all are friends to us and receive us eagerly into their blood, what is the reward for remaining apart?

(Excerpt from the novel *Peony* by Pearl Buck, Open Road Media, New York, 2012)
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter One</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>History of the Jews’ Arrival in China</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter Two</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Great Travelers and the Missionaries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter Three</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Arrival of the Radanites</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter Four</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Jewish Influence on Chinese Thought</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter Five</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Chinese Hieroglyphs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter Six</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hebraic-Chinese Terminology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter Seven</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Physiognomy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter Eight</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Birth and Growth of the Kaifeng Community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter Nine</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Kaifeng Synagogue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter Ten</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Twentieth Century</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter Eleven</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Community of Kaifeng Today</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table of Contents

Chapter Twelve ....................................................................................... 135
Future Prospects of the Kaifeng Jews

Conclusion..................................................................................................... 147

Bibliography ............................................................................................ 153

Acknowledgements ................................................................................. 160
INTRODUCTION

The history of this study goes back a long way.

I have always felt an inexplicable attraction to China and its civilization. I especially admire the exquisite silk paintings going back to ancient times when the art of other civilizations consisted of mere cave etchings.

How can we not admire a civilization that had already distinguished itself in the distant past with essential innovations such as the printing press and the most sophisticated weaponry?

In 1908, the archaeologist Paul Pelliot discovered in Dunhuang manuscripts and printed documents dating back to the eighth century, many centuries before Gutenberg’s invention.

At the age of twenty, already steeped in art history and Chinese civilization, and well-acquainted with the works of Mrs. Pearl Buck1, I read *Peony*, a novel depicting the life of a young Chinese servant working for a Jewish family in Kaifeng (also known as Kaifung Fu or Kaifeng-Fu; a former capital of Henan Province). That was a revelation for me. I wrote a letter to Mrs. Buck, who very graciously replied to me with a first bibliography of the history of the Jews of China, and of Kaifeng in particular.

I began to study the sources and to take notes. At that time, I had the opportunity to consult documents I would not be able to find today.

With the wealth of information I amassed as my investigations progressed, I began to write a first report. I entrusted it to Professor André Neher, Dean of the Hebrew Institute of Strasbourg, where I was then studying, and to Mr. Moshe Katane, who was lecturing in history there. Both of them, as well as Madame Renée Neher, thought that my work was interesting.

---

1 Winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, 1938.
For personal reasons, I had to abandon my investigations. I subsequently immigrated to Israel, where I have lived for the last thirty-five years. During that period, I had a new opportunity to invest time in my research.

As my work was progressing, incorporating the diverse opinions of sinologists, missionaries and travelers, a subtle picture began to emerge of a Jewish life that was unsophisticated but devoted, holding out against all influences.

Due to a plethora of conflicting information, and due to some serious errors on essential points having crept into translations from Chinese to English, as will be pointed out in the chapter on the stelae (engraved stone slabs), I wished to illuminate this topic. Another problem I felt required clarification was this: Why is it that all the researchers united behind the idea that all the Jews in China arrived in this vast region at once? Why did they not consider the possibility that Jewish people arrived at different times over the course of many centuries?

For more than two millennia, Jewish families have lived in China, and especially in Kaifeng, a town which Chinese emperors made their capital for many centuries.

Much later, immediately prior to and during the Second World War, a small number of Jews arrived in China, fleeing Nazism, and created new communities in Shanghai, Peking (Beijing), Harbin and many other towns. There were already some Jewish communities in existence, but they were not very strong, and were in the process of moving elsewhere, reinforcing other existing cities which offered better commercial, cultural or religious prospects, and promised a more flourishing Jewish life.

Furthermore, those local Jews were falling prey to the ravages of assimilation. Some left China in pursuit of the American dream.

Jewish history is replete with episodes of Jews leaving their birthplace to escape inquisitions, pogroms, and various other anti-Semitic phenomena, and ending up in China. The communities thereby created have European Jewish populations. Their history is certainly interesting, but much less so, in my opinion, than that of the Kaifeng community, whose remarkable resilience has enabled it to endure even until today, although its numbers have seriously diminished over the years.
I thus embarked on an attempt to tackle the problems that presented themselves to me.

Firstly, I wanted to derive a probable date for when Jews began arriving in China, in light of the fact that theories abound on this subject. I also wanted to develop the idea that the Jews arrived at various times. In addition, I sought to outline their history, their cultural past and the influence that they had on the local population.

Secondly, I wanted to examine what the future holds for the Kaifeng community. Is it in peril?

In Chapter 1, I will attempt to present all the theories that have been raised regarding when Jews arrived in China.

Chapter 2 will enlist the extant testimony of both great travelers and missionaries.

Chapter 3 will describe the picturesque characters known as the Radanites.

Then, Chapter 4 will investigate the influence of Jewish life and thought on Confucian and Taoist thought, on ancient Chinese history, and on Chinese “mythology”.

In Chapter 5, we will examine an eighteenth century sinologist’s opinion on Chinese hieroglyphics.

Chapter 6 will focus on Judeo-Chinese terminology.

In Chapter 7, we will discuss the uniqueness of the Judeo-Chinese physiognomy.

We will see in Chapter 8 how the community of Kaifeng, with its peculiar fate, was born, and how it developed.

Chapter 9 will be dedicated to the curious history of the synagogue of Kaifeng, which suffered a cruel fate and was destroyed and rebuilt time after time.

In Chapter 10, we will explore the history of the Jewish community of China over the course of the twentieth century, and the tragic fate suffered by some of China’s Jewish inhabitants during the Second World War.
In Chapter 11, we will comment on the official status of Jews in China now, and we will then go on to describe the Kaifeng community’s life today.

Chapter 12 will outline the possibilities that currently offer themselves to the Jews of Kaifeng: is Israel really the ideal solution?

Throughout this work, I had to translate extracts. All the translations, whether from Hebrew, English, Latin or Spanish, were done by me.

Pursuing this research enriched me. I wrote whatever I felt was necessary for my thesis, doing my best to lessen the confusion found in the various sources consulted, the terminology used in one not being the same for all.
CHAPTER ONE

HISTORY OF THE JEWS’ ARRIVAL IN CHINA

The date attributed to the beginning of Jewish settlement in China varies among authors and researchers. I often highlight dates, but without substantiation, as shall be seen throughout this chapter.

It is important to note the confusing terminology one encounters in the sources. Sometimes the arrival of Jews in “China” is conflated with their arrival in Kaifeng, the two terms often used interchangeably, despite the fact Jews in fact settled in several locations in China, such as Harbin, Beijing, Shanghai and Nanking, over the ages over the course of history. We will therefore distinguish between these two terms, as may be seen in the table at the end of the chapter.

We find the first mention of Jews in China in the Bible, in Isaiah (49:11-13). Isaiah promises that, in the end of days, the Jews will return to their land from the four corners of the earth. The verse mentions explicitly that they will even return from China:

And I will make all My mountains away and My highways shall be raised on high. Behold these shall come from far; and, lo, these from the north and from the west, and these from the land of Sinim [Hebrew for China].
Sing O Heavens, and be joyful O Earth. Break forth into singing O mountains, for the Lord hath comforted His people and hath compassion upon His afflicted.

Is this verse an allusion to Jews having already settled in China at that time? Did Isaiah, who lived in Babylon during the exile, receive a prophecy about Jews having arrived in the Celestial Empire?

---

2 The Prophet Isaiah is telling us in the Bible that in the Messianic Era, Jews will come from the Land of Sinim. Sinim is the name of one of Noah’s grandsons (a son of Canaan who was a son of Ham). Every one of Noah’s descendants gave his name to a country, like Mitzrayim for Egypt, Cush for Ethiopia, and likewise, Sinim for China.
3 During the first exile of Shalmaneser, around 735 BCE.
For dozens of centuries, Jewish and Arab travelers have embarked on long, difficult journeys in an attempt to find the Ten Lost Tribes.

In 1973, Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef acknowledged that the Jews of Ethiopia were descendants of the tribe of Dan. Similarly, Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar proclaimed that the community known as “Bnei Menashe” are definitely considered to be descended from the tribe of Menashe. However, neither of these eminent personalities expressed any view on the subject of the Jews of China.

The Jewish traveler Eldad Hadani in the ninth century visited the communities he encountered on his journey, and declared that the descendants of the tribe of Zebulun settled in China. However, its imprecision renders this source unreliable, as is the case with the travel narratives recorded by the twelfth century Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela, which cannot serve as a reference due to the imprecision that characterizes his descriptions.

Jewish tradition teaches that only the tribes of Benjamin and Judah, as well as part of the tribe of Levy, managed to traverse the centuries without losing their identities. However, the goal was always to try to find the other tribes.

Wherever merchants travelled to trade in silk and spices, Jewish homes established themselves in villages and towns at various way-stations. Certain cities became thriving Jewish communities. Some Jewish traders were merely seeking shelter along the way, while others put down roots and married local women. Then, as a natural result of population movement and migration, certain Jewish communities totally disappeared, while others remained, as was the case with the Kaifeng Community in China. We cannot establish an exact date for the beginning of Jewish settlement in China, because although there have been a number of hypotheses, there is little genuine evidence.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, excavations brought to light manuscripts, allegedly dating back to 718 CE, attesting to the existence of Jewish communities in the Middle Kingdom (i.e., China). Although they

---

4 However, neither of the two spiritual leaders speaks about the Kaifeng Jews.
5 Benjamin of Tudela wrote that the Jews of China were “all black”, and also proposed excessive numbers for them, statements which seem to render his reports of the voyage unreliable. See Leslie D.D., *The Survival of the Jews of China*, Leiden, Brill, 1972, 10.
may serve as evidence of a Jewish community living there at that time, it does not allow for any conclusions about their date of arrival. On the other hand, we can conjecture that Jews arrived in China in successive waves, and not all at once.

It is chiefly missionary reports that afford us the possibility of determining one or more periods during which these waves of immigration occurred. The stone stelae situated at the entrance to the Kaifeng Synagogue – as a testimony – also provide us with an approximate date for the arrival of Jews in Kaifeng, as we will see in the chapter devoted to the stelae.

We shall now discuss the various hypotheses informing our discussion of how Jews arrived in the Middle Kingdom.

The historical details reported differ according to the source consulted by the various authors we will cite. Nonetheless, the eminent sinologists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as Jean-Pierre Abel-de-Renmusat (1788-1832), Baron Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838), Joseph de Guignes (1721-1800), and de Guignes’ son, the diplomat and eminent sinologist Chretien-Louis de Guignes (1759-1845), all reached the same conclusion following their research. All asserted that the descendants of Noah laid the foundations of the Chinese monarchy. Following is an account of how this happened, according to the Chinese sources.

Noah’s descendants spread through Oriental Asia, making their way into China approximately two hundred years after the flood. It was in the province of Chen-Si (Shanxi) that the first people coming from the West began to settle. Subsequently, many clan chiefs left this province to establish themselves and proliferate in He-Nan, Pe-Tche-Li, and Chan-Tong. With time, these three provinces combined under a single sovereign to form a state that extended up to the north of the Yang-Tseu-Kiang (the Blue River). The first Chinese monarch was named Fo-Hi, and he had six successors. The date of his mounting the throne is virtually unknown.

Chinese chronology is only reliable starting from the reign of Yao (the sixth successor of Fo-Hi). Only from that date (2357 BCE) is the chronicle well-constructed, documenting the name of each emperor, the duration of his reign, divisions, revolutions, regencies etc., all without alteration. If we

6 According to the Book of Genesis, the flood took place in the year 1956 of Creation, or 2075 BCE.
make a very simple comparison between the historical data relating to the early Chinese emperors, and scriptural information given concerning personalities mentioned in the Pentateuch, we will find a similar chronology regarding lifespans and duration of reigns.

Other French sinologists date the arrival of Jews in China to the period of King Solomon. They base this on the King’s having sent his fleet to India (and undoubtedly to China, as well) in search of rare and precious materials, as well as animals such as peacocks, to be brought back to Jerusalem.7

However, it appears more probable that Jews only arrived in China after the destruction of the First Temple, although it may have been even earlier if we are to believe the Abbot François Louis Michel Maupied, Doctor of Science, in his book *Prodrome d’Ethnographie*, where he expounds his theory:

The year 719 BC: Shalmaneser, King of the Assyrians seized Samaria and transported the inhabitants to the most distant towns of Media. In 676 BC Assarhaddon dispersed the rest of the kingdoms of Syria and Israel into Persia, Media, and the most distant provinces of the Orient. In the Year 606, the Babylonian captivity commenced. Nebuchadnezzar brought the majority of the Jews and, in particular, a large number of princes, priests and even prophets into his kingdom, which extended at that time until Media. Thus, the Israelites of the ten tribes and those of Judea encountered each other in the misery of captivity, and their tears mingled there: that was the end of the schism […]. Now, the Jews, possessors of these books, and more attached than ever to the doctrine which they contained, spread out across the entire Orient, into India and China.8

We thus see a reference to a Jewish settlement in China preceding the exile brought about by Nebuchadnezzar. That is to say, this constituted an additional wave of people coming into China, thus confirming that the Jews arrived gradually in China, by successive waves, albeit with intervals of years or even centuries dividing these migratory movements.


It is in connection with this reason that the sinologist Jean Pierre Abel of Remusat9 retraced the itinerary followed by the Jews who set out from Persia to China, making their way via the Bactriane10 and Tibet, which is akin to the opinion of the Abbot Sionnet in his *Essai sur les Juifs de Chine*11.

The Baron Henrion, author of *l’Histoire Générale des Missions Catholiques*, states that in his opinion, the first group of Jews arrived in China as early as the seventh century BCE.:  

Independent of the relations established outside China between many Chinese people and the Israelites, whom God dispersed among the nations to make known His name, and to prepare the way for His Messiah, some Jews were present in this empire perhaps as early as the seventh century BCE.12

According to the sources quoted above, the Jews arrived in India and spread through all the neighboring regions, including Bactria, in the seventh century BCE, even before the massive exile that followed the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple on the 9th of Av in 586 BCE.

Those remote regions that welcomed them included China and Japan. Seventy years later, when the opportunity to return to Palestine finally arrived, a small number of Jews, lacking a taste for adventure, and unwilling to risk returning to settle again in their homeland, preferred to stay in the hospitable countries in which they had recently established themselves. It is probable that those who wanted to return to the Kingdom of Israel had never known the country their family had inhabited before the destruction.

Once they had settled in Persia, India or elsewhere, the Jews exiled by Shalmaneser were limited in their professional activities to commerce,
leading them to become peddlers in all the Asiatic countries\textsuperscript{13}. Traveling throughout the various provinces, they bore with them their traditions, sharing their knowledge and cultural heritage with anyone willing to listen. The Chinese, lovers of fables and tales, added the Jews’ stories to their own. The Jews, for their part, scattered amongst all the countries but still maintained their ancestral beliefs\textsuperscript{14}, which nevertheless dimmed over the centuries that passed with no communal framework to support them, to disappear almost completely and be replaced by other beliefs that may have seemed more appealing.

At the time of the dispersion, the Jews possessed the following sacred books\textsuperscript{15}: the Pentateuch, Job, Judges, Ecclesiastes, most of the Psalms, Isaiah\textsuperscript{16}, Daniel\textsuperscript{17}, and Ezekiel\textsuperscript{18}.

In 1814, the eminent sinologist Father Antoine Gaubil wrote in his \textit{Chronologie Chinoise}, a reference book on Chinese history, that the arrival of families from Si-Yu (lands to the west of China, i.e., the Middle East, India, Iran etc.) had been reported. He does not however provide us with an exact date\textsuperscript{19}.

Occasionally, we encounter texts documenting the arrival in China of seven families, sometimes eight or ten, or even seventy. Some letters written by Jesuits\textsuperscript{20} suggest that they had proof of the arrival of a wave of Jews under the reign of Emperor Ming of the Western Han Dynasty, who ruled from 58 to 75 CE.

On the subject of dates, it is important to note that we cannot rely absolutely on this type of testimony, because dates differ, depending on whether the Gregorian or Chinese system of calculation is employed. Nevertheless, this can still serve to support the thesis according to which

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Histoire Générale des Missions, 62.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Most of the Jews who came from Judea were observing their religion, and continued to do so.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Isaiah started to prophesize circa 735 BCE.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Daniel started to prophesize in Assyria circa 629 BCE.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Ezekiel prophesized circa 606 in Assyria.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Gaubil, Antoine, \textit{Traité de la Chronologie Chinoise}, Paris-Strasbourg: Treuttel et Wurtz, 1814, 267.
\end{itemize}
an additional wave of Jews arrived during the reign of Emperor Ming of Han, supplementing the numbers of those who were already there.

The commerce that developed along the Silk Road was favorable to Jewish families establishing themselves in certain towns well known to European merchants. To advance the silk trade and acquire the most beautiful silk textiles, dealers would make direct, personal contacts with the weavers, and would sometimes end up settling in the production centers and starting families. The towns where they chose to reside were later to become home to flourishing Jewish communities, but ultimately these Jews disappeared entirely, either due to natural migratory movement, or through assimilation.

Merchants settled all along the silk and spice routes. There are various theories about Jewish settlement and all are plausible. Any of them might explain the presence of Jews who arrived in China at various points and during different and successive periods in the towns of Nanchang, Kanchu, Su Chu, An-Shi Chu, Kashgar, Samarkand, Balkh, Ekbatana (Hamadan) and so on, in search of a respectable livelihood along the Silk Road. Moreover, we must not overlook the considerable time lapse between the arrival of Jews in China in 722 BCE or 580 BCE, and the Middle Ages or a later period. This confirms for us the fact that Jews settled in China over the course of time through many successive waves, by sea as well as by land, as the merchants also traveled by boat and made transactions in the large ports where they docked.

It is natural that in the course of their travels, some Jewish merchants married Asiatic women, introducing to their new families their civilization, culture, dogma and customs. There likewise must have been sea-faring merchants who, borne by the waves of the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, left their group to establish themselves in those countries.

Confucius (aka Khung-Fu-Tse or Khung-Tse) who lived from 551 to 479 BCE, and Mencius (aka Meng-Tse or Mong-Tse) who lived from 372 to 289 BCE, were two great philosophers who spent long years studying the Chinese Annals. Neither ever discredited or questioned what those records reported.

It is important to note that missionaries, themselves sinologists of repute, reported a dozen centuries later that those same records did not always chime with the Vulgate to within a reasonable timespan. On the other hand, they did agree very easily with the Septuagint "the version
authorized by the Church”, although it appears that there is a 901-year gap between the Septuagint and Chinese historical records. Considering that Noah’s descendants settled in China 200 years after the flood, and that seven emperors reigned in succession after him, each enjoying a very long life and reign, it is impossible to ascertain the length of each reign. This would justify the nine centuries of difference between the Septuagint and Chinese records.

When we refer to Genesis 11:10-12, we see the following sequence of biblical heroes:

Shem was a hundred years old when he fathered Arphachshad, two years after the flood. Following Arpachshad’s birth, Shem lived five hundred years, and he had sons and daughters. Arpachshad lived thirty-five years and he fathered Shelah.

If we add the lifespans of Shem’s descendants from Arpachshad to Nahor (allowing for a 200-year delay after the flood, during which time Shem’s descendants could have settled in China), we more than make up for the 900 year discrepancy. Furthermore, the number of those clan leaders is seven (Arpachshad, Shelah, Eber, Peleg, Reu, Serug and Nahor), which is consistent with the Chinese chronology.

Those emperors referred to by the Chinese are more precisely the founders of the Chinese Empire. We are unaware of the exact duration of each of the reigns mentioned in the Chinese records.

The first emperors were Fo Hi, Chin Nong, Hoang Ti, Chao Hao, Tchuen Hio, Ti Co and Tchi. They were followed by Yao. According to legend, Yao reigned alone for seventy-two years, after which he joined forces with the Chun Empire with whom he reigned for another twenty-eight years.

The various reigns we mentioned succeeded one another, just like the genealogical lists mentioned in Genesis 11. Chinese records report all of this as a matter of legend, and it would seem that we could not ascribe much credibility to the Chinese work about the earliest period of world history. However, there are some striking facts, especially considering that various Chinese authors of the same period refer to the same details.

One of the greatest Chinese historians: Sse Ma Tsien (145-86 BCE) and a Mandarin historian no less famous by the name of Tso Tang, left
manuscripts stating, inter alia, that more than eight \(^{21}\) “barbarous” tribes named Thian Tcho arrived in the Middle Kingdom around 740 BCE, from Si-Yu (i.e. the western lands). Si-Yu, like Thian Tcho, designates India, Kashmir Persia and Syria. There are other synonyms of Thian Tcho: Thian Fang and Thian Fang, which also mean celestial region or palace. This name, Thian Tang is the name of the garden in which God created the first man: Atan (Adam). That place later became inaccessible to humans because of the sin Atan committed (the original sin).

Although Sse Ma Tsien reported what Tso Tang wrote, the historian does not agree with his colleague, and asserts that these “barbarous” tribes actually numbered ten (which is consistent with the idea of the ten tribes which disappeared out of the original twelve). This confirms the theory of Marcus N. Adler\(^{22}\):

If we consider that the commercial routes of China and ancient India included not only maritime ways but also went through Media, Mesopotamia, Syria, it is not at all impossible that fractions of the ten tribes of Israel headed for China.

If we base our research on the historical sources cited above, and in accordance with the assertion that there were at least four Chinese Jewish families (Shih, Li, Ai and Ha), then the first flow of Jews arrived in China from India in 620 CE. However, they only reached Kaifeng in the twelfth century, even though Kaifeng municipal records report the presence of a Jewish community in the town since the start of the seventh century, as shall be seen in the chapter on Kaifeng. The four families in the fourteenth century numbered 85 people altogether.

The president of the Union of Jews of Northeast India, Vania Levy Benjamin\(^{23}\) is of the opinion that the arrival of Jews in Kaifeng explicitly – and implicitly in China – dates back to 321 BCE. He states that the ten lost tribes settled in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, they headed for Kaifeng in 321 BCE. Later on, confronted by the vicissitudes of that era, some left for Burma. Benjamin said that he saw in India members of the community whose parents and grandparents had taken refuge there when they came from Kaifeng.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., 6.
The only definitive evidence we have available is that provided by the stone stelae of the Jewish community of Kaifeng. As we shall see in the chapter on the synagogue's stelae, on every stela the Kaifeng community members engraved a historical summary, some of which take us very far back in time. The first of these stone tablets dates from the fifteenth century, but relates the history of the community. The other pieces of historical evidence we possess, relatively more recent, are the letters of missionaries belonging to the first Lazarist Foundations and the first Christian missions in China, dating back to the sixteenth century. This is recent indeed, considering that Jewish history spans dozens of centuries.

A Chinese sociologist, Dr. Pan Guangdan24, concluded that the origins of Kaifeng’s Jews were in Bombay. He based this view on the Jews of Kaifeng having recited the Credo, the “Shema Yisrael” prayer. Obviously, this assumption cannot be considered, as all Jews recite the Shema, and it is impossible therefore to use as a mark of origin. The Jews of Bombay, like the Jews of Persia, were preserving a heritage that came from a common origin: they all came from the Kingdom of Judah, going into exile in various countries.

The arrival and survival of the Jews of Kaifeng remains therefore a mystery for all the researchers, including those from China, and those concerned with the history of religion, like Dr. Kiang Wen-Han25, author of a book dedicated to the monotheistic faiths in China: Christianity in Ancient China and the Jews of Kaifeng. Other Chinese researchers, such as Dr. Tang Yushang of the Chinese Academy of Sociology, have tried to put a date on the onset of Jewish settlement in China, but without clear success.

There are many reports stemming from all corners of the globe in which people, often wishing to remain anonymous, confide that they have Jewish-Chinese ancestors in Kaifeng or elsewhere in China.

It is only fitting at this juncture to mention the existence of the “Radanites” (medieval Jewish merchants). This word comes from an Arabic term connoting “the ones who know the way”. Excavations carried out in China have brought to light baked clay Radanite statuettes in a number of graves. According to all sinologists, these figurines show merchants with a Semitic rather than an Asiatic profile. Going as far back

---

25 Mentioned in Pollack, Michael, Mandarins, Jews and Missionaries. xxii.
as 600 CE\textsuperscript{26}, mention has been made of the Radanites with their distinctive physical profile, mode of dress, appearance and manner. The Chinese populace considered them very important personalities who lent dignity to society. However, the question arises as to why the natives would have considered them so important as to have “immortalized” them as figurines of daily life. Without a doubt, they had to be numerous or affluent in that era. At any rate, they were conspicuous enough to be depicted in statuettes. Relatively recent archaeological excavations revealed further Radanite figurines made of baked earth and varnished with many colors, revealing a technology more recent than that available to those who made the earlier statuettes. They used to bury their dead with the statuettes during the T’ang Dynasty\textsuperscript{27}.

Very probably, the Jews of China and India originated with families from Baghdad, Akbara and Mosul, according to the accounts of the voyager and chronicler Abou Zayid\textsuperscript{28}.

The inscription on the stone stela in front of the Kaifeng synagogue reveals an important piece of information, which was reported by Father Gaubil\textsuperscript{29}:

In the first year of the reign of Hiao Tsong of Han, the Jews gave the Emperor a tribute of cloth from India. The Emperor received them very warmly and allowed them to stay in Kaifeng, whose name at the time was Pien Leang.

We will return to this inscription in the chapter on the stelae.

The Han Dynasty ruled China from 206 BCE until 220 CE. Hiao Tsong, son of the Emperor Kiao Tsong, ascended the throne nineteen years after the start of the Han Dynasty. This allows us to date the Jews’ aforementioned visit to the emperor, in which they gave him cotton cloth,\textsuperscript{30} a material then unknown in China, after which he “allowed them to stay in Kaifeng”. We can thus conclude that the Jews settled in Kaifeng at least from the year 200 BCE.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} T’ang Dynasty. Some Radanite statuettes are housed in the Royal Museum of Toronto.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Thirteenth Dynasty.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Pollack, Michael, \textit{Mandarins, Jews and Missionaries}, 22.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Gaubil, \textit{Traité de la Chronologie Chinoise}, 282.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Cotton cloth was unknown to the Chinese. They knew about silks, but not about the process of dyeing cloth and cotton clothes the way the Indians did.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
In the *Chronologie Chinoise*\(^{31}\), the author mentions the arrival in China of eight different groups of Jewish families. They entered the country successively and settled there. They came into China, for the most part via Chen Si (or Shanxi, to the northwest of Kaifeng, the region of the Hoang Ho River, having as its capital today Xi’an), and took up residence in the large commercial centers, thus enabling them to take part in the market life of towns such as Hang Tcheu, Ning Po, Peking and Ning Hia. However, they subsequently disappeared because most of them converted to Islam. On their arrival in the Celestial Empire, they adopted Chinese names, as the names of their tribes were unknown to the natives, and possibly also to curry favor in the eyes of the prince. It is for this reason that “seven Jewish families” (instead of the eight quoted in the *Chronologie Chinoise*) were named: Sing Tchao Ti, Sing Kao Ti, Sing Gnaï Ti, Sing King Ti, Sing Tehe Ti, Sing Themam Ti and Sing Li Ti. The prefix “Sing” means “family”, and the suffix “Ti” signifies “emperor”, but here it signifies chief (tribal chief for example). Absent from this list of families is the name of the Shih family. Of the emperors that reigned under the Han Dynasty, the first emperor that welcomed the Jewish tribes was Kao Tsu, who reigned around 200 BCE.

In his book *Inscriptions Juives de Kaifung Fu*\(^{32}\) the Reverend Father Jerome Tobar expresses the opinion that the Jews arrived in Kaifeng during the Song Dynasty, approximately during the tenth century.

This in no way precludes the possibility that Jews had previously been living in other Chinese towns at the time of, or even before their arrival in Kaifeng, in accordance with the various economically-motivated migrations prevalent among the merchant classes.

Excerpts of prayer books found in Dunhuang show clearly that the Jews were present everywhere in Central Asia that the Silk Road extended, as only Jews were capable of exporting the Asian products needed by European merchants.

---

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 282. He is not the only one to mention this number: Dr. Morrison, in his book *View of China*, quoted by Abbot Sionnet in *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne*, Paris, 1867, volume XIV, p.221, mentioned “eight barbarian tribes” and Abbé Sionet for his part speaks of “18 tribes which came from Si-Yu and made their religion be known to the Chinese”. As I pointed out above, the numerical data are not very precise.

The eminent archaeologist Paul Pelliot, noted for his discovery of an enormous quantity of Chinese manuscripts in a cave, wrote:

During the Tang Dynasty in Nang Po, as in the whole region of the mouth of the Yang Tse River, adventurers and merchants were coming by sea with their long Persian junks [...] and they were meeting relatives who arrived by the other road (through Turkestan and Kansou). It would be strange that only the Jews were kept out of this trend.

Another wave of Jews who wanted to settle in China reached the Celestial Empire in 220 CE. Many other sinologists emphasize that other waves of arrivals were taking place throughout Jewish history, reflecting not only the era of the Silk Road, but also that of the Second World War.

In his *Chronologie Chinoise*, Father Gaubil maintains that many Chinese Jews had been employed in primary military offices, and some became: “governors of provinces, ministers of state, earned bachelors’ degrees and doctoral degrees”.

The high social status they enjoyed nonetheless did not generate jealousy amongst the local populace. Their positions and influence thus facilitated their publicizing their history and religion and investing certain of their dogmas with official status. One may detect in many literary, philosophical and historical works considered authoritative in China the extent of this influence on the local elite.

In many other Chinese manuscripts that have been discovered, Jews are mentioned. In these, we find not only general references to the Jewish presence in China, but specific mention of Chinese Jewish communities, in

---

33 Among these manuscripts and those found at Dandan Uilik were some letters written in Judeo-Persian and Aramaic, as well as some fragments of pages of penitence prayers (Selichot) estimated to be from 718 CE.

32 At the outset of the Second World War, many Jews left their countries of origin, fleeing the Nazi peril, and took refuge in China, creating many communities not only in the large urban centers such as Peking, Shanghai and Harbin but also in little towns like Tien Jin, Shandong, Hangzhou, Liaoning, Shenyang, Changchun, Jilin, Qiqihar, and others.


36 One of the members of the Kaifeng community was promoted to the rank of General: Li Kong Tin who led the Chinese troops against the Tartar invaders. Another Jew, Chao Zhang Zi, distinguished himself in the Imperial Army.

37 In those remote times, a “bachelor” was a high degree.
Chapter One

particular the community of Kaifeng (capital at that time of the province of Henan).

A striking anecdote appears in the *Chronologie Chinoise*, and is also mentioned by Abbot Sionnet\(^3\). It concerns an event that occurred in 65 CE, which makes it particularly noteworthy, as at that time there were not yet any missionaries in China:

The Emperor Ming sent a delegation to Si Yu\(^3\) to seek out the Saint, who was in all probability soon to appear in Thian Tcho. However, the emissaries met impostors on the way, who, seizing the opportunity, passed themselves off as the Saint and his travelling companions […] The Emperor Ming welcomed them and examined their doctrine. He recognized that this was not the one that he had learnt. He punished the impostors and strongly advised his subjects to study the sacred books more thoroughly.

One might wonder which doctrine is being referred to. Christianity was not yet widespread, and Islam did not yet exist. Buddhism, on the other hand, was already known, because since its inception in the fifth century BCE, it already had gained many adherents in India and had been practiced in the Han Dynasty for around a century. However, Buddhism did not foretell the coming of a holy redeemer. Moreover, Buddhism is not considered to be a monotheistic religion. We are forced to conclude therefore that the Emperor received this doctrine from Jewish teachers.

We will return to this in the chapter on the influence of Jewish thought on Chinese thought.

The influence of Jewish teachings on the local population, particularly the well-read, and on distinguished members of Chinese society, was such that biblical stories were found in official Chinese books and were recognized as sources for Chinese history.

This serves to prove that from the time of the Jews’ arrival in China, their presence had a great impact there. A case in point is the way in which the biblical account of Creation appears in the work of the famous historian Lao Tzu\(^4\). He recounts that the first man had been created from silt, and that in the garden where this man lived, there was a tree which gave wisdom to those who ate of its fruit. Moreover, he wrote that later on,

---


\(^{3}\) Si Yu designates the region to the west of China: India, Persia, and even Judea.

\(^{4}\) End of the fifth century BCE – one of the founding fathers of Taoism.
a “purifying” Flood had been sent to “destroy” mankind. But the “Emperor Niu Ua” (this is how Noah is referred to in the Chinese writings) saved the world, “by blocking the cracks of the sky with a stone of five colors: the rainbow, a stone which he purified through sacrifices”.41

The Chronologie Chinoise makes reference to a history of China corresponding very closely to that provided by the biblical text, and also to that of the Vulgate, as was confided in a letter written by Father de Maillat, a Jesuit, to the Reverend Father Souciet:42 “The Chinese historical chronology corresponds to that of the Hebrew text, and that of the Vulgate”.

This missionary is not the only one to comment on the influence of the Jews in China on the intellectual and even the esoteric level by dating the Jewish presence in the Celestial Empire to at least seven centuries before the Christian era. We read the following letter from Peking, written on August 8, 1728 by Father Joachim Bouvet of the Jesuits, again to the attention of Reverend Father Souciet43:

It is difficult for Your Reverence to have the patience to examine all of them because of the many calculations of a form unknown in Europe with which they are filled, if not, perhaps, for the perfect similitude that the system of these mysterious numbers have with the ancient and genuine Hebrew Kabbalah based on the ten elementary numbers of their divine sephirotic figure, and on the numerical power of the twenty-two sacred letters of their alphabet [... ] the Kabbalah common to the ancient Hebrew and the ancient Chinese.”44

41 Here, Niu Ua is presented as a man, whereas in other sources Niuwa was portrayed as a goddess. The lack of consistency in the gender may be due to the fact that the Chinese language does not distinguish between masculine and feminine gender. There are illustrations of the Goddess Niuwa portraying her as half human, half fish, but perhaps this is merely the work of an artist with a vivid imagination. Everywhere else, Niu Oua is considered to be a man who was a heroic Emperor.
43 Ibid. vol. 24, 268.
44 The Tree of Life is a figure comparing the different attributes of God to the ten spheres which pertain to these attributes, and connected to each other by channels corresponding to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet.
The following letter, written by Father Cibot to Father Brotier in Peking on November 5, 1769, also focuses on the influence of Jewish teaching in China.  

However I warn you in advance that the aura of the revelation shines in all the ancient monuments of China. Our thinkers who quote the Chinese authorities are happy that not enough is known of what comes from beyond the seas. This enables them to prove to the public that they do not have any notion of it. I examined the matter at leisure: we can put into writing the most sublime passages of the holy books about the Divinity and all His attributes, and it seems to me that we cannot explain, without the idea of a promised and expected Messiah, a great number of passages scattered here and there in the ancient books. Those of the Greeks and the Romans do not have anything similar.

Thus, we see that Jesuits of various periods were struck by the influence exerted by the Jews, and all assert that the Jewish presence in China dates back to a very early period, most probably the seventh century BCE.

To return to our subject, we do not possess any genuine historical evidence, nor do we have any archaeological proof of when the first wave of Jews arrived in China, but we may accept the correspondence of the Jesuit missionaries to their superiors in France as evidence because their testimony is the only one we can take in account.

If the influence of the Jews and their Judaism managed to affect Chinese history and philosophy, it must be that the Jews settled in China long before Confucius and Lao Tzu (also spelled Lie Tse, Laozi, Lao Tseu and other ways) in the fifth century BCE, and that the Jews served as teachers to those personalities whose wisdom enlightened the world.

The Jewish Oral Law teaches: “Do not do unto others what you would not want done to yourself.” Confucius incorporated this dictum into his own teachings. It seems he was taught this principle a few centuries before Hillel lived. Later it became part of the Talmud. We can thus ask if this principle had its origins in the Jewish Oral Law that later canonized it in the Talmud.

Yet that is not all we can find in the philosophers’ writings. For example, Lao Tzu taught: “One who is happy about what he has is rich,”

---

45 Ibid.
and we find this principle in the Jewish *Ethics of the Fathers* 4:1: ¬איהו עשיר? השמח בחלקו - “Who is rich? He who is happy with what he has!”

Another principle Lao Tzu wrote is this: “One who triumphs over himself is strong.” The same idea appears, once more, in *Ethics* (ibid.): ¬איהו גיבור? המבש את יצר - “Who is strong? He who triumphs over his passions!”

A poet from Taiwan (formerly known as Formosa) wrote in his day, “Whoever has a talented and virtuous wife has a treasure more precious than jewels.” In Hebrew we find in the Proverbs of King Solomon a poem entitled, “The Virtuous Woman”, which begins: “Who can find the virtuous wife? She is more precious than pearls!” (Proverbs 31:1).

These sentences lead us to the thought that perhaps Confucius and/or Lao Tzu had Jewish teachers in China. We shall see other examples in Chapter 4 relating to Jewish influence on Chinese thought.

We saw Father Bouvet’s reference to the very ancient Chinese works containing Kabbalistic calculations involving the ten sephirot and the twenty-two sephirotic canals relating to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Doesn’t this constitute an additional proof of the existence of Jews in China since time immemorial, or at least since the seventh century BCE? Does this not indicate an above-average social status for the Jews, considering their having been in contact with the elite of the time?

In his book, Michael Pollack⁴⁶ likewise reflects on the arrival of Jews in China. He, too, proposes that in all probability this influx occurred before the Babylonian exile of 586 BCE by way of what would, centuries later, become the silk route, by land or by sea. We know that when they went into exile from the Land of Israel, they were only allowed to practice professions involving commerce⁴⁷.

Pollack even cites the opinion of a Russian cleric, Alexei Vinogradoff, who claims that the Jews’ arrival in China dates back to before the birth of Moses. Pollack thinks this opinion owes to a mistaken interpretation of the text engraved on the stelae erected in front of the Kaifeng synagogue in 1489.

For Pollack, at any rate, Isaiah’s prophecy declaring that in the Messianic era “they” will return from “Sinim” proves that already at that time it was known some Jews had settled there.

The engraved text on a stela from 1663 indicates a much earlier date than all those previously mentioned. Certain families belonging to the Jewish community of Kaifeng took part in engraving these stelae. Every family composed a different part of the text. This text makes it clear that the Jews’ arrival in the Celestial Empire dates back to the Chu Dynasty, which lasted from 1100 BCE until 221 BCE. However, in two stelae, from 1512 and 1679, the influx of Jews into China is said to go back only to the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 221 CE). The discrepancy between these differing testimonies can only leave us perplexed.

In Taiwan lives a man named Shih Hung Mok, whose testimony, if accurate, is very instructive 48. He belongs to the well-known Shih family of Kaifeng. He was born in Kunming, in the Chinese province of Yunnan. According to his testimony, his family arrived in China in the year 620 CE. He says that he was circumcised according to Mosaic law, and that in the care of his maternal uncles he travelled very widely, but that later, he was a pilot in the Chinese air force. Subsequently he settled in Taiwan.

Based on the evidence cited above, we can conclude the chapter by saying that successive waves of Jews arrived in China beginning in the seventh century BCE, by land and by sea, and continued to do so right up until the period prior to and during the Second World War. Turning our attention to what concerns us, the Kaifeng community saw its inception before the Mongol invasions 49 which shook the Chinese state in their time. Hence, this community predates by far the Han Dynasty. We can infer that

49 The Mongol invasions began under Genghis Khan. The Qin Dynasty formed a state in central China twenty years before the reign of the Han (in the year 221 BCE). The state was coveted by barbarian tribes while sitting in the north and northeast future empire. These tribes were partly made up of tribes sowing confusion and terror. It was at this time that the first Chinese Emperor, Qin Shi Huangdi (who will see his name perpetuated forever, since his name was attributed to the whole nation, Qin being the etymological Chinese root of the English word Chinese), launched a project to build the Great Wall of China to deter enemy and barbarian attacks. At that time, around 300 BCE, Jews were already ensconced in China and Kaifeng, but they fled back to India before the barbarian threat that claimed over 500,000 victims. This is why, at the beginning of the Han Dynasty, Jews returned to Kaifeng.