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Contents

Manfred Hutter / Ulrich Vollmer
Introductory Notes: The Context of the Conference in the History of
Jewish Studies in Bonn 7

Part 1: Jewish Communities in Asia

Gabriele Shenar
Bene Israel Transnational Spaces and the Aesthetics of Community
Identity 21

Edith Franke
Searching for Traces of Judaism in Indonesia 39

Vera Leininger
Jews in Singapore: Tradition and Transformation 53

Manfred Hutter
The Tiny Jewish Communities in Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia . . . 65

Alina Pătru
Judaism in the PR China and in Hong Kong Today: Its Presence and
Perception 77

Suzanne D. Rutland
The Asia-Pacific Region and Australian Jewry 91

Part 2: Religion and Politics

Meron Medzini
Zionist Federations and Zionist Diplomacy in Asia to Ensure United
Nations Support for the 1947 Partition Plan 111

Jonathan Goldstein / Dean Kotlowski	
The Jews of Manila: Manuel Quezon, Paul McNutt, and the Politics and Consequences of Holocaust Rescue	123
Malte Gaier	
Jews in Pakistan in the Context of Estranged Pakistani-Israeli Relations	139
Pingan Liang / Zheng Liang	
The Bilateral Relations between Israel and Modern China (1948 – 2010)	151
Theo Kamsma	
The Artful Deletion of Israeli / Jewish Presence in the Straits	163
Part 3: Judaism in Everyday Life and Society	
Heinz Werner Wessler	
“My Backward Place is Where I am”: Jewish Identity and Jewish Authorship in India	191
Yudit Kornberg Greenberg	
Hindu-Jewish Dialogue: A New Tradition in the Making	211
Annette Wilke	
The Hindu-Jewish Leadership Summits: New “Ground-breaking Strides” of Global Interfaith Cooperation?	225
Ping Zhang	
When <i>Chokhmah</i> met <i>Zhi</i> : Perception and Misperception of Jewish Wisdom in China since the 1990s	249
Gilya Gerda Schmidt	
Why the Chinese People are Interested in Judaism, the Holocaust, and Israel	259

Gilya Gerda Schmidt¹

Why the Chinese People are Interested in Judaism, the Holocaust, and Israel

In a book chapter on the Chinese people's knowledge of Jews, Xiao Xian from Yunnan University in Kunming, China, concludes that "Although Jews lived in China for centuries, the Chinese people were long unaware that these people were part of a worldwide Diaspora. Not until the European powers forced open China's closed door in the second half of the nineteenth century did the Chinese begin to know about Jews in the outside world and to connect them with the small Jewish community inside China" (Xian 1999: 64; Pan 2001; Elazar n.d.). Although not aware of the global nature of Judaism, some Chinese people as far back as the Song Dynasty (960 – 1279 CE) had taken notice of the tiny minority population whom they called by several different names, among them Yi-ci-le-ye – the Chosen People (Xu et al. 1995: 32). Because the Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci had already discovered the Jews of China in the early 17th century (Xu et al. 1995: 80), Europe had been aware of a Jewish presence in China long before China realized that there were Jews anywhere else in the world. Until the mid-19th century, the awareness of Jews in China was mostly a one-way street.

Between the time of the Concessions (foreign enclaves) in the mid-19th century and 1992, at which time China established diplomatic relations with the modern State of Israel, much turmoil happened within China, so that today the Jews of China no longer officially exist, only their "descendents", who have no legal standing (Xu 2006: 98). Judaism is not one of the five recognized religions in China, which include Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. And yet, in just twenty short years, at least five Centres of Jewish Studies have been established at Chinese universities – in Nanjing, Shanghai, Kaifeng, Beijing, and Shandong, all by Chinese nationals. Although none of them are Jewish, in fact cannot be, the academics who participate in these pro-

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grammes take the study of Judaism as seriously as any programme in Israel, the United States, or Europe. The directors raise the funds to send their PhD students to study Hebrew and Judaism at Israeli and other international universities, and Chinese scholars travel to Israel to study the Holocaust at Yad Vashem as well as at universities in other countries (Song 2008). In turn, Chinese universities bring Israeli scholars as well as scholars of Judaism from other parts of the world to their institutions to enhance their academic offerings and further academic exchange (Troen 2009: 29).

In 2006, a stroke of luck connected me with a Chinese delegation to my university, the University of Tennessee. At the time, a group known as the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, based in London, had begun partnering with Chinese universities to educate a broad segment of academics and students from all over China on the Holocaust. The first such partnership was with Nanjing University; home to the Diane and Guilford Glazer Centre for Jewish Studies which was founded in 2006 (the Glazers are also major donors to the Judaic Studies Programme at the University of Tennessee which I direct). The programme is headed by Professor Xu Xin, a most enterprising and courageous Chinese national (Treiman 2003). In 1984 Professor Xu was teaching a course on American Jewish authors, without having ever met a Jew. That year he met Professor Jim Friend from Chicago, who visited China to teach. In 1986, Xu Xin lived with the Friends for a year in Chicago, learning all about Judaism (Friend 2006: front page). In May 1992, after China recognized Israel, Professor Xu Xin established the first Institute of Jewish Studies in China, in order to meet “a growing demand for Judaic Studies in China, promoting the study of Jewish subjects among Chinese college students and a better understanding between the two peoples following the establishment of full diplomatic relations between China and Israel in January 1992” (Xu fundraising pamphlet: front page). Professor Xu Xin is also the president of the China Judaic Studies Association, an organization for academics who teach Jewish studies.

It so happened that the second conference organized by the International Task Force was to take place at Shanghai University in 2007 in conjunction with the Centre of Jewish Studies at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences which is led by Professor Pan Guang. Upon learning that I teach about Judaism, Israel, and the Holocaust, Professor Changgang Guo, my dinner partner from the Chinese delegation, who happened to be the organizer of the 2007 conference, invited me to join them, give some lectures, and lead a workshop. For me, this was an incredible opportunity to learn about a people I knew little about and to share my knowledge of Judaism. I could never have imagined what a rich experience this would be, an experience that has had ripple effects ever since (Schmidt 2008: 8 – 12).

Shanghai's Jewish presence dates back to the 19th century, the time of the Concessions, when Sephardi Jews from Iraq, Egypt, and India – among them the Sassoons (Baghdad and Bombay) and the Kadoories (Baghdad) – settled in Shanghai (Xu et al. 1995: 121; Pan 2005: 5 – 9; Pan 2001: 24 – 45; Owyang 2007: 164 – 65). They were wealthy businessmen and observant Jews, who generously supported their community. In 1920, Jacob Sassoon, who had lost his wife, Rachel, built the Ohel Rachel Synagogue in her memory; it was in use until 1952 (Pan 2005: 7; Owyang 2007: 196). Today, it is a government building housing the Shanghai Education Commission that can only be seen from a distance by most visitors. Xu Xin notes, and Cara Anna wrote a recent article about Jewish events, such as a wedding, taking place in the synagogue, after lengthy negotiations with the Chinese government (Anna 2008: 4). Another important landmark in Shanghai is the Ohel Moshe Synagogue, built in 1927 by the Ashkenazi Jewish community (Owyang 2007: 165). When I visited Shanghai in 2007, it was not possible to enter the site, as the buildings were under renovation. Renovations of the complex were completed in 2008, and I thoroughly enjoyed a visit to what has become the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum, a reminder of the approximately 25,000 European Jews who found refuge just a few blocks from the Museum, in the Hongkou District of Shanghai. The Ohel Moshe Synagogue is intact, and on the second floor one can peruse an exhibition about Israel and China-Israel relations. The museum also includes a building dedicated to the Chinese Consul to Vienna, Feng Shan Ho, who wrote visas for several thousand of the Jews who found refuge in Shanghai (Pan 2001: 90 – 131). Under Japanese occupation in 1942, these refugees were ghettoized in row houses along Huoshan Road, across the street from Huoshan Park, where a large memorial for the refugees has been erected.

While in Shanghai, I kept records of the contacts I had made, and in 2008, when Professor Guo invited me for a second conference on “Globalization, Values and Pluralism” at Shanghai University and Jerry Gotel from London simultaneously invited me to join them in Kunming, Yunnan Province, for another Holocaust conference, I took the plunge and wrote to my colleague, Professor Qianhong Zhang at Henan University in Kaifeng, whom I had also met in 2007, to see if this would be a good time for me to visit their university as a visiting scholar. Miraculously, everything fell in place, and I was able to reconnect with faculty and students I had met in 2007 in Shanghai, also from Kaifeng, and to meet new colleagues and more students who came to Kunming from as far away as Inner Mongolia, Xian, and Harbin (on Harbin see Pan 2001: 47 – 87; Xu 2004: 88 – 93). The south-western part of China and Yunnan Province in particular, is home to nearly half of the 56 recognized minorities in China. To qualify, the National Minorities Institute imposes strict criteria such as “a common language, an area of inhabitation, a unique set of customs, attitudes,

and beliefs, and traditional means of livelihood,” which the descendents of Chinese Jews cannot meet (Xu 2006: 93). Kunming is also the end station of the Burma-China road, built under Allied direction during World War II, to give support to the Flying Tigers who were based in Kunming. This was one of America’s major contributions in support of China’s efforts to rid their country of Japanese occupation during World War II. Today, the region is also home to the Uygurs, a radical group of Muslims who clamour for at least autonomy, similar to the way Tibet does. When I arrived at Kunming airport in 2008, the group had detonated a bomb on a bus in Kunming, killing two, and our hosts whisked me off to the compound where the Holocaust conference took place, where we remained for the duration of the conference.

Kaifeng, located along the ancient Silk Route, prides itself on being the home of the oldest Jewish community in China, dating back to the 11th century (Xu 2003). At the height of its existence, the community was about 5,000 strong. Welcomed graciously by the emperor of the Song Dynasty after a long and arduous journey from “the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea” (Xu et al. 1995: 4), these Jews were given Chinese names by the emperor, one for each of the seven representatives who were part of the delegation that visited him (Xu et al. 1995: 23). Today, Chinese families carry these names and proudly point to their descent from the original group who settled in Kaifeng. Alas, “the synagogue [Temple of Purity and Truth] no longer proudly stands on Teaching the Torah Lane. Hebrew is neither chanted nor understood. The Torah scrolls have been lost. Inter-marriage is rife. Nine hundred years have elapsed since Jews first settled in Kaifeng, and the passage of time, isolation, natural disasters, and war have all taken their toll on the Kaifeng Jewish community” (Xu et al. 1995: 137). So writes Professor Xu (also see Fishbane 2010: 9). And after the revolution of 1949, new ways of categorizing the Chinese population brought additional difficulties for the remainder of the original Chinese Jews, who did not readily fit into the new system developed by the National Minorities Institute. To qualify for national ethnic status, a person must fulfil three requirements: “1) distinctive religious customs and practices, 2) residence of the group in a specific locality, and 3) a distinctive language” (Xu et al. 1995: 139). Since the Jews of Kaifeng were not able to prove these elements any longer, they are classified today as Han Chinese. Once the new state of Israel was established, most of the Jews in Shanghai, Harbin, and Xianjing left China.

The mythical aura surrounding the Jewish community of Kaifeng has not lessened over time. On the contrary, the Institute of Jewish Studies at Henan University provides a basis for visiting scholars who are interested in the history of this once famous community and are willing to share some of their own knowledge on Jewish topics with the students in the Institute. The students take it upon themselves to be the guardians of the remnants of this Jewish com-

munity, be they people or buildings. Traces of Jewish life can still be found in the former “Teaching the Torah Lane”, a street once home to a vibrant Jewish community and its synagogue. Walking along Nanjiaojing Hutong, the still existing house numbers point to homes of Jewish descendents, such as No. 21, the home of Mrs. Zhao, the widow of a descendent of Kaifeng Jews. Kaifeng is well-known for its delicate and exquisite paper cuts. Mrs. Zhao’s daughter, who studied in Israel in 2008, is a skilful paper cut artist; her designs include the Kaifeng synagogue, a Magen David, doves, flowers, and the word *shalom* in Hebrew. Down the street and around the corner from Mrs. Zhao’s home is a shack inside of which is located the well from which the Jews of Kaifeng drew their water. In the old part of Kaifeng, the Ancient Guild Hall holds two pictures of the Jewish quarter as it once existed. One can also see two of the four stone bowls that used to be in the synagogue. I was told that the other two bowls were taken to Canada. The bowls are massive and about three feet in diameter, but I was not able to determine their use. Perhaps they held incense or fire. Beverly Friend writes that they were used “for ritual washing before worship” (Friend n. d.: 3). Only the three steles with the community’s history were inaccessible to us, as the museum that houses them was under repair.

My understanding of the Chinese people’s interest in Judaism, the Holocaust, and Israel was formed primarily by my interactions with a significant number of students. “Why do you want to study Judaism if it isn’t even one of the five religions in China?” I asked. The answers were very interesting and I would like to share a few here.

- Chinese students see Judaism as being a very old civilization – like their own, whose traditions have survived – unlike theirs. Judaism is rich in religious holidays and festivals and in life cycle events. This survival of the tradition is a sore point with some of the young people, because during the Cultural Revolution Chinese traditions were ridiculed and expunged from Chinese life. Buddha images were destroyed, and religious practices abolished. Now young people feel that their parents’ generation is lacking values and rituals. They feel that the only goal is to make money, that there is no higher goal. They want to find a way to fill their own sense of emptiness and return to their cultural values from before the Cultural Revolution. They admire Jews for having retained their cultural and religious traditions throughout history and are keenly interested in how we did that. One recent example of Chinese character-building for the students is the “Green Long March” to save the environment of the Yellow River, a reversal of the deadly “Long March” led by Mao Zedong in 1934.
- China and Judaism both have an ancient language with a unique alphabet that has survived for thousands of years. Yet, in both cases the ancient language was in need of modernization. Hence, the Chinese simplified Mandarin, while

the Jews through Eliezer ben Yehuda developed Modern Hebrew. Both cultures are rich in literature. Professor Zhiqing Zhong from the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences studied in Israel where she received her Ph.D. in Modern Hebrew Language and Literature from Ben Gurion University of the Negev in 2006. She is the translator of many of Amos Oz's works into Chinese, including his very complicated autobiography, "A Tale of Love and Darkness". It is my understanding that Amos Oz travelled to Beijing for the release of the Chinese edition.

- Confucius and the Hebrew prophets are contemporaries. The two value systems, though spatially worlds apart, developed parallel to each other, sharing many ideas. Although we have no evidence of merchants travelling between the Middle East and China as far back as Solomon, some people suggest that there indeed was interaction between the two peoples, to be reinforced or complemented when the First Temple was destroyed in 586 BCE. It is thought that some Jews settled in India at the time. From there it was indeed possible to explore the Far East as well.
- Jewish teachings, as well as Confucian teachings, emphasize deeds, not dogma. "Don't do unto others what you would not want them do unto you", can be found in the Talmud (Shabbat 31a) and in Confucius' Analects (15:23). Both systems stress ethics, personal integrity, and both take an optimistic approach to human nature. In Judaism, a major principle is *tikkun olam*, or the perfecting of the world, a concept that the Chinese people also appreciate. This idea includes discipline and consideration for all living things.
- Both peoples value family. The Chinese people admire the Jewish commitment to both the nuclear and the extended family – respect of children for parents, and respect for elders in the community. With China's one-child policy, many families look longingly to the larger Jewish families with many siblings.
- Both peoples value education. While we joke about Jewish mothers and how they quell over "my son the doctor", Chinese parents likewise take pride in the academic achievements of their children – especially in the areas of science and mathematics and in music and art. Chinese young people will make great sacrifices to earn an education, often travelling far from home, because, especially in rural areas, education and particularly higher education, is difficult to obtain. They often work while going to school and send money home to help their families. This is not unlike Jewish immigrant families to America, whose children were the first generation to graduate from high school and attend university, often working nights to help support the family, or vice versa, working during the day and going to school at night.
- Both peoples have a history of suffering and persecution. In discussing the Holocaust, one student wanted to discuss the Rape of Nanking by the Japanese in 1937. The expression of this concern was just the tip of the iceberg. The

students were extremely interested in finding out what the genocide experience meant to the Jewish people. How did Jews cope with the Holocaust? And especially, how did they manage to pick themselves up after the Holocaust and continue with life? Did they hate the Germans? If not, why not? They were keenly interested in why Jews did not lose their faith in God as a result of the Holocaust, and how they maintained their moral values. Of course, many Jews did lose their faith, but the students focused on the fact that the Jews as a people are optimistic, they have hope, no matter how bad things are.

- Both Judaism and China experienced a rebirth, Judaism with the birth of the modern state of Israel in 1948 and China in 1949 with the revolution and the creation of the People's Republic of China. They point out that President Sun Yatsen in the 1920s was a strong supporter of the Zionist movement and pointed to Zionism as an inspiration for a modern Chinese nationalism.
- Both China and Israel have five official religions. In China it is Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. Contrary to some perceptions, Israel does not have only one official religion, namely Judaism, but the state supports five religious groups – Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Baha'i and the Druze (Chinese people are very interested in the Baha'i faith). When I asked Chinese students whether Judaism could ever become one of the recognized religions in China, they just smile.

Since my two visits in 2007 and 2008 I have unfortunately not been able to return to China. However, I have maintained contact with about twenty of the students and with all of the major faculties. Several of the students asked me to send them specific books for their research, which I did, and several of the academic programmes were in need of books on Judaism – history, literature, art, social theory, not just religion. We conducted a book drive in the community and sent boxes to Nanjing and Kaifeng. Unfortunately the shipment to Lu Dong University in Shandong Province was inexplicably lost. The number of Chinese students and faculty who have come to the University of Tennessee has been amazing. In the fall of 2008, three of the graduate students whom I had met at one of the conferences came to Knoxville for three weeks to conduct research for their M. A. theses. Xiao Xiao Xie, Haiyang Yo, and Lin Ding lived with me and a Chinese professor who was kind enough to help out. They thoroughly enjoyed themselves. Xiao Xiao has recently gone on to Australia to study for his PhD and "Ocean" (Haiyang) finished his M.A. degree, got married, and is now a father. In fall of 2008, I met Professor Lihong Song, a colleague of Xu Xin's at the Glazer Institute of Jewish Studies at Nanjing University, at the annual meeting of the Association for Jewish Studies, and we enjoyed a meal and good conversation together. This was not our first meeting; we had previously met at the Kunming Holocaust conference and before that in Shanghai. In 2010, Professor Guo from

Shanghai University visited my university and gave a very well attended public lecture on “Religion in the Context of the Social Development of Contemporary China”. We travelled together to the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Atlanta, where he was one of our invited international guests and participated in a special topics forum on Asia, that the International Connections Committee, of which I was a member, had organized. Professor Xu Xin from Nanjing University stopped in Knoxville in January 2011, and gave an equally well-received lecture on the Jews of China. In April of this year, Professor Zhiqing Zhong from the Beijing Academy of Social Sciences, who was a Visiting Professor at Harvard’s Yenching Institute, came to Knoxville for a unique programme on her translation work of Amos Oz’s books and our Italian Hebrew teacher’s translation work of modern Hebrew literature. We had hoped that one of my Kaifeng students, who has since spent a year in Israel and earned her PhD in Judaic Studies at Nanjing University, would be able to come to Knoxville as a Research Scholar in fall of 2012. Alas, these plans did not work out. So far, only one of our students has travelled to Shanghai at the invitation of Professor Guo. In the spring of 2011, Amy Canter, a double major in Judaic Studies and Religious Studies, spent six weeks at Shanghai University doing research on Chinese students’ knowledge of Judaism, the Holocaust, and Israel. She greatly enjoyed the experience, so much so that she bought a new ticket upon returning home and spent the summer in China as well. The University of Tennessee has extensive linkages with Chinese universities beyond Shanghai, but these involve mostly the sciences and engineering.

Chinese interest in Judaism and Israel is widespread and genuine. Although China’s diplomatic relations with Israel are young – a mere twenty years – cultural relations have developed amazingly quickly and are very strong (Wald 2008: 20 – 25). Especially in the area of education, Chinese scholars travel to Israel unabashedly, studying Hebrew, the Holocaust, and Jewish and Israeli literature, culture, and history, in an effort to better serve their own people. In many ways, the Chinese dragon and the lion of Judah are soulmates.

As I was revising this paper for publication, an article on the future importance of China to Israel appeared in my inbox – from Barry Rubin, of Walter Laqueur and Barry Rubin, “The Israel-Arab Reader” fame. I have used this text in my Zionism course for many years. Barry Rubin recently travelled to China and discovered “a remarkable amount of interest in China about Israel and Jews” (Rubin 2012). No surprise there. Two of his observations are worth including, “that Israel in particular and the Jewish people in general have been success stories”, as China hopes she has, and that both countries “have many parallel interests, among them the desire for stability in the Middle East” (Rubin 2012). Reading the fine print in this article won’t hurt either, it is enlightening along the political front.

This paper is dedicated with much gratitude to my colleagues Changgang Guo, Xu Xin, Zhiqing Zhong, Qianhong Zhang, and Lihong Song, as well as “Jewel” and “Gordon” and “Duncan”, and all the students at the Shanghai University 2007 and 2008 conferences, the 2008 Kunming Holocaust Conference, and the 2008 Jewish Institute seminar at Henan University in Kaifeng.

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