The Theology of the Chinese Jews, 1000–1850

Jordan Paper

Postscript by Rabbi Anson Laytner
THE THEOLOGY OF

THE CHINESE JEWS, 1000–1850
"Juif de Caiñum lisant la Bible à la chaire de Moyse, avec deux souffleurs" [Kaifeng Jew reading the Bible on the Chair of Moses, with two prompters], drawing by Father Jean Domenge, S.J., 1722. Society of Jesus Archives.

The sketch illustrates the Mizrahi custom of reading the Torah scroll within its open hard covering case, which is placed on a chair, called the Chair of Moses, in the centre of the synagogue. An assistant is shown following the reading from a Torah bound as a book.
THE THEOLOGY OF

THE CHINESE JEWS, 1000–1850

JORDAN PAPER

Postscript by Rabbi Anson Laytner
To my wife, friend, colleague, and partner, Chuang Li, whose support over the decades has been so essential to my work, and to my cousin, Herbert Paper, who preceded me in researching Chinese Judaism
If God once sang on Mount Sinai, this was a song of permanent variation.
—Dániel Biró
School of Music, University of Victoria
Contents

Prologue  ix
Acknowledgements  xi

1 Introduction: The Four Questions  1
Who Are the Chinese Jews?  1
Are the Chinese Jews Jewish?  5
What Are the Sources for the Theology of the Chinese Jews?  16
Is This Theology Relevant Today?  21

2 From Whence They Came to Where They Went  25
The Extent of the Diaspora  25
Jewish Life under Christianity and Islam: Tenth to Twelfth Centuries  30
The Sea Route to China and the Settlement in Kaifeng  33

3 Life in China: Tenth to Nineteenth Centuries  37
Religion  37
Education  48
Social Structure  50
Government  51
Economy  52
Culture  53

4 Brief History of Buddhism and the Abrahamic Traditions in China  55
The Buddhist Experience in China  56
Christianity to the Mid-Nineteenth Century  58
Christianity in China after the de Facto Demise of Judaism  62
Islam  66
Judaism  69
Contents

5 The Sinification of Judaism 79
Veneration of Ancestors: Family, Tribal, Religious, and Cultural 79
Education and Its Relationship to Judaism 85
The Kaifeng Jews and Their Neighbours 87
Chinese Judaism 90

6 A Speculative Theology of the Chinese Jews 95
The Names of God: Hebrew 96
The Kaifeng Synagogue's Stelae and Plaques 98
The Names of God: Chinese 100
The Nature of Creation 106
Monotheism from a Chinese Perspective 110
A Speculative Chinese-Jewish Theology 113
Assimilation and Theology 124
Historical and Cultural Context 129

Epilogue 131

Postscript: What Western Jews Can Learn from the Kaifeng Jews, by Rabbi Anson Laytner 137

Appendix: Chinese Logographs for Terms and Translations in Chapter 6 145

Notes 147

References 153
Prologue

For over half a century I have been a sinophile, beginning with an unplanned undergraduate course I took on Chinese civilization. This course led to intense study of classical Chinese and a doctoral dissertation that involved the reconstruction and translation of an early medieval Chinese philosophical text. My studies then moved to comparative religion, particularly of the development and nature of Chinese religion. As a Jew, I was fascinated with the phenomenon of the Chinese Jews, who in the twelfth century constructed a synagogue in Kaifeng, the capital city of the Northern Song dynasty, my favourite period in the history of Chinese culture. Over the decades I accumulated whatever material I came across on the Kaifeng community.

In the year I retired from my professorship, I had just finished writing two books that brought together years of study in two areas of comparative religion—ecstatic religious experience and comparative theology—and I began to cast about for a new project. Over the years, I had become increasingly interested in comparative theology, first with Native American religions, and then with indigenous Chinese Christian theology, followed by the theology of female spirits worldwide, and finally a holistic work on polytheistic theology in general. Considering the plethora of publications on the Chinese Jews, I realized that there was nothing on their theology. The tendency was to assume that as their religious life was quite similar to that of Jews elsewhere, so must be their theological understanding. But that assumption had to be false.

The Chinese Jews had not undergone the many centuries of suffering that European Jews had endured under Christianity, nor had they experienced the second-class citizenship of Jews in Muslim countries. Instead, for nearly a millennium they existed in an atmosphere of tolerance, indeed of complete acceptance, and they not only maintained a traditional Jewish life but adapted to a Chinese one as well. Given a cultural milieu that was very different from the European one, surely their theological understanding was different too. Further, given that
they would have been literate in Chinese and that some prepared for the civil service examinations, their basis for thinking would be far removed from the classical Greek philosophy whose renaissance formed the basis of Muslim, Jewish, and Christian theology in the late medieval period. This remove would have furthered the divergence between European and Chinese-Jewish theologies over the last millennium. Moreover, as the socio-cultural milieu of contemporary North American Jews is closer to that of the Chinese Jews than of the European Jews, their theology may have something to offer to modern, liberal Jews.

This project, then, allowed me to bring together my self-identify as a Jew with my love for Chinese culture. I hope the result is not only interesting but useful. It should be understood by readers that this book is written not from the methodological purview of Jewish studies but from that of comparative religion, especially comparative theology, and Chinese studies. By comparative theology I do not mean the particular methodologies put forth at the end of the nineteenth and the end of the twentieth centuries (see Locklin and Nicholson) but a simple, straightforward comparison of the notion of deity as in my own studies mentioned above. In the case of this study, the theologies discussed are post-Holocaust popular Ashkenazi theology, medieval Mizrahi theology, and the quasi-theology (the equivalent of deity) of the traditional Chinese literati, especially in their use of Daoist terminology, as well as the Chinese-Jewish synthesis of the latter two theologies.

As Michael Fishbane pointed out with approbation (personal communication), I step outside of comparative theology toward the end of this study and, as does Rabbi Layner, engage in “constructive theology” (personal communication), although this was far from my original intention. As a Jew and a sinophile, I could not but be influenced by what I had discovered and thus went beyond a hypothetical reconstruction of the theology of the Chinese Jews, especially with regard to its contemporary applicability to North American Judaism, of which I am a part.
Acknowledgements

I owe a debt of gratitude to all those scholars before me, beginning with the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Jesuits who carried out considerable research on and historical analysis of the Jews of Kaifeng. Without their work, my task could not have been accomplished. The encouragement of several close friends was crucial to my continuing this work over a period of years, in spite of severe criticism from those oriented toward the new Jewish orthodoxy. Especially important for long-term support were my spiritual partner, Aviva Goldberg, and my intellectual partner, Steven Bentheim. Needless to add, this book would not have been conceived if it were not for my life partner, Chuang Li, to whom the work is dedicated.

Others who were particularly helpful were Rabbi Anson Laytner of Seattle, who carefully read the manuscript and made many important suggestions; Professor Marty Lockshin of York University, a specialist in medieval rabbinic studies, who answered several crucial questions preliminary to my beginning the work; and Professor Dániel Biró of the School of Music, University of Victoria, whose good-humoured understanding of Judaism provided a supportive context.

This work was written while I was a fellow of the Centre for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Victoria. The positive attitude of the fellows and the friends of the Centre toward my work provided the essential milieu for my studies to continue after retirement from York University. Particularly helpful were the director, Paul Bramadat, the founding director, Harold Coward, and the administrator, Leslie Kenny. Without their generous support, this work would not have seen publication. I am also grateful to anonymous reviewers of this book as well as Professor Michael Fishbane of the University of Chicago, who made useful suggestions for its betterment, and Professor Emeritus Asa Kashner of Tel Aviv University, who graciously pointed out several passages that required a more nuanced exposition. Of course, aside from the postscript, I alone am responsible for the interpretations presented here.
Chapter 1

Introduction: The Four Questions

Who Are the Chinese Jews?

Jewish merchants probably have been travelling to China since the Chinese opening of the caravan trade route through Central Asia well over two millennia ago. The indirect trade with Rome was so extensive that the Roman Emperor Trajan forbade the wearing of silk because the imbalance of trade was bankrupting Rome, China wanting little from the West save gold. The primary intermediaries in this trade were merchants of the Parthian Empire, which stood between the Roman and Chinese Han Empires. The Parthian Empire centred on Persia, which had been home to many Jews since the time of the Persian Empire centuries earlier.

The caravan trade ended with the collapse of the Han Empire in the early third century CE and was resurrected with the reunification of China in the late sixth century, followed by the formation of the Tang Empire in the seventh century. Among the many documents found in a cave along the trade route on the western fringe of this empire is one from the ninth century written in Judeo-Persian. By the tenth century, the caravan trade, due to China’s loss of its Central Asian provinces and expanding Arab seafaring, was replaced by sea trade. The marine route was from the Arabian Sea to and around India, and around Southeast Asia to coastal southern China. So many Arabs were involved in this trade that the Chinese government gave self-rule to enclaves of Arab merchants in the southern coastal seaports. Along with these Muslim
merchants were Jews. The details of this maritime trade are discussed in chapter 4.

A group of these Jews travelled to and settled in the then capital of Kaifeng sometime between the late tenth and eleventh centuries. By the twelfth century they became sufficiently established and wealthy to construct a magnificent synagogue, which eventually became one of the largest in the world. In the process, the Jewish community partially assimilated to Chinese culture in an atmosphere of acceptance. Chinese culture is not racist and not usually xenophobic. For example, Tang dynasty culture celebrated the exotic; paintings and ceramics portrayed foreign grooms and traders displaying features of those from Southwest Asia, some probably Jews. Chinese Jews became high civilian and military officials. Further discussion of Chinese culture in these regards, and in comparison with Christian and Muslim cultures, is provided in chapters 2 and 3, and the assimilation of the Jews to Chinese culture—that is, the sinization of Judaism—is discussed in chapter 5. Jewish communities had previously developed in other Chinese cities, including Hangzhou, the next capital after Kaifeng, and Ningpo, a seaport in the same general area where Shanghai developed in the nineteenth century, but we have virtually no information on them.

Kaifeng is a low-lying city on the Huangho (Yellow River), often called “China’s Sorrow” due to its drastic flooding. Several times the Kaifeng synagogue was destroyed by flood waters along with much of the city and rebuilt. At least once the Torah scrolls were lost to flooding but replaced via the Jewish communities in the seaports of either Ningpo or Yangzhou.

The third phase of the caravan trade ended with the collapse of the Mongol regime in the fourteenth century. In the sixteenth century, during the latter half of the Ming dynasty, the government cut off the sea trade, for a number of reasons. It seems that in this period the Jewish communities in the Chinese port cities disappeared. Thus, the Chinese Jews became isolated from Judaism in the rest of the world.

The effects of this isolation can be seen in the quality of the Torah and related scrolls. After the major flooding of Kaifeng in the fifteenth century, the Kaifeng community was able to attain scrolls from Southwest Asia. But after the seventeenth-century flood, the damaged scrolls could be replaced only by the Kaifeng Jews themselves, for these scrolls have errors indicating they were written by an untrained Torah scribe (Pollack 1975).

Matters took a further turn for the worse in the nineteenth century. European ships carrying Christian missionaries along with cargo had to a large degree replaced the Arab vessels in the sea trade with China, and Jewish merchants no longer had the easier relationship they had
enjoyed with Muslim merchants. The vast non-Chinese Manchu Empire of the time was fighting a Uygur Muslim resistance movement in the Central Asian provinces it attached to China, and government suspicion was turning to Chinese Muslims as well. Since the Chinese saw little difference between Jews and Muslims, it is possible though far from certain that Jews too were impacted by negative government attitudes.

In 1841, another major flood in Kaifeng damaged the synagogue and impoverished the surrounding area. The Chinese economy overall was collapsing in a period of rapid dynastic decline, so the local economy did not recover from the flood. A decade later, the area was devastated by a widespread indigenous Christian religio-political movement, the Taiping, that led to an immense reduction in the population in Kaifeng. The Taiping Movement took place between the two Opium Wars that opened up China to European colonization and Christian missionaries, which in turn led to further deterioration of the Chinese economy and society.

The last Chinese rabbi died in the first part of the nineteenth century. Thus, by the mid-nineteenth century the Kaifeng Jewish community was rapidly becoming defunct, although aspects of Jewish rituals continued among the few remaining Chinese Jews well into the twentieth century.

At this time, Jews from Kaifeng travelled to the new seaport of Shanghai to seek help from newly arrived European Jewish merchants in rebuilding their synagogue and saving the Jewish community. Funds were collected for this purpose, but rather than being used to help the Kaifeng Jews, the funds were diverted to help Russian Jews suffering from pogroms. Perhaps many of the European Jews did not accept the Chinese Jews as fellow Jews because they looked Chinese rather than European.

Because Chinese Judaism was dying, with the Kaifeng Jews impoverished, when European Jews reached Kaifeng in the second half of the nineteenth century Chinese Judaism tended to be perceived as a failed or inauthentic Judaism. But the very forces that led to its demise also led to, among other things, the end of Chan (Zen) Buddhism as a viable Chinese religious sect. (It continued in name but in a Pure Land mode.) This negative perception of Chinese Judaism ignores the fact that Chinese Judaism was successful for many centuries. Until Judaism's slow demise, due to separation from Judaism elsewhere amid the collapse of China itself, Jewish families prospered; some held important government positions, and the synagogue had the nominal support of the government. If we compare the longevity of Judaism in China to that in eastern Europe, they are comparable.

For example, the major Jewish community in Prague (Praha) lasted approximately 850 years, from the twelfth century to the arrival of the Nazis in 1939, although it is now being slowly revived. The Jewish
community in Kaifeng also lasted for approximately 850 years. The oldest synagogue in Prague functioned for 730 years, from 1209 to 1939; the synagogue in Kaifeng lasted for 678 years, from 1163 to 1841. Judaism disappeared from both Kaifeng and Prague because of external factors, not because of an inherent defect in either mode of Judaism.

Indeed, given that Ashkenazi Judaism, especially Yiddishkeit, has been waning since modern Israeli Hebrew was based instead on the Sephardi pronunciation, its life has been only about 900 years. The Jewish communities in Spain lasted for a far shorter time, and, given the various expulsions in England, the history of Judaism there is not as long as its history in China. Needless to say, the history of Judaism in the Americas is considerably shorter. Yet Euro-American Jewish critics consider Chinese Judaism a failure because of assimilation and understand that it was short-lived.

Jewish critics unfamiliar with Chinese history were not the only ones who viewed the Chinese-Jewish experience as relatively brief. Roman Malik (2000, 2), in his introduction to the anthology *From Kaifeng ... to Shanghai: Jews in China*, writes, “The existence of Jews in China covers a period of several centuries, from the arrival of the first Jews, probably merchants, in Tang China (618–907) ... to the exodus of Jewish refugees after the end of World War II.” The word “several” in the *Oxford Dictionary* means “more than two but not many.” To use the word “several” to describe a period spanning fifteen centuries, for whatever reason, is clearly to belittle the length of the Jewish experience in China.

European and southwestern Asian Jews, primarily Sephardim, were among the Western merchants residing in the foreign concessions in Shanghai after this port city was developed for trade with the West in the mid-eighteenth century. Later, Ashkenazi Jews fleeing pogroms in Russia came to live in northern Chinese cities in Manchuria. The persecution of Jews in Germany in the 1930s led to many fleeing across Eurasia to end up in Shanghai, where they were confined by the Japanese occupation until the end of World War II. These circumstances have complicated the contemporary common Western understanding of Chinese Judaism. Thus, today many assume that the term “Chinese Judaism” refers to the century and a half of European Jews living in China—that is, “Judaism in China”—rather than the “Chinese Judaism” of the last millennium.

A further complication in understanding Chinese Judaism is the recent recognition by the chief Sephardi rabbi in Israel of a Burmese tribe as one of the “lost tribes” of Israel and the real Jews of Kaifeng, although by their own story they could never have been there. This misconception has furthered the understanding in Israel that the Kaifeng Jews’ claim of Jewish ancestry is not legitimate. (See chapter 2.)
Introduction

Are the Chinese Jews Jewish?

Europeans have been fascinated by the Chinese Jews since they were first "discovered" in the eighteenth century. More recently, there has been increased interest in and support for the study of Chinese Judaism among Jews. In 1985, the Sino-Judaic Institute was founded in California to advance the study of Chinese Judaism both in the West and in China. The institute supported the founding of the China Judaic Studies Association and several Judaic studies programs in Chinese universities. In recent years, Chinese scholars of Judaism have lectured at liberal synagogues throughout North America and Europe as well as in Israel. Jewish publishing houses are producing books on the topic.

Hence my surprise when, on applying for a research grant on the same topic, I was informed that although the liberal Christian theologian reviewer lauded the research project, anonymous Jewish reviewers unanimously took umbrage that Chinese Judaism was taken seriously as a legitimate aspect of Judaism. Their expressed attitude was that by assimilating and becoming Chinese, the Chinese Jews were not truly Jews. Jews were a pure race. The Jews in China lost authenticity through miscegenation, by intermarrying with Chinese, and their Judaism was not a true Judaism because the Chinese Jews assimilated with Chinese culture and spoke Chinese (as well as Judeo-Persian).

What the Jewish reviewers seemed to ignore is that the physical assimilation took place nearly a millennium ago. Hence, the reviewers seemed to have objected illogically to Chinese-Jewish males marrying Chinese-Jewish females. Moreover, if cultural assimilation had not taken place, there would have been no Chinese Judaism. And it is the very nature of the ideological assimilation that is the focus of this book. But what the reviewers found particularly objectionable was that I, a Jew, was married to a Chinese woman.\(^1\) This fact they obliquely referred to as "of great relevance for Canadian Jewry: assimilation... From a Judaic perspective, then, the Kaifeng Jews are a warning more than a hope." Thus, by being married to a Chinese, I was not just a traitor to Judaism but involved in its very destruction.

The adjudicating committee of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada turned down my application for a research grant primarily on the basis of racism, as they "concurred with the ... issue of assimilation [meaning miscegenation]" raised by the reviewers. I bring forward my own experience in this regard solely because it illustrates that for a number of scholars in Judaic studies the issue of race is so strong that it can lead a major secular government-funded research body to deny a research project primarily in support of this perspective.
The Theology of the Chinese Jews

Thus, the existence of the Chinese Jews brings forth fundamental questions about Judaism for Jews of European background. What is Judaism? Who is a Jew? The answers range from the most conservative ultra-Orthodox, for whom only a small number of those who call themselves Jews—members of their own and related sects—are really Jews, to the most liberal Jews, for whom anyone who calls himself a Jew is a Jew, whether practising or not. For those non-Jews who are culturally motivated to hate Jews as a race, such as the Nazis, anyone who has one great-grandparent who was identified as Jewish, even if their family has been Christian for generations, is a Jew.

In the following brief discussion of the nature of Judaism, there is no attempt to define Judaism per se. As Michael Satlow pointed out in an incisive article from 2007, "Defining Judaism": "What after all is Judaism? Most academic writing on 'Judaism' has tended to avoid this fundamental question" (838). So without narrowly defining Judaism—which is impossible, given its many variations over time and place—the broader question must still be posed regarding the question of whether the Chinese Jews are Jews: Is Judaism a religion, an ethnicity, a race, or some combination of these?

That many northern European Jews embraced northern European racism—a seeming peculiarity of the cultures of the Indo-European-language family, especially in northern Europe and northern India—is a fact. In the late nineteenth century, many American Jews, particularly Reform Jews of German background, identified themselves by blood or race, concepts popularized by the emerging discipline of anthropology. This identification ceased when the racist Jim Crow laws of the early twentieth century meant that alignment by race exposed Jews to even more discrimination than they had already endured.

But the concept was then taken up by Jewish intellectuals in Germany, some of whom developed a racial understanding of Jews alongside those theorists who became the founders of Nazi ideology. Even as eminent a liberal Austrian Jewish philosopher as Martin Buber (himself the husband of a former non-Jew) understood that being a Jew was a matter of blut, of blood, rather than religious observance (Susser 77ff.). Haim Nahman Bialik, the distinguished Yiddish- and Hebrew-language poet, said at a press conference in 1934 at Hebrew University, "I, too, like Hitler, believe in the power of the blood idea" (Karpel).

A century later, an increasing number of North American Jews are again understanding themselves as a race, and there is a growing fear of the dilution of pure Jewish blood. Entering the words "Jews" and "assimilation" in Google in October 2011 resulted in 3.1 million hits. The fear is not with regard to religion, in spite of the rhetoric, for those Jews who
marry non-Jews who convert to Judaism are as liable to be ostracized as those who marry spouses who do not convert. Given that more than half of Jews today in North America marry outside of Judaism (Mayer et al.), and if the children of these marriages are rejected as non-Jewish, very few Jews will be left in North America in just a few generations’ time.

The punchline of many Borscht Belt Jewish jokes—"Funny, you don’t look Jewish"—is inherently racist, as it places primacy for identification on physical appearance. And what is this Jewish appearance for Jews from northeastern Europe? It is often Slavic rather than Semitic. Many Ashkenazi Jews in Israel look down on all other Jews, including those of Semitic appearance from Arabic-speaking countries (see Kordova), although these Jews are far more likely to resemble the Jews of ancient Israel than they are. Besides, all the major developments of rabbinic Judaism took place in Semitic-speaking lands rather than northern Europe, save for the relatively late development of Hasidism. Some non-Ashkenazi Jews have left Israel to escape racism. Moshe Shek, an Indian Jew who returned to Bombay in 2000 after five years in Israel, said to an interviewer, "I had come to Israel to feel more Jewish, but I had never felt less Jewish in my life than in Israel.... Before I went to Israel, I had no idea that there was a line between Sephardim and Ashkenazim, with the latter feeling superior to the former.... Anything Indian is very in in Israel, except the Indians themselves. We are just blacks who happen to be from India" (quoted in Ginsburg, 38).

A decade later, in 2010, racism among the ultra-Orthodox had reached the point that some Ashkenazi parents would not allow their children to be in the same classroom as Sephardi children, let alone Falasha or others of colour. Israeli courts have begun to fine some ultra-Orthodox school systems for such racist policies (Kashti).

Wherever Jews moved, assimilation through intermarriage with local females was the norm. The Torah itself provides examples. The most prominent perhaps is the story of Joseph after he settled in Egypt. As a reward, the pharaoh gave Asenath, the daughter of an Egyptian priest, to be Joseph’s wife (Genesis 41:45). Ironically, with the growing concern over miscegenation, discussed with the euphemism of "assimilation," even Joseph can be considered a pariah for this marriage, as suggested in an article by a Reform rabbi: "Assimilation, a word that concerns the loss of Jews through attrition and absorption into other faiths or into no faith at all, harkens back to Joseph, the first Israelite to live in a diaspora. Joseph adopted Egyptian customs and clothes, took an Egyptian wife, and was given the Egyptian name Zaphenath-paneah (Gen. 41:54).... The threat of assimilation has not changed much since the day that Joseph settled in Egypt" (Pearce).
The Theology of the Chinese Jews

Centuries of frequent pogroms in eastern Europe meant that many Ashkenazi women of reproductive age were raped. Their children added to the pool of non-Jewish blood begun with the many mixed marriages early in the spread of Judaism throughout Europe. It is not accidental that the physical appearance of many Ashkenazim is similar to that of Slavs. Similarly, many Sephardim continue to resemble Portuguese, even though they were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula a half millennium ago. And most Oriental or Mizrahi Jews (those from Baghdad and other areas of Southwest Asia) appear no different from their neighbours in that part of the world—that is, Iranian or Semitic.

A long-standing rabbinic injunction has it that any child born of a Jewish woman is Jewish. This was to protect children who might otherwise be rejected. The extension of this understanding led to the requirement of having a Jewish mother (or going through the conversion ritual) to be accepted as a Jew. This extension became important after the establishment of the state of Israel and the Law of Return.

The predication of Jewish identity on having a Jewish mother has led to the notion that Judaism is matrilineal, but there is not a single aspect of matrilineality in Judaism. In other words, the requirement for acceptance as a member of a group is confused with social patterns of descent. For Judaism to be matrilineal, a Jew’s Hebrew name would not be X, son or daughter of Y (the father), but X, son or daughter of Z (the mother). Certainly, when a person is called to read from the Torah, it is the former term that is used, not the latter. Similarly, all of the repeated references to the Patriarchs in the siddur (prayer book) would instead be to the Matriarchs (references to both are a contemporary development in liberal congregations). Further, all the genealogies in the Torah, without exception, are of male, not female, descent. Moreover, in all known matrilineal cultures maternal uncles take the role of the father in patrilineal cultures. Hence, if Judaism were matrilineal, the role of the father in a brit milah (Covenant of Circumcision ritual) would be taken by one of the mother’s brothers. From an anthropological or sociological perspective, there can be no question that traditional Judaism is patrilineal.

The issue of lineage is important because a critique of Chinese Judaism as not being authentically Jewish is based on the fact that the clan lineages were patrilineal (names of wives and mothers were included) and the Patriarchs are not only frequently mentioned but revered. Since it is now assumed by many contemporary Jews that Judaism is matrilineal, Chinese Judaism was therefore spurious and the Chinese Jews cannot really be Jews: “According to Halacha (Jewish religious law), they [Chinese Jews] are not recognized as Jews as they followed patrilineal descent...” (Perednik 5). This criticism is absurd, because the practices of the Chi-
nese Jews in this regard were and are no different from traditional Jewish practices elsewhere. One can only wonder if those who make this criticism are aware of normative Jewish ritual practices or have read the Torah. The similarity of patrilineality in both Jewish and Chinese cultures is but another way in which the two cultures were compatible.

The current injunction in the new Orthodox Judaism against marrying a converted non-Jew is not originally Jewish; it is Christian. In medieval Spanish Christian law—Las siete partidas of 1265—the penalty for a Jew marrying or converting a Christian woman was death (Marcus 38–39). Christian law elsewhere in Europe provided the same penalty. A Muslim in countries following Islamic law who converts from Islam is also subject to the death penalty.

There are virtually no non-assimilated Jewish populations. Current genetic research has led a number of scholars to the conclusion that most Jewish communities were formed by Jewish men marrying local women. From the genetic standpoint, Jewish identity has carried on almost everywhere solely through the male line and a small number of local “founder” females, all originally non-Jewish (Thomas et al. 2002).

A small majority of the Jews in Israel and the vast majority of Jews in the United States and Canada, including this author, are Ashkenazim, but the genetic research—the unbiased scientific research—with all of its uncertainties, demands an understanding of the Ashkenazim that according to the rhetoric of many contemporary Jews means that none of us are Jewish. A comprehensive survey of genetic and other research on the Ashkenazim concludes: “The DNA studies have revealed a high degree of genetic interrelatedness among Ashkenazi groups, particularly among those of Eastern Europe. This common ancestry can be attributed to a small founding population, coupled with rapid population growth and a high rate of endogamy over the past 500 years” (Coffman).

Coffman’s detailed analysis of a large number of DNA studies means that had not a small number of Jews sharing some degree of genetic material perhaps from the area of Israel intermarried with European women and intermixed with the Jewish Khazars, a Turkic-speaking people originally from Central Asia, the Ashkenazim would not have become an ethnic group that came to comprise millions of people. To put it another way, the Ashkenazim are no more racially pure, whatever that might mean, than are the Chinese Jews.

In China, the merchant Jews who arrived around the eleventh century were, given the length, difficulties, and dangers of the journey, unlikely to have brought wives with them. Those who elected to remain in China took Chinese wives, who, as is well documented, converted to Judaism. As is discussed in chapter 5, Chinese women by Chinese tradition adapted
The Theology of the Chinese Jews

to the customs, including religious rituals, of the patrilocal family into which they married. Since this physical assimilation would have taken place many centuries before Europeans met Chinese Jews, the Chinese Jews were for many European Jews not Jewish because they did not look Jewish; that is, they did not appear European.

Northeastern European Jewish racism has led those so inclined to judge the degree of Jewishness by skin colour. The Falasha or Ethiopian Jews, who are of a medium-brown colour and who according to some analysts seem to have practised a form of Judaism more closely linked to the time of the Temple than that of later rabbinic Judaism, were nonetheless required to ritually convert on immigrating to Israel.² The Lembas—"the "black Jews" of southern Africa—are probably descended from Jewish maritime merchants from Yemen and have maintained Jewish practices for many centuries in isolation. Although DNA testing of the marker for Kohanim has attested to the virtual certainty of the Lema population in general as being of Jewish descent, they are not generally accepted as Jewish at all because they are quite black.³

It is ironic that the reluctance of many Caucasian Jews to accept non-Caucasians as Jews is matched by the readiness of non-Jewish Europeans to label non-Caucasians as Jewish. For example, some seventeenth-century Spanish intellectuals in the Americas identified the indigenous Americans as Jews, which added legitimacy to their subjecting them to the horrors of the Inquisition: "All the inhabitants of the Indies [Americas] must be of Jewish descent ..." (de Landa 8).

There is a difference between the Jewish experience in China, and probably in India as well, and the Jewish experience in Europe, North Africa, and Yemen. The difference is in the matter of proselytizing. Most modern Jews are unaware that Jews proselytized in the distant past. This practice ended in Christian and Islamic lands when Jews were forbidden on pain of death to convert Christians or Muslims. Only the conversion of peoples and kingdoms explains why Judaism attained such a large population in some areas while remaining small in others.

A number of historical texts suggest the following major conversions, and there may have been others. The Himyar kingdom, which ruled what is now called Yemen, converted to Judaism in 378. In North Africa there is evidence to suggest that the Phoenicians who remained after the Roman sack of Carthage may have converted to Judaism, and there were Jewish Berbers. The latter would have been involved along with Muslim Berbers in the conquest of Iberia.

But the most important conversion, from the standpoint of numbers, as pointed out above in Coffman's analysis of genetic studies, was that of the Khazars. The large and powerful Khazar kingdom, which ruled over
the area of present-day eastern Ukraine, southwest Russia, and Georgia, became Jewish between the mid-eighth and mid-ninth centuries. The thirteenth-century Mongol invasion destroyed the Khazar kingdom, and linguistic and other studies strongly suggest that its citizens then blended with German and Slavic-speaking Jews to the north to become the Ashkenazim. Only such an influx could explain how a small northeastern European Jewish population grew to number in the millions. In China, the Jews did not proselytize, and all of the various synagogue communities combined totalled only in the tens of thousands.4

European Jews for centuries have understood themselves as a people, indeed a people with a special relationship with God, a “Chosen People,” although the nature of that relationship is subject to various theological interpretations, and it may have been adopted from a Christian understanding of Jews. But understanding oneself as a part of a people is not the same as understanding oneself as a member of a special race. The Torah is replete with stories of women converting to Judaism. Indeed, Solomon is understood to have had numerous wives who were not Jewish. In the mid-twentieth century, some famous people in the entertainment industry, including an African American, converted to Judaism, to the applause of many Jews. In the United States, until the mid-1960s or even later, Jews were not, from a racial perspective, considered to be white. Jews were limited in where they could live, work, go to universities, teach in universities, use swimming pools, and so on. At that time, the issue of race seemed not to be an issue for Jews, save for suffering from racial persecution. But since that time, Jews have been considered as white, and many Jews, particularly Orthodox and Conservative Jews, have accordingly adopted white racist attitudes (see Tobin, Tobin, and Rubin).

Some Israeli geneticists have skewed the research to argue that there are DNA markers for individual Jews and for Ashkenazim in particular.5 Following the publication in 2009 of Shlomo Sand’s history and refutation of the racial basis of secular Zionism (aspects of this work are discussed below), two genetic studies were carried out to counter his thesis and argue that the Jews do constitute a distinctive race, although that word is not used, as can be ascertained from the titles of their publications: Atzmon et al., “Abraham’s Children in the Genome Era: Major Jewish Diaspora Populations Comprise Distinct Genetic Clusters with Shared Middle Eastern Ancestry,” and Behar et al., “The Genome-Wide Structure of the Jewish People.”

The first-mentioned study also claimed that the findings “refuted large-scale genetic contributions of Central and Eastern European and Slavic populations to the formation of Ashkenazi Jewry.” The second
concludes that one can "trace the origins of most Jewish Diaspora communities to the Levant." But, as with most statistical analyses of such surveys based on individuals in a number of different populations, the conclusions can go in different directions in step with the political or other agenda of the authors. For example, the abstract of the first-mentioned paper admits that the various Sephardic and Ashkenazic communities indicated "variable degrees of European and North African admixture"; the word "most" in the quoted passage from the second speaks volumes.

Analyses of these publications by other geneticists published in blogs found that the conclusions represented idealizations only suggested by the raw data. That a degree of genetic similarity existed in diverse Jewish populations was a new finding, but the Jewish populations contained considerable admixture depending on geographic and other circumstances. Thus, the Ashkenazim evidence far more admixture than other Jewish groups save those outside of Europe, North Africa, and the Near East. The least admixture, as to be expected, is among the Jews of Iran, who have probably been in that region for well over two millennium. The greatest admixture, of course, is to be found in those Jewish populations, such as in South Asia, where marriage to females outside of the Jewish communities was not subject to the death penalty. None of the statistical analyses could be used to determine whether any particular individual is Jewish. Hence, these studies rather confirm that there is no Jewish "race," but they do indicate there are degrees of relationships between Jewish populations, which is hardly unexpected.

The Israeli biologist Raphael Falk for several decades has been researching this issue of a biological basis for Jewish identity. In 2006 he published a book on the topic in Hebrew and was interviewed for an article in Haaretz, where he succinctly stated his findings: "I don't have any definition of who is a Jew. There are no biological markers in general or genetic ones in particular according to which one could define a man or a woman as a Jew" (Karpel).

What about ethnicity? For some Hasidic sects, the clothing style of eighteenth-century Polish rent collectors is mandatory holy garb, although Moses, David, and Maimonides were unlikely to have worn it; indeed, some aspects, such as the fur-trimmed hats and silk caftans, may have originated with the Khazars. Actually, the requirement for Jews to wear special clothing, or at least a special head covering, was Christian rather than Jewish. For example, the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) called by Pope Innocent III decreed "that such Jews and Saracens of both sexes in every Christian province and at all times be marked off in the eyes of the public from other peoples through the character of their dress" (Marcus 138).
For many Americans, Baltic and Eastern European food is the epitome of Jewish cuisine, although any ordinary restaurant in Poland, the Ukraine, or northwestern Russia, aside from offering pork and mixing meat and dairy, would by that criterion be Jewish. Some of these foods have become part of festival rituals, such as latkes (potato pancakes) during Hanukkah. But unless the Maccabees were in Peru nearly two thousand years before the Spanish arrived, latkes are a relatively recent northeastern European addition to the festivities. The influence of modern Israel on contemporary North American Jewish consciousness has meant that the typical foods of the southern and eastern Mediterranean shores are now also considered Jewish. By that logic, the cuisine of central China should be understood as Jewish also.

Actually, many so-called Ashkenazi Jewish dishes—such as knishes (Chinese: baozi), kreplach (hundun), blintzes (chunjuan), piroshki (zhengjiao), and many noodle preparations—are northern Chinese. They were brought to Poland and the Ukraine in the thirteenth century by the invading Mongol army, which had chefs, as well as military technicians, from northern China.

If the Plattdeutsch (Low German with the addition of Turkic words and Slavic grammatical elements) dialect known as Yiddish, which the Jews brought to eastern Europe when they moved from Germany during the eleventh and twelfth centuries or later, is considered a mark of being a Jew, just as the Ladino (an early dialect of Castilian Spanish) is for the Sephardim, so should the Kaifeng dialect of Chinese. Indeed, if speaking Yiddish is denotive of being Jewish, as it was so deemed by the Czernowitz Language Conference of 1908, then the Christian Amish are Jewish too, for some of the Plattdeutsch they still speak is intelligible to Yiddish speakers.

In other words, all Jews have over time adapted to the culture and language of the places in which they lived. An average contemporary Jew in North America, for example, cannot be distinguished from a non-Jew in appearance, clothing, or lifestyle. Moreover, most American Jews participate in Americanism, celebrating such holidays as Independence Day and Thanksgiving with the same rituals celebrated by American Christians, and they speak English rather than Yiddish or Ladino as their first language.

But ethnicity itself is today understood by at least some North American Ashkenazim as hereditary. This is because they have added to the nineteenth-century anthropological understanding of race, which attributes specific human traits such as intelligence to race—as in the Nazi understanding of race, which further depicts aspects of ethnicity as being hereditary also. Thus it is often understood that the cultural aspects of
Ashkenazi Judaism other than the religious ones are hereditary. Hence, children adopted from outside of an assumed Ashkenazi genetic background, or those converted, can never become Ashkenazim, nor can their children, even if brought up in an Ashkenazi home and educated in an Ashkenazi yeshiva. In other words, there is an assumption that being Ashkenazi, even a secular Ashkenazi, is in the blood. Of course, anyone familiar with modern ethnology is well aware that culture is not hereditary, any more than religion is, or a particular language such as Yiddish.

Judaism as a religion is a different matter. Judaism developed as a religion of diaspora, even before the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. With continuous interchange between rabbis from Toledo to Baghdad, a set of ritual and dietary practices was established (subject to minor regional variations), along with common holidays, the centrality of the study of Torah and Talmud, and so forth, creating an essential commonality of religious behaviour. This commonality means that Jews can travel long distances and feel ritually at home wherever a Jewish congregation is found, even if they pronounce Hebrew words differently, or find the songs and prayers slightly different, or detect minor ritual variations. Throughout history, whenever Jews adopted the rituals of the cultures in which they lived, such as sharing the American Thanksgiving meal or saluting the American flag, so long as it did not contradict Jewish ideology it was understood not to negate being Jewish. That being the case, the Chinese Jews were at least as Jewish as American Jews.

An overall similarity in ritual life is not the same as identical ritual practice in every detail. The minor divergences of Chinese-Jewish practices, which are discussed in chapter 5, were well within the range of variability of Judaism until more recent times. Jewish law did not become fully codified until the sixteenth-century codification by Joseph Caro, which in effect slowly suppressed regional differences. Until this codification, the wearing of a head covering as a religious act, for example, varied with regard to time and place. But this code was subject to continual interpretation. Judaism did not become doctrinaire until quite recently, when the nature of the Israeli parliamentary system allowed a small minority to institute a virtual theocracy based on a narrow and simplistic interpretation of Jewish law. This rigidity drove many Israelis away from a Jewish life toward secularism.

It is generally agreed by Jewish scholars that the Chinese Jews understood the same Judaism as did Moses Maimonides, that their rituals followed the practices of the Jews of Baghdad, and that they remained in contact with the Jews of Persia and related areas into the sixteenth century. They probably continued to speak Judeo-Persian to that time, since Persian was the lingua franca of the foreign merchants in the Chinese
ports. Were a Persian Jew to travel to any of the Chinese-Jewish communities prior to the nineteenth century, surely he would have felt as comfortable as if he were in a synagogue in Tehran.

But this may be of no consequence, since, as Jacob Neusner pointed out, Jews in North America no longer identify themselves by religion (Judaism) but by "ethnicity" (Jewishness): "It is a Judaism wholly outside of the inherited Torah, however received and interpreted.... Indeed, the American Judaism of Holocaust and Redemption defines a theory of the Jewish social order that scarcely relates to, or can be classified as, a religion at all; it is essentially a system of ethnic Jewishness" (225).

A survey carried out by Kosmin and Keysar in 2008 confirms the same trend identified by Neusner over two decades earlier: "they noted that the proportion of American Jews who identify themselves as religious had dropped by more than 20 percent over the past two decades, while the cultural Jewish populations has nearly doubled" (Jacklin).

This new American Jewish focus on the Holocaust and Redemption in the state of Israel, which has come to be viewed not as a residence but as a place of refuge for Jews, means that this ethnic Jewishness is specifically Ashkenazi ethnicity, for it is primarily the Ashkenamzim who suffered the Holocaust. But the question of what this ethnicity means is unclear for most American Jews. By all practical indicators, most American Jews are ethnically American, and that they consider some aspects of north-central European cuisine as sacred does not in and of itself alter this. So, according to Neusner, the contemporary question becomes not only What does it mean to be a Jew? but Should one be a Jew? "For ideologists of the Jewish community, the most certain answer to the question of the third generation [from 1960 on] must be 'There is no real choice.' And 'the Holocaust' provides the answer: Hitler knew you were Jewish. So you too should know, and affirm, you are Jewish. So what? That's what.' Here we listen to the voice of ethnicity for its own sake" (236).

This is an ethnicity with little content, for Yiddishkeit, save for small isolated pockets in Brooklyn, Toronto, and Jerusalem, is no longer viable. Moreover, Hitler did not identify Jews by ethnicity but by race. Hence, ethnicity comes to be understood as Hitler understood it: a matter of race. And this turns us back to the notion of identifying Jewishness not by religion, not even by a real ethnicity, but by race, by blood.

Most contemporary North American Jews would be affronted by being labelled a racist and do not understand that "assimilation" is but a euphemism for "miscegenation." Nor do they comprehend that this understanding of Judaism as a matter of blood, the purity of which must be maintained, is relatively recent, and that Jews previously understood themselves to be a people of a Book, the Torah (both oral and written)—
that is, a people of Judaism as a religion—rather than of Jewishness as race.

This issue of Jewish identification is here discussed at length because if the Chinese Jews are not understood as Jewish there is no point to this book—there would be no theology of the Chinese Jews. In this study, it is taken as a given that there is no such thing as "race" and that genetic studies indicate that Jews are as much a mixture of peoples as any other population. The Chinese Jews, therefore, were as Jewish as any other Jew. They were no more physically assimilated than Ashkenazi Jews, no more culturally assimilated than French Jews, and no more ritually impure than Orthodox American Jews of the mid-twentieth century, and they were certainly more faithful to the form of traditional rituals than Conservative or Reform Jews. To deny the reality of the Chinese Jews is but to posit the racial and cultural superiority of Jews of northeastern European extraction and to promote Jewish identification based first on an undefinable bloodline, second on light skin colour, and third on specific non-Semitic European languages, now dying in North America, rather than on religious practice and understanding.

The above discussion, however, may be moot. It is becoming increasingly recognized that Judaism, at least from the standpoint of Israeli jurisprudence in which ultra-Orthodox rabbis determine who is a Jew, has recently shifted from a culture of inclusiveness to one of exclusiveness. Not only are the Chinese Jews and Jews of colour not accepted as Jews, but most Jews in North America have been declared in the words of ultra-Orthodox rabbis as "goyim," a semi-pejorative term for non-Jews (Gorenberg). The identification of a Jew is no longer a matter of religious practice, ethnicity, or self-identification but is based on whether one possesses particular documents proving one's mother is Jewish. In 2010, the requirements are to produce the "ketubat, or religious wedding contracts, as well as birth or death certificates of [one's] mother, grandmother, great-grandmother and great-great-grandmother" (Ahren). When Shoah survivors objected that these documents no longer existed, they were told that this was not the problem of those rabbis denying a person's Jewishness (Ahren). Since almost no one could supply the required documentation, the question of who is a Jew from the standpoint of contemporary Israel has a simple answer: Almost no one.9

What Are the Sources for the Theology of the Chinese Jews?

When Jews took up permanent residence in the then Chinese capital of Kaifeng, in central China, they would soon have realized that the sole route to wealth combined with prestige was through the written civil
service examinations. Success in the first major examination led to official elite status, and success in the second and third of the series qualified one for administrative positions in the government. Given the Jewish cultural penchant for education and socio-economic success, many Chinese-Jewish families would have oriented their children to study for the examinations, which would have led to major changes in modes of thinking.

Written Chinese, being logographic rather than alphabetic or syllabic, focuses on visual signs rather than symbols for sounds and thus utilizes different parts of the brain. Written Chinese thus leads to ways of thinking that tend to be more pragmatic and concrete than modes of thinking typical of aurally oriented (alphabetic and syllabic) written languages. Moreover, given that the civil service examinations focused on a fixed body of very early Chinese texts—the classics, consisting of poetry and philosophical, historical, and ritual works—and that all educated Chinese were familiar with the few philosophical Daoist books and a huge corpus of poetry, much of it oriented toward Daoist thought, the students would have imbibed a set of cultural understandings similar to that absorbed by educated non-Jewish Chinese. We can also assume that virtually all Chinese Jews would have been functionally literate in Chinese, since most Chinese were, and Judaism culturally emphasizes education at least as much if not more so than does Chinese culture.

In contrast to the experiences of Jews living in Christian- and Muslim-dominated cultures, as previously discussed, the Chinese Jews lived in a benign cultural and political environment. So long as they adhered to the general outlines of Chinese culture, all the opportunities available to Chinese were open to them. As many Chinese followed various sects optionally adjunct to Chinese common religion—such as Daoist or Buddhist sects, which filled a role similar to that of the mystery cults in Hellenistic culture—so the Judaism of the Chinese Jews would be seen in the same light. Hence, Jews would be perceived as but marginally different from Chinese in general, a difference that was in itself part and parcel of the Chinese cultural gestalt. The Chinese tend to be fascinated by differences rather than fearful of them, so long as they are not in contradiction to social ethics.

Thus, two factors moved the Chinese Jews moderately away from the theology they brought from Persia. First, their mode of thinking came to be far from the Greek-influenced developments emerging at that time in Islamic, Jewish (e.g., Saadia Gaon, Maimonides), and subsequently Christian theology, as Chinese thought is negatively oriented to abstract universals. In that regard, the Chinese Jews were probably closer to Biblical thought than medieval Christian or Islamic philosophy and theology.
Second, their life experience was very different from that of the Jews in the West, who experienced government-condoned murder, torture, and expulsion, along with limits imposed on their right to occupy and own land. The implicit theology of the Chinese Jews would slowly have come to differ from developments in Europe, the eastern Mediterranean, and Mesopotamia, while their ritual life and dedication to the Torah and the Talmud remained unchanged.

Unlike Christianity, Judaism is not a creedal religion save for a single statement—that God is singular—and a general understanding of descent from the Patriarchs, the role of Moses with regard to the Torah, the centrality of the Torah, and the notion of a covenant with God, symbolized through male circumcision. Other issues central to traditional Judaism, around which there are conflicting viewpoints, include ideas of reward and punishment, either in this life or in a life to come, and redemption, particularly with regard to the concept of a messiah and Jerusalem. To a degree, save for Hasidic communities with a zaddik (an especially holy spiritual leader), there are as many theologies as there are Jews. But there are streams of understanding. For example, in contemporary North America there are ultra-Orthodox, modern Orthodox, traditional Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist, Renewal and so on, streams not only of theology but of ritual practice. With regard to the latter, the Chinese Jews were clearly Orthodox (see chapter 5), but what was their theology? And as no theological texts written by the Chinese Jews have come down to us, how can this theological understanding be accessed?

When Jesuit missionaries entered China beginning in the late sixteenth century, they did so by assimilating to elite Chinese culture as the Jews in China seem to have done, although the Jesuits, being monastic priests, did not of course take Chinese wives. When Jesuits discovered the Jewish community in Kaifeng, they were fascinated for a number of reasons. For one, they thought that converting the Chinese Jews to Christianity would (somehow) lead to the conversion of all of China. For another, they hoped that the Chinese Jews would have a Torah that, in their eyes, was more pure, more true to the time of Jesus, than those Torahs used in Europe. To their disappointment, they found that the Torahs in the Kaifeng synagogue were identical to the Torahs found in European synagogues, with which they were familiar.

After being approached by a Jew from Kaifeng who sought them out in the by then capital city of Beijing in the mistaken hope that they were European Jews, the Jesuits studied the Chinese Jews for a century. They engaged in various discussions with Jews that were reported back to Europe, although these discussions must be read with an understanding of
Introduction

the various Jesuit agendas with regard to both China and the Vatican. The Jesuits studied the Chinese-Jewish rituals and ritual calendar, finding them to be similar to those in Jewish Europe, albeit with additions. They meticulously diagrammed and mapped the synagogue, labelling the various features. They copied the inscriptions of the three large stelae on the synagogue grounds and on the synagogue's numerous wall and column placards, both in Hebrew and Chinese.

These Jesuit writings have been examined by numerous scholars, who have produced excellent studies on the linguistics, history, and rituals of the Kaifeng Jews. But the focus has been on the Jewishness of this community, where they came from, and so on. The consensus is that their Judaism was little different from that found in Persia and Iraq. What has not been dealt with in depth is the related question Just how Chinese were these Jews? And especially: What was their theological understanding, within the possibilities of normative Judaism?

The material collected by the Jesuits, particularly the placards in the synagogue in Chinese, presents a means for coming to terms with the theology of the Chinese Jews. While the stelae were written to be read by non-Chinese passersby, the placards within the synagogue were meant to be seen by the worshippers. The placards in Hebrew, of course, would have fit in synagogues anywhere in the world. But the ones in Chinese are particular to the Chinese Jews. The placards in Chinese are not translations from Hebrew but are very much within the thinking of mainstream Chinese and Daoist thought and language—the two having fused together along with Buddhist thought during the initial period of Jewish residence in Kaifeng. A proper understanding of these placards requires that they be read from the standpoint of the classical Chinese language at the time they were written and in the context of Chinese texts that would have been familiar to their authors. These placards, in conjunction with the corpus of data on the Chinese Jews, especially the layout and contents of the synagogue, are the primary source of the analysis of their theology. These placards would have been seen every time the Kaifeng Jews were in the synagogue, and surely the placards would not have been put up if they had no meaning. Most important for the validity of this approach, the terminology on the placards was the actual theological language that the Kaifeng Jews used when discussing religion in Chinese with the Jesuits.

The Jesuits were not the only Christians fascinated by the Chinese Jews. The most important Protestant missionary in this regard was William Charles White, who went to China from Toronto as an Anglican missionary and became the Bishop of Honan province in 1909, the seat of his diocese being Kaifeng. He was not only a clergyman but a highly
productive scholar. On his return to Toronto he retired from the mission at the age of sixty, in 1933, and became a professor at the University of Toronto as well as curator of the Far Eastern collection of the Royal Ontario Museum. Eventually he became its assistant director. Much of the museum’s extensive collection of northern Chinese art and archeology was donated by White from his own collection, amassed over decades in China.

Among Bishop White’s many publications was *Chinese Jews: A Compilation of Matters Relating to the Jews of K’ai-feng Fu*, published in 1942. *Chinese Jews* is a massive three-volume work that puts together the studies of the Jesuits three centuries previously, as well as most other material important to the study of the Kaifeng Jews. Subsequent studies by other scholars relied heavily on this work. The present study of the theology of the Chinese Jews is largely based on White’s collected material, which fortunately contains the Chinese originals as well as translations. Although White’s translations are, on the whole, very good, those aspects relevant to theology are somewhat suffused with Christian missionary usages and interpretations. Accordingly, for this study, I have retranslated the material in Chinese.

For background material on the Chinese Jews necessary to this study, three works are outstanding. First is Donald Daniel Leslie’s masterful *The Survival of the Chinese Jews: The Jewish Community of Kaifeng*, published in the prestigious *T’oung Pao* monograph series in 1972; it is the best succinct history available. Next came a work that focuses on the European reaction to the “discovery” of the Chinese Jews—Michael Pollak’s *Mandarins, Jews, and Missionaries: The Jewish Experience in the Chinese Empire*, published in 1980. The most recent, and by far the most readable and most important comprehensive study, is by Xin Xu, *The Jews of Kaifeng, China: History, Culture, and Religion*, published in 2003. This work is particularly significant because it is written from a Chinese scholarly perspective, the most relevant perspective for understanding Chinese culture and perceiving Chinese Judaism within the sweep of Chinese culture and history, although not from the perspective of religious studies. The author is a sociologist rather than a historian, and a careful and consistent use of historical texts is not always evident.

Introduction

Scholars (1984). More recently, Jonathan Goldstein edited a selection of articles by the major scholars now working on Chinese Judaism, *The Jews of China: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, published in 1999, and Roman Malik did the same in *From Kaifeng ... to Shanghai: Jews in China* in 2000. These last two works cover both the Kaifeng Jews and the more recent experience of European Jews in China, there being far more articles on the latter than the former. A comprehensive study of the modern Chinese understanding of Jews and Judaism derived from nineteenth-century Christian missionaries and other Europeans thereafter (not the Chinese Jews, though, whom the author strangely doubts existed) will be found in Zhou Xun, *Chinese Perceptions of the “Jews” and Judaism: A History of the YouTai*, published in 2001.


**Is This Theology Relevant Today?**

From the medieval period to the present, Jewish theology in Europe and Southwest Asia developed in a milieu of persecution, at times horrendous. In Islamic countries, Jews were tolerated as second-class citizens, their being a People of the Book, as were Christians and Muslims; at times they prospered and at other times they were expelled or forced to convert. In Christian cultures, until relatively recently, as will be explored in the next chapter, Jews were often not allowed to own land, were limited as to occupations and where they could live, and suffered from crusades, pogroms, and expulsions. All of this led to the Final Solution, the Holocaust. Jewish theology developed in tandem with intellectual developments in the Islamic and Christian worlds. It reflected the rediscovery of classical Greek texts and their influence on medieval philosophy. In Spain in particular, prior to the late-fifteenth-century final expulsions, much of the time all three religions interacted with one other in an atmosphere of relative toleration.
As a result of this context, normative European and Euro-American Jewish theological understanding tends to emphasize a jealous and punitive deity, who visits on His chosen people dire catastrophes for their imperfections. (A former chief Sephardi rabbi in Israel recently said that the Holocaust was God's punishment for the development of Reform Judaism in Germany.) This theological understanding has a long history. William Dever traces it back to the beginning of the Israelite monotheism that emerged in the sixth century BCE:

The Bible is thus "revisionist history," revised on the basis of the lessons that the authors presumed to have drawn from their own stormy history. The fundamental lesson for them was that Yahweh was indeed a "jealous god," punishing those who flirted with other gods. The conclusion? Don't do this again! And many of the exiles in Babylon, as well as the remnant left back in Judah, learned from this lesson. Nothing teaches us like pain... There is only one God, rigidly male; and he is a jealous god, demanding, vengeful. (295–96)

Moreover, this theological understanding often countered the rejection of the dominant cultures in which Judaism found itself by furthering isolation, fostering Jewish separation from the rest of the world. Jewish thinking came to embody the focus on abstract concepts that was the Greek legacy to medieval theology.

God was understood to be male, and thus males were superior to females, who did not, as males did, have a direct relationship with God. Although this understanding seems to have been shared neither by Israelite religion nor by the early synagogue period, centuries of cohabitation with a Christianity that was becoming increasingly misogynist influenced both Judaism and Islam.

Finally, because they were not allowed to put down roots, Jews were not oriented toward concern for the larger environment, and this unconcern too is reflected in the theologies that developed. The Kabbalah and Hasidic traditions emphasized a transcendent theology, a fleeing upward from this undesirable world and life, and little concern for the earth.

In spite of financing the American Revolution and serving with distinction in the revolutionary army, American Jews, as well as those in Canada, suffered until the latter part of the twentieth century from many restrictions, as previously mentioned. Yet many Jews were able to establish themselves in government, business, and the intellectual realm. The growing revulsion toward the Holocaust by many non-Jews after World War II led to the disappearance of many of these restrictions and a relatively benign atmosphere for Jews, although random incidents of violence continue, and fundamentalist Muslim-influenced anti-Judaism is
coming to the fore on university campuses. North American Jews today grow up in an atmosphere of acceptance and full citizenship, and many contemporary Jews are seeking to understand their religion in this new and more tolerant Western cultural milieu.

In post-Napoleonic Europe, especially in Germany and France, Jews gained full citizenship, and there developed a Reform Judaism in Germany that sought to harmonize itself with Lutheranism, particularly with regard to worship services. (In more recent times, the Reform movement in North America has returned to more traditional approaches, liberally interpreted.)

The Holocaust led many Jews to become unspoken atheists, for whom reciting the prayers and following the rituals became meaningless. The spiritual element of Judaism thus diminished for them, many Jews turned to Asian religions. The number of Jews who have turned to Buddhism, aspects of Hinduism (yoga, etc.), and other Asian traditions is far greater proportionally than for Christians. Some new Jewish sects, such as the Renewal Movement, consciously incorporate Asian and Native American ritual practices.

Many contemporary Jews, aside from those seeking meaning by turning to separatist and fundamentalist ultra-Orthodox sects, are searching for the opposite: a Judaism that is all-inclusive and tolerant of deviations from the norm, as well as a Judaism that has something to say about the preservation of our planet and the search for peace. It is in these regards that the Jewish theology that developed in China may have something to offer.

Chinese Judaism developed in an atmosphere of full acceptance and no prejudice. The adoption of Chinese culture was not inimical to a full Jewish ritual life. Chinese Jews could own land, could enter any occupation, could sit for the civil service examinations, and, if successful, attained administrative positions in the government. Yet for nearly a millennium, Chinese Jews elected to live together within Chinese cities and remain Jews while being Chinese. Assimilation did not lead to the disappearance of Judaism in China but the opposite. External factors that impinged on Jews affected non-Jewish Chinese equally, and it was these factors that led to the relatively recent end of Chinese Judaism. Jews in China may have suffered from flooding, from the breakdown of central governments and the resultant civil wars, as well as from the conquering of China first by Mongols and then Manchurians, but they did so no differently than their non-Jewish neighbours.

Thus, the theology of the Chinese Jews developed over many centuries in a milieu quite different from the Jews who lived in the West. It was a milieu similar in many regards to contemporary North America, save
they would not have experienced anti-Jewish actions or sentiment. The Chinese Jews would not have experienced the horrors of the Spanish, English, and other expulsions, the Inquisition, the crusades of southern Europe, and the pogroms of eastern Europe, let alone the Holocaust. Their understanding of God was bound to be different from that of Europeans, as will be explored in chapter 6.

In the following, it will be demonstrated that the Jewish theology that developed in China over many centuries emphasized complementary gender equality in relation to a non-anthropomorphic (non-sexed) monotheistic deity, who did not exhibit human traits and was therefore neither punitive nor jealous. Chinese-Jewish theology did not emphasize separation from a hateful world and was similar to the cosmogonic and cosmological understanding of the larger Chinese culture. Thus Chinese-Jewish theology did not reject this world but fully embraced it, understanding humans to be a part of nature rather than masters of it. Moreover, its use of Daoist-originated terminology and cosmogony, while not essentially different from medieval Jewish theology, with its non-anthropomorphic understanding of deity, may resonate with those contemporary Western Jews who are oriented toward Daoism and Buddhism. (See example in the Epilogue.)
From Whence They Came to Where They Went

This chapter considers how widespread Judaism became. From a small country at the eastern extent of the Mediterranean, Jews and their Judaism spread around the globe. China is hardly the only part of the world far from the eastern Mediterranean in which Jews became established. This chapter also examines the world from which the Jews went to China and the route they took to get there.

The Extent of the Diaspora

North American Jews today tend to base their vision of pre-modern traditional Judaism on the Jewish experience in Eastern Europe, especially during the period of Czarist Russian rule. Hence, they tend to view traditional Jewish society as extremely insular, with Jews being confined to rural shtetls or urban ghettos and having few opportunities for travel. Folktales involving travel concentrate on rabbis journeying from one Jewish ghetto to another but never very far. But in actuality, this Eastern European pattern was abnormal for Jewish life elsewhere and in earlier times.

Long before the mythic but improbable Diaspora following the Roman crushing of the Jewish attempt at independence in 70 CE, Jews had established themselves and built synagogues throughout the Mediterranean and Southwest Asia. During the Hasmonean Kingdom and the following Herodian dynasty (165 BCE–CE 92), conquered territories were required to convert to Judaism and Jewish proselytizers spread Judaism
throughout the Mediterranean world (see Sand). Indeed, by the time of the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem, there were probably many more Jews living outside of Israel than within.

From the earliest times, Israelites participated in the sea trade alongside Phoenicians and later Carthaginians. A major Israelite settlement existed in the port of Alexandria during the time of the Prophets (see Jeremiah in the Hebrew Bible), and many Israelites had remained behind in Baghdad and later in Persia when they were allowed to return to their homeland. Jews were to be found in all of the major Hellenistic cities. There is speculation that Jews resident in Ethiopia, probably arriving by sea, predated the development of rabbinic Judaism. Jews travelled, usually by sea, throughout the Roman Empire, and some became Roman citizens.12

Although no explicit evidence exists, it is reasonable to assume that Jews participated in the caravan trade between Parthia and India and through Central Asia to China—the Silk Road—beginning two millennia ago, establishing communities in the major oases of Central Asia. As is discussed later, there is ample evidence of their participating in this trade during its second phase, several hundred years later.

The earliest major maritime trade in human history probably took place between the very early cities of Sumer in Mesopotamia and Harrapa in the Indus Valley of South Asia some four to five millennia in the past. This trade spread around India to Southeast Asia and present-day Indonesia and then to China. Eventually, the “maritime silk route” became far more important than the Silk Road. The major maritime merchants along these extended routes were Arabs, and one can assume Jews were involved.

Certainly Jews were renowned navigators, cartographers, and makers of navigation instruments by the time Portugal and Spain began to explore the oceans. In 1334, Jayme III, King of Mallorca, noted that Jucceff Faquin, a Jew from Barcelona, “had navigated the whole of the then known world.” It is known that there were many Jews in the Portuguese fleet that captured Mauritania in 1415. Vasco de Gama had Jewish pilots and navigators in his service during his journeys of exploration. As Marranos (crypto-Jews), they were on Columbus’s first voyage and in Cortez’s army (Keyserling 3-6).

When Europeans colonized the Americas, Jews were among the earliest settlers. (Of course, the native peoples of the Americas were not descended from Israelites, being the “Ten Lost Tribes,” as Europeans first fantasized.) Jews became so well established in the New World that it was the Jewish communities in Philadelphia and other cities that primarily financed the American Revolution through Hyam Solomon. Jews were
at the forefront of the American and Canadian movements westward, setting up stores in the emerging towns and prospering by provisioning gold rushes. The synagogue in the city where I presently live, in Victoria, British Columbia, was built in 1863 and is the oldest one in continuous use in Canada. It was built by Jewish merchants from San Francisco who followed the gold rush northward by sea to provision the gold prospectors. The second mayor of Victoria and one of the first two members of the Canadian parliament from this area were Jews.

Thus Jews came to be found along the land and sea trade routes around the world. As Jewish ritual life requires a community of at least ten male adults, communities came to be established on every continent, save unpopulated Antarctica. This spread of Jews further enhanced trade for all, as it allowed rudimentary banking wherever Jewish communities were to be found. Jews tended to be literate, and notes of credit could be used to transfer wealth without the need for carrying valuables that might easily be stolen. Jews also tended to be multilingual and thus had an advantage for long-distance trade over those less linguistically equipped.

Given that Jews were so strongly involved in maritime mercantile activities and that considerable sea trade went on between China and present-day Iraq, Yemen, and Iran, it can hardly be a surprise that Jews came to settle in China. By the time the community at Kaifeng was established, Jewish mercantile communities were spread along the west coast of Africa as far south as the Cape (the present-day Lembas are probably the descendants of one of these communities), in India, and in Central Asia.

Notwithstanding the wide range of Jewish migration and conversion in the eleventh century, the majority of Jews lived closer to their original homeland, residing in Europe, North Africa, Egypt, Israel, Persia, Mesopotamia, and the southern Arabian Peninsula. In these areas they lived under Christian or Muslim rule. Even the communities in India eventually came under their sway, as Islamic regimes conquered most of South Asia and the Roman Catholic Portuguese early established Goa as their foothold in India. Jews living under Muslim and Christian rule invariably suffered from discrimination and often encountered violence.

Because after the 1947 partition India became predominantly Hindu, younger Western scholars tend to forget that prior to the British Raj most of India had Muslim rulers. Accordingly, an assumption has arisen that Jewish life in India has always been benign, an assumption that does not accord with the Indian Jews' own histories. When Goa became a Portuguese colony, it was after the same expulsion of Jews from Portugal as has taken place in Spain. Thus, the Jewish communities in India at times
suffered from Muslim persecution and Portuguese expulsion. Local histories by synagogue communities with a long history in India detail these unfortunate events.\textsuperscript{13}

One people living on the border of India has recently been officially accepted in Israel as an Asian-Jewish community and does not fit into the above brief historical framework, for they are not Jewish at all. Indeed, among many of the ultra-Orthodox in Israel and New York City is now a shared, and bizarre, understanding that this Asian community are the real Jews of Kaifeng who fled from China to Burma nearly 2000 years ago.

In March 2005, Shlomo Amar, the Sephardi chief rabbi in Jerusalem, pronounced that the approximately 6,000 members of a Tibeto-Burmese-speaking people living in Mizoram and Manipor, an area between Bangladesh and Myanmar (Burma), were descendants of one of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel—specifically, the Tribe of Manasseh. These people were named the Bnei Menash. The rabbi’s pronouncement was taken to counter that of the Israeli interior minister who considered the claim of the 6,000 to be spurious. These people had been converted to Christianity by British missionaries at the end of the nineteenth century, a conversion with which they later become uncomfortable, as it ended traditional religious practices (which had nothing to do with Judaism) and created conflict with their neighbours in this volatile border area. Learning that they could escape from their present difficult, destitute life by emigrating to Israel, many accepted as their oral history a story apparently created for them by a British or American tourist.

According to this story, the Bnei Menash escaped from the Assyrian captivity 2,700 years ago to Persia and from there migrated to Afghanistan. Several centuries later, they fled the armies of Alexander by going over the Hindu-Kush and then directly through Tibet to reach Kaifeng, in China, around 240 BCE. There they were enslaved, and many were killed. Finally they were expelled or escaped around 100 CE, after their leather scrolls were burned. They left China via eastern Southeast Asia and ended up on the Indian-Burmese border. They were taught songs in English about fleeing from Egyptians riding chariots, crossing the Red Sea, and so on. Their shawls, a common item of apparel in the area, were interpreted as Jewish talliths, and though they raised and ate pigs, they were somehow seen to be continuing a Kashrut Jewish life. Although they did not practise circumcision, it was said they did, and so on.

This history seems to be a mishmash from someone who does not understand either Chinese history or geography but knew confused snatches of both. For travelling through Tibet from the Hindu-Kush rather than the usual northward trade route around Tibet via the edges of the Tarim Basin to reach China would be an extremely arduous if not
impossible journey, save for experienced mountain climbers. Kaifeng had not come into existence as a city until many centuries after the time given, and Jews did not permanently reside there until a thousand years after the time they were said to have fled China. Slavery was minimal at the time of the Han dynasty, when their enslavement was supposed to have taken place (shades of Exodus). Chinese slaves at that time were in effect indentured servants with individual written contracts that spelled out their duties and working hours. The infamous book-burning around 225 BCE was of classic Chinese texts on political philosophy to stifle internal opposition to the short-lived despotic Qin government, not of foreign books. Of course, there is absolutely no evidence for or even suggestion of persecution of Jews in China at any time. Travelling from China to India as described would not have been the normal route but again an extremely difficult one. Finally, genetic testing has not confirmed any relationship between the “Bnei Menash” and the Jews.

Indeed, these Burmese had never expressed a relationship to Judaism until a Pentecostal Christian minister named Tchalal in 1951 received a vision from the Holy Spirit (of the Trinity) that they were originally Jews and should return to the newly formed Israel, which was then welcoming Jews with open arms. Their knowledge of Judaism was based on the King James English translation of the Old Testament.

With the proclamation by the Sephardic chief rabbi in 2005, several rabbis were sent to the border region, a mikvah (ritual bath) was built, mass conversions took place, and the converted were then immediately flown by charter aircraft to settlements on the West Bank. They were to have been sent to Gaza, but the Israeli government was then terminating the Jewish settlements there.

To counter the Sephardic buildup of political supporters at the same time, in 2005, the Ashkenazi chief rabbi Israel Meir Lau had a delegation of rabbis go to the slums of Lima, Peru, to convert Christian Andean Indians to Judaism (using the ocean instead of a mikvah). The converted were immediately flown to Hasidic settlements on the West Bank, while the actual Jews living in Lima were ignored. These new Jews were given to understand that Christopher Columbus, who had never been within a thousand miles of Peru, was Jewish, and that they carried his blood.14

Israeli politics seems to have led to the acceptance by the ultra-Orthodox of ersatz Kaifeng Jews while denying the Jewishness of the genuine Kaifeng Jews. According to an Israeli journalist writing in 2005, the few descendants of the actual Kaifeng Jews who have reached Israel, and even converted there under Orthodox rabbis, are still not considered Jews and at least one had been jailed as not being subject to the Law of Return and of therefore being in Israel illegally (Rotem).
This attitude may be changing. In 2009, a wealthy benefactor brought a group of seven “Kaifeng Jews” to make aliyah to Israel. The seven were provided a one-year visa, which gave them time enough to undergo the conversion process (Eichner). After a half year living on a kibbutz, all seven became yeshiva students (Jeffay). It seems that this routine is a process used to convert those recognized as Chinese Jews to become, in effect, European Jews, and that the Judaism to be brought back to Kaifeng will not be Chinese Judaism, or even Mizrahi Judaism, but Ashkenazi or Sephardi Judaism.

**Jewish Life under Christianity and Islam: Tenth to Twelfth Centuries**

When the Jewish community in Kaifeng was being established, the vast majority of Jews lived in lands under Muslim or Christian control. Particularly in Christian lands, the lives of Jews, always precarious, began to descend into a hell on earth. Elsewhere—India (before the Muslim conquest), coastal China, and East Africa—Jews were understood as ordinary human beings with their own ethnicity. But in Muslim and Christian lands, Jews were regarded as a special people treated at best as second-class citizens and at worst as the hated epitome of evil.

 Cultures with a monotheistic religion have a concept of “truth” that is singular and absolute. Such cultures have no inherent tolerance of religious differences, which are often perceived as a threat to the singular, correct mode of religious life and understanding. But for Christianity and Islam, Judaism by its very existence is a virtual slap in the face.

 For Christianity, subsequent to Paul’s non-Jewish-Christanity victory over Peter’s Jewish Christianity, the continuation of Judaism could be understood as a denial of Christian truth. If the teachings of Jesus—the New Testament—supplanted the Israelite teachings—the Old Testament—and if Jesus as Christ, himself a Jew, promised life after death only to those who became Christian, the refusal of Jews to accept Christianity brought into question the very essence of the Christian truth. Moreover, popular preachers at this time often focused on the Jews as the murderers of Christ; their sin of deicide was passed on through the generations, as was Original Sin. That this popular perception violates the essential Christian theology that Christ was the sacrificial son of God whose sacrifice annulled human sin, and that the death of Christ was essential for resurrection seems to be irrelevant. Hence, from this perspective, all Jews bear the mark of Satan the Antichrist, and thus are responsible for all the ills of the world.

 In Islam, the attitude is not as severe, as the Qur’an and the Hadith have conflicting statements about Jews, both positive and negative. Jews

30
do accept the primary tenet of Muslim faith, the belief in a single god, whereas they do not accept the Christian triune deity, which includes a Jew as one of the three aspects of God. What the Jews do not accept regarding Islam is the second article of Muslim faith, that Mohammed is the Prophet. Jews accept a number of prophets, none of whom has absolute doctrinal authority.

Jews are recognized by Islam, along with Christians, as Peoples of the Book, and accordingly may not be forced to convert. Thus, Jews and Christians tended to be tolerated in Muslim countries so long as they did not threaten Muslim rule and accepted their place as inferiors. Jews could rise to important offices, engage in any occupation alongside Muslims, and be respected members of the larger community. But they could also suffer expulsion and forced conversion by local rulers who acted on their own. Most of these edicts were temporary, and with a political change even those who converted were often allowed to return to the practice of Judaism. Maimonides in his youth, for example, was expelled from Cordoba in Andalusia with all Jews who refused to convert. After wandering through Spain, his family settled in Muslim North Africa, where he studied at the great Islamic university in Fez. The family then went on to Egypt, where Maimonides eventually became a physician to the royal court in Cairo.

In Christian lands for a number of centuries, the persecution of Jews tended to be local and sporadic, but this changed with the beginning of the Crusades in 1096. The hysteria and fury of the First Crusade was primarily expended on the Jews living in Europe. Whole villages were burned to the ground and their inhabitants massacred. Wading through non-Christian blood won the butchers, knights and peasant-soldiers alike, an eternity in Paradise. Within a century, massacres occurred outside of the Crusades as well. In 1190, for example, mobs slaughtered the entire Jewish population of York (and then had all the debt records kept in the cathedral burned). From then until the mid-twentieth century, the Jewish experience in Europe continued to be one of expulsions and forced conversion, particularly in Western Europe, and increasingly frequent pogroms, especially in Eastern Europe. In northeastern Europe, Jews were invited by the feudal landlords to come from Germany to manage their estates. Being the rent and tax collectors for the spendthrift nobility, as well as their moneylenders, earned them the hatred of both the peasantry and the aristocracy.

Because medieval Christianity forbade Christians to lend at interest, and because Jews were increasingly forbidden to practise various professions, Jews were encouraged, and at times required, to function as moneylenders. Since the aristocracy needed to be able to borrow money,
often to finance their wars, and since no one is interested in lending without interest, the aristocracy turned to Jews to be their financiers. Jews also became goldsmiths, gold being the currency of the time. The aristocracy was well aware that if it became impossible for them to repay their loans when due, a choreographed pogrom would resolve their financial problem, since dead lenders cannot collect debts.

Jews were also encouraged to become merchants, given their ability to communicate with distant communities and the ease with which they travelled from one Jewish community to another. These merchants were the primary source of luxury items for the northern European aristocracy. The frequent expulsions and massacres, requiring families to flee at a moment’s notice, discouraged Jews from taking up farming and other occupations requiring permanent establishments. Merchants and moneylenders tend to have liquid assets and are in a better position to relocate when necessary. Thus, the Jew in Europe came to be perceived as Shylock, the hated usurer.

In the period under discussion, far more Jews lived in Muslim lands than in Christian. There they suffered no discrimination regarding occupation, and since Islam did not forbid lending at interest, Jews were no more likely to become moneylenders than Muslims. Non-Muslims, however, were required to pay a special tax. This tax was more onerous on farmers than others and drove many Jews off the land. Thus, Jews in Muslim lands tended to become merchants but were also involved in a host of other occupations, including public administration.

Even when Jews were forced to convert to Islam, the move was not perhaps as devastating as converting to Christianity, given the considerable similarity between Judaism and Islam in dietary practices and modes of worship in mosques and synagogues. Theologically, both are straightforwardly monotheistic. Islamic countries seemed to exhibit less concern than did Christian countries when those who converted continued to practise Jewish rituals in secret, and after a period of time most converts were allowed to become Jewish again. This was never an option in Christian lands. The Inquisition began in Spain as a means to ferret out former Jews carrying on Judaism in secret in order to burn them at the stake and confiscate their property, the latter perhaps becoming the main motivation.

The more benign situation for Jews in Muslim lands, combined with their knowledge of Arabic, allowed them to study at the great Muslim universities, which were bringing back Greek philosophy and learning. Jewish theology and mysticism flourished in this environment, and the roots of modern theology and mysticism are to be found in developments at this time. Jews in turn transmitted this learning to Christians.
If it were not for the Jews acting as a bridge between Islamic learning and the Christian world, it is unlikely that Christian theology would have developed as it did.

Thus, Jews on the whole were far more comfortable living under Islam than Christianity, particularly in the time span covered here. It is this world that was the origin of the Jewish merchants who moved to Kaifeng.

Given their knowledge of the situation in Christian Europe and their experience in the more benign but still precarious Islamic Southwest Asia, the Jews who lived in China must have felt they were living in paradise. For in China, given the nature of Chinese religion (see chapter 4), forced conversion was impossible and religious persecution was inconceivable, save when the state felt threatened by the economic or political power of a rival institution. Moreover, neither secondary status nor special taxes were assigned to newcomers, and all walks of life were open, depending on skill and luck alone.\textsuperscript{15}

**The Sea Route to China and the Settlement in Kaifeng**

Because Kaifeng was at one end of the Silk Road, because evidence exists of Jewish involvement in the overland trade route during the Tang period (seventh to ninth centuries), and, most importantly, because the past experience of the Ashkenazim led many to presume that Jews were not seafarers, it is usually assumed that the Kaifeng Jewish community was founded by caravan traders. But at the time the Kaifeng Jewish community began, the overland route had become insecure, and far more foreign goods arrived by sea than by land. The maritime silk route is a far more probable route for the arrival of the ancestors of the Kaifeng Jews than the Silk Road.

The subject of trade in the distant past between China and the West brings to most people’s minds the famous Silk Road, the caravan route from northwestern China around the Tarim Basin north of Tibet to the Hindu Kush, from where the caravans travelled either southeast to India or west to Persia. But this route was feasible only during those times when China controlled the route through Central Asia, allowing for safe travel relatively free from robbers and frequent exorbitant duties.

The route, first opened during the Han Empire, lasted from approximately 100 BCE to CE 200. After the collapse of the Han dynasty, the route was not again open until a second major Chinese empire, the Tang, again took control of the routes around the Tarim Basin. After an interregnum of several centuries, the route was usable during the short-lived Mongol Empire in the fourteenth century, and it was again passable during the Manchu Empire, from the seventeenth into the nineteenth
century. In contrast, trade by sea was relatively constant and continually increased in size from the Han dynasty to the present. Even when the caravan route was open all the way to China from the West, the sea route was often found preferable; it was moderately faster, relatively safer, more comfortable when the seas were calm, and it allowed for larger cargoes. Thus, Marco Polo went to China during the Mongol Empire by the overland route but returned by sea.

As pointed out above, sea trade between India and Mesopotamia was already well established by the time of the earliest civilizations, 5,000 or so years ago. Archeologists are at times uncertain whether a cylinder seal is from Harrapa on the Indus River or Sumer between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, regardless of the site at which they are found. Trade between the two areas never ceased and continues today, often in sewn-plank ships (dhowis) that have been used in this area for millennia.

Arabian seafarers early gained knowledge of the predictable trade winds, and it became possible to sail from the Arabian Sea to South Asia, onward to Sri Lanka, and thence to the Malacca Straight and Southeast Asia without following the coast—that is, to sail out of sight of land. Beginning around 2,000 years ago, this sea trade had reached China and the entire east coast of Africa. It is reasonable to assume that Jews were involved in both the sea trade as well as the caravan route, although there can be no hard evidence for the earliest part of this period.

More and more seafarers in larger and larger ships went directly to southeastern China, and from the fifth to sixth centuries some permanently settled there. By the eighth century, the population of the major port of Guangzhou (Canton) at the southern extreme of China may have been half foreign, with hundreds of thousands of Arabs and Persians. These foreigners lived within the city in their own enclaves, which the Chinese government permitted to be governed according to their own laws, meaning Sh'aria, and leaders, who would be responsible for maintaining order. Undoubtedly, some members of these communities were Jews.

An uneventful trip from Basra to Guangzhou took about four months, not counting stops, or six months when stops for trading and provisioning are taken into account. Even this short time depended on the seasonal trade winds. Depending on one's timing, the wait for favourable winds could add another half year to the journey. Still, this was far shorter than the minimum one to two years required for the overland route. Of course, such journeys had their hazards, given the possibility of encountering storms and pirates.

By the eleventh century, whole industries in southeastern China, particularly pottery and silk manufacturing, were devoted to products for
foreign export. These commodities were exported from ports close to the pottery kilns and silk-weaving factories, particularly those in Quanzhou and Hangzhou, the Chinese capital in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries. Even today, some beaches along the East African coast are littered with Chinese pottery shards from that time. This trade did not stop at southern China, and these seafarers from Mesopotamia, Yemen, and Persia sailed to ports farther and farther north. By the eleventh century, some of these mariners were sailing into Korean ports.

Although we have no knowledge about them, we do know that at this time synagogues existed in Quanzhou and Hangzhou, as well as in the great port of Ningpo, whose importance was surpassed only by Shanghai, which developed from a fishing village to the main seaport for Europeans in the mid-nineteenth century. By the twelfth century, Ningpo was the most important seaport for foreign trade, as it served Hangzhou, the Southern Song capital, which was farther up a river where the largest ocean-going vessels could not go. It was from the synagogue at Ningpo that the Kaifeng synagogue community, far inland, replaced its flood-damaged Torah scrolls in the fifteenth century. Ningpo and possibly Yangzhou remained the Kaifeng Jewish community’s link to the Jewish world elsewhere until the Ming dynasty severely curtailed overseas trade, beginning at the end of the fifteenth century, as a reaction to increasing piracy.

Given the enormous Arab and Persian resident population in the seaports, many thousands of Jews must have been living there. Trade goods—along with rice and silk produced in the highly productive Jiangnan region, where these ports were located—easily made the journey from Quanzhou and Ningpo to Kaifeng on barges by way of the Grand Canal and the Yellow River. (One can still take overnight passage on barges along the Grand Canal between Suzhou and Hangzhou.)

It is far more likely that the Jews who developed a permanent settlement in Kaifeng came this way rather than by the caravan route, especially as all the other Chinese synagogues were in the seaports. Zhu Xiang suggests that the Jews who went to Kaifeng left from the major port city of Yangzhou, where the Grand Canal originated and where there exists evidence that Jews resided.
Chapter 3

Life in China: Tenth to Nineteenth Century

The Jewish community in Kaifeng commenced near the beginning of the Song dynasty (from the late tenth century). By this time, traditional Chinese religion, society, government, education, economy, and culture had reached its full development. From then until the late nineteenth century, the changes that took place were incremental rather than major. This chapter introduces the cultural context, with an emphasis on religion, into which the Kaifeng Jews settled and integrated. For references to life during the Song dynasty, Jacques Gernet’s classic work remains the standard Western language source. Extensive references for the description of Chinese religion will be found in Laurence Thompson’s essential textbook and in Jordan Paper’s compendium of comparative studies (1995).

Religion

Chinese Judaism cannot be understood without understanding Chinese Religion, because Chinese Judaism became a subset of it, as well as being Jewish. From a Jewish perspective, that is, Chinese Judaism is Jewish, but from a Chinese perspective it is normative Chinese religion with an acceptable additional aspect, on a par with lay Chinese Buddhism in this regard. An analogue in Western culture might be a Christian or a Jew who is also a Mason. It is a set of additional rituals that is not inimical to the normative religion. Similarly, an American Christian, Muslim, or Jew participates in the rituals of Americanism, as well as Christian, Islamic, or Jewish rituals.
Chinese Religion is a subset of a religious understanding found in all horticultural and early agricultural traditions, from Africa to Polynesia. It can be found in aspects of early Israelite religion, as well as in the Greek and Roman worlds.\(^{16}\) This religion is one that is focused on family; some called it "familism." The family is understood to extend in time and space. With regard to time, it includes the living, the dead, and the unborn. With regard to space, family goes far beyond the nuclear family; the term most frequently used is "clan." The dead of the family are understood to be able to intercede for the family with higher powers if the family remembers and honours them.

The family is celebrated through rituals that are family reunions, centring on a banquet, with the dead as honoured guests. The most reverent aspect is the feeding of the dead; in turn, it is expected that the dead will ensure sufficient food for the living. The primary religious injunction is the continuation of the family, whether matrilineal or patrilineal. When combined with sacred kingship, added to the banquet are ritual inebriation, spirit possession by the dead rulers, and a justification of rulership in that the ruler is the most direct descendant of the most powerful former living person, who is now the most powerful of the dead spirits. It is this religious construct that in this book is termed "normative Chinese religion" or Chinese Religion.

Yet no concept has caused more confusion regarding China in the Western mind than religion, a term that did not exist in China before it was poorly translated into Chinese in the late nineteenth century. Xu Xin writes in *The Jews of Kaifeng, China* that Judaism was readily accepted in China because China was a "secular" state and thus did not compete with an established religion. Xu is writing from the rapidly fading perspective of the Chinese Communist Party, which adopted the Christian missionary perspective that the Chinese religion summarized above was crass superstition and therefore not only not a religion but unworthy of consideration. The Jesuits had argued from the late sixteenth century that China was a religious vacuum awaiting the Christian truth.

While accepting for diplomatic reasons aspects of Chinese religion found in Western countries, such as Buddhism and Islam, the Communist Party, which won the civil war in 1949 and adopted Leninist–Stalinist official atheism, suppressed Chinese religion per se, and it suffered greatly during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). The study of Chinese religion in China until recently was considered to fall within the discipline of folkloristics rather than religious studies. (In the past few years, the Party has reversed its position and is encouraging normative Chinese religion in a variety of ways.)
The Jesuits who entered China in the late sixteenth century, for the purpose of communicating with their supporters in Europe, fabricated a triune Chinese religion of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism, the latter being a Jesuit invention for which a Chinese term had to be created later. This fabrication was based on translating san jiao, “Three Teachings,” as “Three Religions.” Deliberately ignored was ninety-nine percent of Chinese religious behaviour. The Jesuits created this idea of “three religions in China” because normative Chinese religious behaviour defined being Chinese. If the family rituals were denied to converts, the Jesuits focusing on the royal court and high officials, the Jesuits would not have had any converts. Besides, when the Jesuits accepted government offices, they would have had to participate in state religious rituals, which, if understood as religious, would have led to their being burned at the stake by the Inquisition when they returned to Europe. Thus, the Jesuits were strongly motivated to consider normative Chinese religious practices as secular family and state rituals, and consequently not in conflict with Christianity. This sixteenth-century false depiction of Chinese religion has remained a dogma in world-religions textbooks to this day.17

In China, we have literary evidence for this family religion and sacred kingship from at least 3,500 years ago, and it is undoubtedly a couple of thousand years older than that, given the continuity among ritual vessels excavated from tombs over that period. Chinese religion is the oldest continuous religion for which we have documentary evidence; the basic structure has not changed to this day. Rather than provide a history of this tradition, the following account outlines the religion as it existed when those who became the Chinese Jews reached Kaifeng. From that time until today, normative Chinese religion has remained essentially the same.

From as far back as we can trace Chinese culture and continuing to the present, the highest religious and social virtue is xiao—“filial piety.”18 It is as if all of the Ten Commandments of Judaism were rolled up into a single one: “Honour your father and your mother.” Filial piety for the Chinese has ramifications that go far beyond the biblical injunction. For one, it means that the individual is subsumed within the family. Individuals identify themselves by clan name first and foremost, and their lives are dedicated to the family, especially the family dead. For another, it means that virtually all Chinese religious rituals derive from that simple ritual of feeding the dead in the context of the family as the primary numinous (or sacred) entity. Finally, it means that belief has no meaning in Chinese religion. Belief is a matter of accepting what cannot be proven and is intangible. Belief means suppressing doubts. But having
grandparents or parents, whichever is the most recently departed, does not involve faith. We do not have to believe we have a mother or father (unless we are orphaned at a very early age); we know absolutely that we have parents. They are more real to us than anything else. Thus, when they die, they do not disappear from our memory, nor is doubt created as to whether they actually existed.

From the concept of xiao derive other aspects of Chinese religion and social values. For the elite, xiao became synonymous with the duty to serve the ruler or the government as one serves one’s parents. The corollary is that the ruler and his consort should act as “the Father and Mother of the People.” With regard to popular religion, from the eleventh century on, the deities were dead human beings who were given virtually the same offerings as the dead of the family, and from the deities one expected the beneficence one expects from the dead of the family.

Spirit possession in China seems originally to have been a matter of the dead possessing a descendant while the offering to the dead was being made. Spirit mediums came to be part of the government and could pass on the wisdom of dead rulers to their descendant, the living ruler. This office disappeared in the century preceding the Song dynasty. (For a comparable mediumistic incident in the Bible, see I Samuel 28:3–25.) As the deities came to be understood as dead humans, so they could possess living humans—spirit mediums—to advise, heal, and benefit humans. Thus, in China the deities became tangible; when they entered the volunteered bodies of living people, they could talk or be talked to, touch and be touched in turn. They were real to the senses, and thus again belief is not a relevant concept in this religious system.

Because belief is not an aspect of Chinese religion, and because it is assumed that all people have parents, Chinese understand their religion to be normal human behaviour and, accordingly, indistinguishable from other aspects of normal behaviour. Thus, Chinese religion has no particular name in Chinese culture. It is not a religion to which one can convert, because to the Chinese mind it is simply a matter of being a proper human being. In traditional China, the greatest crime was to be unfilial, and that was punishable by death. All Chinese, and anyone who becomes Chinese, are involved with Chinese religion. Chinese religion and culture, as Jewish religion and culture (not yidishkayt), are (save in the contemporary world) inseparable. Jews, Muslims, Christians, and all others who become Chinese are involved with the essential element of Chinese religion: honouring one’s parents (or parents-in-law, for females), both while alive and when deceased.

Death is understood as a continuation of membership in the family in a new mode. For those who take becoming a spirit seriously, death is seen
to cause the transformation of the loved one into a revered spirit who can assist the family from the spirit realm. For those who are agnostic about the spirit realm, the dead are understood to have continuing life in the memories of the living members of the family. Thus, it is essential to have offspring if one is to survive death, whether or not one accepts the spiritual reality of the dead (the latter understanding is also to be found in Judaism).

Chinese families are patrilineal—descent is through the male line—and patrilocal—the groom’s home becomes the newlywed’s residence when possible. The patrifocal nature of the family concept strengthened over time, so that by the eleventh century it was understood that from birth a female child is not a member of her natal family but of the family into which she marries. Thus, it is expected that she will maintain the rituals of the family into which she marries, and on her death her spirit will become part of the accumulation of spirits of the family into which she marries. Her sons will have her name plaque on their altars, and offerings will be made to her as well as to her spouse, upon his death. A female who dies before becoming betrothed is spiritually anomalous, and attempts may be made to find a groom for a spirit marriage so that her spirit will be cared for by the groom’s family.

In a typical Chinese home, not only in China but in Vancouver, Toronto, New York, London, and so on, the main room or a special room will house a family altar. On the altar will be the name tablets of the recent dead of the family: parents or grandparents. In front of the name tablets will be an incense burner, and, in front of that, three small cups for offering wine (or tea in devout Chinese lay Buddhist homes), flanked by two candlesticks and two vases for flowers. Behind the family tablets is, commonly, an image of a major deity, such as Guanyin (Kuan Yin), so that offerings to the family dead are in effect made also to her. In some homes, by the side of the tablets are subsidiary altars, perhaps to the deity of the family’s occupation. If an elder brother lives nearby, the household may contain no alter, but its members instead visit that other home for the family rituals. Often, the eldest female in the home will offer incense to the tablets first thing in the morning. Since Vatican II, even Roman Catholic Chinese homes may have family altars.

During major festivals, depending on the region of China, twice each lunar month, at the new and full moons, food and wine offerings are made. On such occasions, the most elaborate meal that a family can afford is prepared and offered on a table placed in front of the altar to the family dead. (A Jewish parallel is the tradition of pouring a glass of wine for Elijah during the Pesach seder, or ritual meal.) It is understood that the spirits of the dead eat the spiritual essence of the food, and when
they are satisfied the food is removed to a dining table and the living members of the family sit down to eat the material remains. Of course, there are many minor elaborations that vary from region to region. Many Chinese, especially the educated, feel no concern about whether spirits actually come to the offering. What is important is that the dead are remembered and that the family, living and dead, is celebrated as a single social unit. The frequency of these offerings, from a pragmatic standpoint, means that the family has at least one highly nutritious meal twice each month, just as in Jewish homes the shabbat meal means that each family has a nutritious meal at least once a week.

The earliest evidence of Chinese familism is of rituals devoted to clan spirits rather than nuclear families. These were the clans of the aristocracy, the most important of which was the clan of the king, later termed “emperor.” Thirty-five hundred years ago, the amalgamation of the spirits of the dead of the ruling clan was understood as a single numinous entity termed Shangdi (literally, Power Above—which Protestant missionaries in the nineteenth century took as their Chinese term for the Christian God). Three thousand years ago, the term Tian (Sky) had come into use with the same meaning (see chapter 6 for a fuller exposition of these terms, particularly in relation to the theology of the Chinese Jews). The ruler was called Tianzu (Child of Sky), meaning the one who was most directly descended from the dead of the ruling clan (not, as understood in the West, meaning he was divine). The offering of food by the ruler to the cosmic generative pair Sky-Earth (see below), representing both his ancestors and the cosmic procreative spirits, was thus the pre-eminent state ritual. Clan offerings in general are elaborate, often accompanied by musicians to entertain the dead while they are banqueted, but the furnishings and paraphernalia are as described above for family dwellings, except richer in material and elaborateness.

We do not know if in the earliest period nuclear families made offerings or if they depended on the offerings of the clan of which they were a part or which ruled them. But roughly 2,000 years ago the religion was democratized in that all families understood their dead to become spirits and practised the ritual described above, which was the same as the clan offering but on a smaller scale. We know this because at this time all the families took on surnames, which hitherto only the aristocratic clans had. The surnames taken were from those of the aristocratic clans, which is why so few surnames are used in China—only a hundred or so common ones for over a billion and a quarter people. Theoretically, all those with the same surname are of the same clan. In actuality, only those that can be seen to be related in clan record books are understood to be related.
Families of the same surname, particularly those who live in the same area, often band together to build a clan temple. These buildings are dedicated for offerings to the more important of the clan spirits—those who when alive promoted the fortunes of the clan. In urban areas, where the cost of land is high, a special room in a local temple will be built to serve as a clan temple. (This pattern was also found in the Kaifeng synagogue.) Only name plaques of the clan dead are found in clan temples; no images and no deities are honoured there. Thus, the name plaques of the dead can be found on both the family altar and, if important, in the clan temple. The clan temple has the same furnishings as the family altar. On days in which offerings are made, the male of the family will bring the family’s food to the clan temple to be offered. It will then be brought home, offered at the family altar, and then eaten. The pattern is for females to make the offerings inside the family home and for males to make the offerings outside, in the clan temple.

The family dead are perceived as numinous spirits, but numinous only for their own clan. It is considered improper, if not dangerous, for anyone to make an offering to the dead of another clan. There were and are, however, a host of cosmic, natural, and protecting numinous spirits. These are the deities.

The most important of the cosmic deities is Tiandi (Sky-Earth), a male–female couple to whom only the emperor and his consort may make offerings; for anyone else to do so would be the height of treason. The sun, moon, and certain stars are also cosmic deities. Nature deities include mountains, bodies of water, aged trees, and unusual rock formations, as well as the agricultural fields to whom farmers make offerings. More functional are the various deities found in village, neighbourhood, and city temples.

By the eleventh century, the latter deities had undergone a major transformation: they were understood as dead humans who had become deified. Often, these were humans who had died under anomalous circumstances. For example, two of the most important Chinese deities are the ubiquitous Guanyin and Mazu. The former is the deity of childbirth and human fertility, but she is also a general protector and a deity for merchants. Mazu, important in the southeastern coastal area, was the deity of mariners and fisherman, but she was also a deity of fertility and commerce.

According to the biographies of both, they were unmarried females—that is, females who, upon death, were not cared for by any family. Thus they would have been understood to become dangerous wandering ghosts, evily possessing people, who would then require exorcism. But some wandering ghosts, on possessing people, proved themselves to be
beneficial to individuals and communities. Those possessed became their mediums, and temples were built in gratitude for their beneficence. This is most likely how Guanyin and Mazu became deities. As their popularity spread, the government co-opted them by giving them official titles, and thus they became national deities. Other deities include famous generals and magistrates who became protecting spirits of cities and villages.

Guanyin is also the male Buddhist Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. And that provides a clue to the origin of the Song dynasty and thereafter Chinese notion of deity. Bodhisattvas are humans who are ready to enter Nirvana (extinction) but out of compassion remain in Samsara (the realm of illusory suffering) to assist others in reaching Nirvana. Over time, they came to be perceived (as are saints in Christianity) as semi-deities to whom prayers can be made for specific benefits. As Buddhism had become totally assimilated in China by the Song period, the concept of the Bodhisattva may have led to a new understanding of deities as spirits of special dead humans.

In farm fields are shrines to the earth deity couple, Grandmother and Grandfather Soil, to whom offerings are made for agricultural fertility. Offerings are made to rain deities in times of drought. In every village and urban neighbourhood there stands a temple. Traditionally, the temple is the only public space. It is where old people gather and the young play in their free time; it is where performances and entertainments are held, nominally for the pleasure of the deities enshrined in the temple. There is no clergy; the temple is managed by a village committee, and, if the building is large, a caretaker may be hired. Anyone can enter at any time and make offerings or not, depending on their inclination.

These local temples are eclectic. Anyone can bring an image to be placed there. People who make offerings, always for material benefits such as health, wealth, and success in business or examinations, generally do so to all of the deities enshrined in any particular temple as well as to the main deity of the temple. If their needs are taken care of, they will return and give thanks to all the deities there, since it is difficult to ascertain which deity is responsible. If no one’s needs are met for a time, the temple will deteriorate from neglect and lack of donations, and people will go to other temples where the deities are perceived as more effective.

The most common offerings are incense and paper spirit money, which is burned in furnaces by the temple, but food is offered also, usually uncooked. (Only the departed of the family and clan receive cooked food.) Offerings can be multi-functional. I have observed women stopping at the village temple on the way home from their daily shopping at the market to offer the food they purchased, which is then brought home to be cooked for the family meal.
Large cities will also have a city temple, housing the protector of the city. Guilds may have their own temples. All of these are open to anyone who wishes to enter. All temples have similar architecture, the degree of ornamentation varying from region to region. Essentially, they are in the form of a Chinese-style mansion, no different from large secular buildings. The furnishings before the deities again are the same as to be found on family shrines, except much larger and more elaborate.

Traditional state religion amounted to the family religion writ large, the whole of China being a single family under the emperor and empress as the Father and Mother of the People. Thus, the sacrifice of the emperor to the deceased of his clan was not simply a clan ritual but an offering for the state as a whole. As the chief priests of China, the emperor and empress, on behalf of the people of China, made offering to the cosmic spirits for the well-being of the nation and for good harvests. (In contemporary Taiwan and Mainland China, elected officials are now beginning to take on these roles.)

When the capital was moved from Nanjing to Beijing in the fifteenth century, a series of temples was constructed in the four directions radiating from the palace: to the south was built the Altar to Sky, along with the Temple for Good Harvests and Altars to the Mountains and Seas; to the north, the Altar to Earth; to the east, the Altar to Sun; and to the west, the Altar to Moon. Flanking the south-facing front entrance to the palace were the altars to the soil and to the imperial clan. In the centre of the palace was the temple housing the altar of the imperial family. When the emperor made offerings at these altars outside of the palace, within the palace, the empress was making similar offerings. Thus was maintained the gender equilibrium essential to the Chinese understanding of the cosmos, along with the inner and outer roles for females and males, respectively.

Chinese governors and magistrates performed civic rituals as representatives of the emperor. Again, belief was of no concern. Chinese theorists wrote treatises on rituals as long as 2,400 years ago, and the emphasis was on decorum, not on belief, with an understanding that the primary function of the rituals was social cohesion. Thus, officials could be agnostic regarding the spirits and yet carry out these rituals with sincerity, keeping in mind the pragmatic purpose of the rituals.

By the Ming period (fourteenth to seventeenth centuries), temples had been built to the First Teacher in every administrative centre. The focus of these temples is not on deities but on prominent figures who had influenced the direction of Chinese political philosophy, such as Kongzi (Confucius—the First Teacher) and Mengzi (Mencius). These figures were not deities but honoured dead humans, similar to the monuments
in the form of Greco-Roman temples to Jefferson and Lincoln in Washington, D.C. Thus, on the birthday of Kongzi a state-sponsored ritual offering took place at these temples (a ritual still carried on in Taiwan). But the offering itself had to be made by a descendant of Kongzi, as only the descendents can make offering to the non-deified dead. Others at the ritual were understood to be assisting the descendant in his family offering or as guests at the offering, just as were guests invited to a home for a family offering and feast. These temples also served as clubhouses for civil service examination graduates (see below under Education)—that is, the literati—and provided schoolrooms for middle and higher education.

As in all religious traditions, there were many festivals, but the two most important were those that focused on the dead of the family: the Spring Festival and Qingming. It was these festivals, and probably these only, in which the Chinese Jews would have taken part. Undoubtedly, they enjoyed the special foods and festivities of the other festivals, but they are not likely to have taken part in the religious aspects. But not to have maintained these two festivals would have rendered one unfilial and therefore not Chinese.

The primary ritual of the Spring Festival (known in the West as the Chinese Lunar New Year) is the offering to the family dead on the evening before the first day of the New Year. All other aspects of the festival are secondary and not mandatory. The festival takes place on the second new moon after the winter solstice, which is considered the turning point between winter and spring.

Qingming was originally a spring fertility ritual, as was at one time in the distant past the Jewish celebration of Pesach. Both traditions saw a reformation of spring festivals to fit the emerging primary aspect of the religions. For Judaism, it is the mytho-historic events surrounding Covenant and Torah. For China, it is the honouring of the family dead. Thus, Qingming is a festival when families go out into the countryside to make offerings not to the agricultural fields, as would have been done over 2,000 years ago, but at the graves of their departed. Graves are cleaned and offerings appropriate to a family picnic are made. It is these two festivals, the Spring Festival and Qingming, that primarily bring families together to honour—not worship—their dead.

As China consolidated 2,000 ago, it incorporated several civilizations that shared common features and were based on differing but similar versions of familism. The Han dynasty (third century BCE to third century CE), the first successful Chinese empire, sought to create a homogeneous culture based on the family rituals, but, given the size of China, regional variations within a more general homogeneous structure con-
continue to today. Thus, for example, graves have differing appearances as one moves from north to south.

Buddhism entered China just after this consolidation took place, and its history and influence on Chinese religion are discussed at the beginning of the next chapter. Daoism as an intellectual orientation developed earlier, approximately 2,500 years ago, along with the other philosophical streams. Philosophical Daoism provided Chinese intellectuals with texts—the Zhuangzi and the Daodejing—that became the basis of Chinese mysticism, as well as a variant of political philosophy. Religious Daoism consists of several institutional religious traditions that later developed after the fall of the Han dynasty alongside the development of Buddhism in China. Both Buddhism and religious Daoism became subsumed within the general Chinese religious gestalt. Thus, Daoist priests commonly officiate at Chinese funerals, while Buddhist monks or nuns are hired to chant sutras as masses for the dead forty days after the same funeral. Of course, Chinese Muslims and Jews would not have utilized any of these services. Daoist priests are also hired for periodic renewal rituals for villages and towns.

Sacred sites, often scenic, abound in China. Buddhist monasteries and Daoist temples in the mountains provided pilgrimage sites for the devout and places for excursions and recreation for others. All could stay at the monasteries and temples that functioned, aside from their religious aspects, as both resort hotels and hostels for pilgrims. The most important sacred site, Mount Tai in northeast China, long predates Buddhism and Daoism, and served as a place for imperial pilgrimage as well as a resort for northeastern China, being the only such site in that part of China.

Only at funerals and community renewal rituals are professional priests usually found. For most other rituals—in the home and in clan, village, and city temples—ordinary people make the offerings, whether it be the eldest in a family or a city magistrate. Marriages are celebrated not by a religious ritual, save for announcing the new member of the family to the ancestors before the family tablets, but at a banquet, in which those invited witness the new social relationship.

Other religions, as discussed in the next chapter, also entered China at various times or developed among the people. Chinese and the Chinese government are quite tolerant of these developments so long as they do not threaten the government or public order. Indeed, it was common for the imperial government to subsidize temples for these religions, as it did the synagogue at least in Kaifeng and probably elsewhere. But as most changes of government were due to religio-political movements, the government will crack down hard on any movement
that is suspected either of threatening insurrection or monopolizing the economy. Thus, various Chinese governments have suppressed the economic power of the Buddhist churches but without inhibiting individual adherence. More recently it has disallowed those forms of Christianity that are controlled by foreign governments.

Religions of foreign origin usually remained a religion of foreigners for a century or two. Those that lasted longer tended to be assimilated into the Chinese religious gestalt, preserving their own central tenets and practices while adding compatible rituals that accord with the Chinese religious understanding. Thus, after several centuries, Judaism and Islam in China became Chinese Judaism and Chinese Islam, just as has happened with Jews and Muslims in the United States (excluding the few who reject any accommodation to their changed circumstances).

**Education**

China had a written language at least 3,500 years ago, and a high degree of literacy has been the mark of elite status ever since. Contrary to a view commonly found in descriptions of traditional China, the majority of the population was functionally literate. It was necessary to be literate to carry on business, to serve in the military, and indeed to function at all save under the most impoverished circumstances. All shops had signs in writing, not in symbols and pictures, as was the case in pre-modern Europe, and even those restaurants that catered to the lowest levels of society decorated their interiors with written statements—that is, calligraphy. Moreover, the name plaques of departed family members are in writing, and during the Spring Festival homes are decorated with written couplets. Judaism, and later Islam, along with China, are the most literate traditions in human history.

Kongzi, who lived in the sixth century BCE and is known in China as the First Teacher, is exactly that. He was the first person in the world, for whom documentation exists, who made his living by teaching. His hopes to become a government minister unfulfilled, he became instead a professional teacher. He trained students to be government officials. This was radical in his day, as government positions in the feudal period of his time were inherited. His students did become high officials, however, and the major theorists of the Chinese government that accordingly evolved are from his intellectual lineage. Thus, China slowly became a bureaucracy based on a specialized education.

The texts for this education were lost in a major destruction of books by Qin Shi Huangdi, the first emperor of China (third century BCE), who sought to destroy opposition to his draconian regime by destroy-
ing their books. After his death and the ensuing collapse of his regime, some of the books were reconstituted, and these became known as the Five Classics. During the Song period, additions and commentaries were added, and they were renamed the Thirteen Classics. Treated with reverence but not as holy books in the sense of the Bible and the Qu’ran, the Classics became the basis of education for those studying to become government officials. These texts include a very early text on prognostication, which, with later appendices, was reinterpreted as a philosophical text, as well as a book of the earliest surviving historical records, a book of early documents and speeches, a book of the earliest extant poetry and songs, and several books on ritual. To these were added the teachings of Kongzi and Mengzi.

Over time China invented the written examination. The examinations were based on the Classics, as well as the writing of poetry and calligraphy with artistic merit, and used for selecting government officials. The civil service examination system reached its full development by the Song period, although further changes regarding essay stylistics took place in the Ming period. The Civil Service examinations were open to virtually anyone. First there was an annual preliminary examination at the local level to qualify for taking the initial examination. The first of the actual examinations was at the district (county) level, the second at the provincial level, and the third at the national level. The last two were triennial. Those who passed at the third level would proceed to an examination in the imperial palace; this examination was not for passing but for ranking the third-level graduates.

All who passed the first examination had their social status changed. They were automatically among the elite, or literati, and wore special clothing and were subject to different penalties should they be convicted of a criminal offence. Normally, first-level graduates did not receive government positions. Second-level graduates qualified for government positions, and third-level graduates were offered the more important administrative positions. Those who were ranked first in the palace examination were likely to become prime ministers later in their career, and those who ranked highly were offered prestigious posts in the national academies.

Few passed even the first of the examinations. The failure rate was high, and people took the examination over and over. There are stories of grandfathers, fathers, and sons sitting for the examination at the same time. Success, a great honour, was not for the individual but for the entire family and clan and even for the graduate’s home village or city. The most common reward for meritorious service in the government was the awarding of posthumous titles to one’s ancestors. Those who succeeded
were certain to have their name plaque placed in the clan temple on death and to be mentioned in the local histories.

There were several types of education in China. There was the basic education that would be taught in village schools, if the village could afford a teacher, or in clan schools. The wealthy would have private tutors. Then there was specialized education at a higher level. Study for the civil service examinations was the most prestigious, and clans or villages might subsidize a promising student, as the rewards from success would fall back on them. Other specialized forms of education were for government clerks, physicians, and military officers. Finally, those born into Daoist lineages, as well as Buddhist and Daoist monks and nuns, were offered education in those traditions.

Lower-class females often received enough education to run a small store, while upper-class women needed sufficient education to manage a complex household and serve as the treasurer of the clan—equivalent to running a modern corporation. Upper-class women were also educated in writing poetry and in calligraphy. Thus, education in China is as complex as Chinese society but has a prestige found in no other traditions save for Judaism and Islam.

### Social Structure

Chinese class structure was oriented toward government. Above the social classes was the imperial family and the emperor himself, also called the Single Person, the one human being who was above all and absolutely alone, because no one else was of his rank and prestige; it is lonely at the top. A change in regime meant executing the entire imperial family and pulling down their clan temple.

Over 2,000 years ago there was a feudal aristocracy, and it was slowly replaced by the civil service system. All who passed the first of the three examinations passed into elite status. Theoretically, there were no other elite. Very wealthy merchants were co-opted into the system by being permitted to purchase the first or second degree (not the third) for a high fee. This had a double advantage for the government. First, it transferred some of the merchants' wealth to the government, reducing their financial clout and accordingly their power vis-à-vis the government. Second, it stifled the resentment of potential rivals toward the government, as the wealthy could gain elite status (but not a government position), hobnob with the literati, and thus feel part of the government itself.

Beneath the literati were well-to-do and middling merchants, physicians, artisans, government clerks, and wealthy landowners, forming the middle and upper-middle class. In cities, these persons might meet to-
gether in poetry circles or engage in Daoist rituals. Beneath them were the shopkeepers, farmers who owned their own plots, and journeymen of various skills who formed the lower-middle class. The lower class would include farmers who worked for landowners, and servants, both salaried and indentured. At the bottom were poverty-stricken unskilled labourers, assuming they were lucky enough to find occasional work and not starve to death.

**Government**

According to the civil service system’s ideology (termed the *rujia tradition* and usually incorrectly translated as “Confucianism”), the emperor should reign but not rule. Governing was to be in the hands of the literati, who were specially educated to govern with ethical sensibility. Of course, the emperor did rule, and was generally buffered from the civil service by the palace eunuchs. But the practical administration was in the hands of the civil service bureaucracy.

Aside from various central government boards and the military, the administration had three levels: a national level under a prime and subsidiary ministers, provincial governors, and district and city magistrates. There was also a board of censors, whose task was to criticize both policy and administrators. Government officials were poorly paid, yet government service was the only route to both prestige and wealth. Bribery and graft were the expected sources of revenue for officials, and the censor’s task was to ensure that the bribery remained reasonable and did not utterly pervert justice.

The general population’s interface with government was with the magistrate and his clerical staff. Some of the clerks worked for the district government and some worked directly for the magistrate, who took them with him as he moved from one position to another. The magistrate was the sole local official and carried out the roles of many officials in the modern West: police chief, forensic detective, prosecuting attorney, judge, mayor, and tax collector. Ideally, the magistrate would have to do nothing, for everything would run smoothly; the goal was harmony. But if crime got out of hand, if rebellion brewed, if taxes went unpaid, if the crops failed, this was all the responsibility of the magistrate, as well as the governor at the provincial level.

Magistrates and governors were never allowed to serve in or near their home areas, to prevent them from creating their own power base. For the same reason, they were rotated every three years, their promotion depending on performance. When a government official’s close relative died, he was given a leave of absence, the length depending on the
degree of relationship. For parents, the officials were given "three years" leave (actually three times the nine-month gestation period). Functionally, this tended to give the officials a long sabbatical in the midst of their careers.

Clans also had a role in government, as any misbehaviour was a reflection on the clan; hence, the clans were expected to police their own. Similarly, guilds were expected to maintain standards among their members. Even thieves organized themselves into guilds and were expected to police themselves. Housebreakers, for example, were expected to surrender if cornered and not try to use violence to escape. So long as they snuck in and out with what they could steal, constables would not go after them. But if they hurt someone, the thieves' guild was expected to take care of the miscreant. In the same way, communities of foreigners were often given the right to govern themselves, but they were required to maintain good order.

Economy

The economy was primarily agrarian. The ideal was intensive farming of small plots of land. But if the taxes were too high, if the weather was bad, if through death and inheritance the land was so divided among sons that the plots were too small to be viable, farmers might be put in the position of borrowing on their land and then losing it. Over the course of a dynasty, the land came to be held by fewer and fewer people. This led to an increase in poverty, in unemployment, in starvation, and eventually insurrection. Thus, each new dynasty tended to redistribute the land, and the cycle began anew.

A second level of the economy was skilled trades, to make, for example, the tools farmers needed, and to build houses, and so on. Merchants distributed goods throughout local areas as well as throughout the country. On the coast, industries for export flourished, particularly ceramics, silk, and tea.

China was self-sufficient and usually there was an imbalance of international trade in China's favour. The Roman Empire so suffered from the loss of gold to China that, as mentioned before, Emperor Trajan forbade the wearing of silk. The British Empire so suffered that it created an opium industry in Afghanistan for sale in China, which it sold there in violation of Chinese laws. This led to the Opium Wars, a topic that comes up in the next chapter in connection with the history of Christianity in China.

During the Song period, the Jews in China arrived as merchants involved in the overseas trade. But once they settled in, creating perma-
nent communities with synagogues, various members became engaged in virtually all the economic activities, including those of government officials and soldiers.

Culture

By the Song dynasty, the literati distinguished two types of artistic production: those created by professionals, which they considered craft, and their own amateur art, which they considered high art. All the literati were necessarily competent if not great poets—they were tested on it. And as calligraphy was considered the highest form of visual art, all were competent at that as well. Many were amateur musicians. Since the same brushes, inks, paper, and silk were used for calligraphy and painting, virtually all were passable painters. Of course, they were also scholars, and all of the books were written by them.

From the Song dynasty on, it is the government officials themselves who set the standards for poetry, calligraphy, painting, and even the playing of one of China’s oldest musical instruments, the qin. Often these activities took place at parties after feasting and drinking, especially the latter. Chinese were more interested in the doing of art—art as living aesthetic expression—than in storing up the results of painting or poetry.

The placards that decorated the synagogue, which provides the main evidence for understanding Chinese-Jewish theology (discussed in chapter 6), would have been written with the brush on paper as an artistic expression by a literati Jew or one of their non-Jewish friends, pasted on wood, and then carved by an expert woodcarver, who transferred the appearance of the brush strokes onto the wooden placards. These were the main sources of decoration in the synagogue, as placards decorated most buildings and rooms everywhere.

Other forms of decoration and aesthetic items of daily use were created by craftspeople. These include the great developments in ceramics, especially the celadon wares, and the beginning of the use of furniture, both of which took place during the Song period.

Popular entertainment included operas, storytelling, and various kinds of music. Often shows were put on at local temples, nominally as entertainment for the deities, but for the entire village or neighbourhood as well, since temple grounds were the only public spaces. Urban centres such as Kaifeng would have had tea houses and wine houses where musicians or storytellers might entertain the patrons, as well as theatres for opera. In the marketplace, one would find storytellers, jugglers, and acrobats. There were cultural developments for all classes of society.
The Theology of the Chinese Jews

This brief summary of pre-modern Chinese culture and society outlines the situation into which new arrivals found themselves when they entered China. The following chapter provides a history of how some of these arrivals, including Jews, adapted or failed to adapt to their new homeland.
Chapter 4

Brief History of Buddhism and the Abrahamic Traditions in China

Some foreign religious traditions became transformed in the Chinese cultural milieu to the point where they became an element of Chinese religion itself, such as Buddhism. By adapting aspects of normative Chinese religion, some comfortably fit into the Chinese religious gestalt as minority traditions, such as Islam and Judaism. Others, such as Christianity, rigidly rejected accommodation to the Chinese world view and morality and at times were expelled by the Chinese government.

The histories of the three interconnected Abrahamic traditions in China are quite different from those of Buddhism and from each other. Judaism and Islam did not proselytize in China and adapted to Chinese life and culture without in turn influencing it. In doing so, they became part of the Chinese cultural matrix and survived for a considerable period of time. Muslims were present in much larger numbers and, given that some Central Asian countries contiguous with China converted to Islam, never lost contact with the Islamic world. They remain a viable presence in China today. After a half-millennium, Judaism in China lost contact with Judaism elsewhere. This combined with its relatively small numbers led to its slow decline.

The Christian experience is quite dissimilar. Save for Nestorian Christian merchants present in China during the Tang period, Christians came to China as missionaries and sought to convert China to Christianity and a European way of life. The missionaries were supported by European powers who used them as a tool in their failed attempt to colonize China as they had India, the Philippines, Southeast Asia, and Indonesia. The
anti-Chinese attitudes and destructive behaviour toward Chinese notions of good order by first the Vatican and later by Protestant missionaries led to Christians being hated by the Chinese and, at various times, expelled or massacred.

To comprehend the Jewish experience within Chinese culture, it is helpful to consider the histories of the other Abrahamic religions in China. But to understand these histories in more depth, it is useful to briefly look at the history of Buddhism in China, the first major non-Chinese religion to become assimilated by Chinese culture.

**The Buddhist Experience in China**

Buddhist merchants entered China with the inception of the Silk Road in the early Han period, when Jewish merchants were probably also entering China. By this time, several cultures along the Silk Road in southern Central Asia had become Buddhist, so their presence was noticed by the Chinese. A monastery to serve these numerous Buddhist merchants was built in the then capital of Loyang.

The collapse of the Han dynasty in the early third century was as disruptive to the Chinese world as the collapse of the western part of the Roman Empire was to the Romans. The Chinese empire became fragmented into several kingdoms and within a century descended into political chaos and economic collapse. The Chinese lost faith in the ability of traditional ideologies to solve their problems and became open to new ideologies.

The expanding number of Buddhist monasteries at this time necessitated altering the standard rules of Buddhist monasticism that forbid monks to handle weapons and money. To survive raids by brigands during this period of disorder, the monasteries were walled and monks were trained in martial arts. Given the practice of lay members contributing to the monasteries to gain merit toward salvation, they also became repositories for wealth. This wealth led to the monasteries becoming proto-banks, as money could be lent at interest to those in need. The monasteries became the means for social order for the peasantry, and Buddhism, the first proselytizing religion, rapidly spread among the Chinese.

China fractured into two halves. The rulers in the northern part of China capitalized on this new adherence by co-opting the religion, with the ruler taking on the role of head of a state-sponsored Buddhist church, much as the English monarch is head of the Anglican Church. The various Buddhist sects from India that were present in China, and were never fully understood by the Chinese, were becoming increasingly sinicized. In the south, the gentry became supporters of these newly sinicized Buddhist sects as well as the developing Daoist churches.
By the seventh century, at the inception of the second major successful Chinese empire, the Tang, China Buddhism had become dominant within the broader context of Chinese familism. Daoism had developed into several institutional religions on the model of the Buddhist sects and vied for supremacy with Buddhism. The two traditions competed for imperial support, while the various Buddhist sects competed with one another.

At times the wealth and power of Buddhist institutions rivalled or surpassed that of the state and were seen as a challenge to governmental authority. The state then cracked down on the institutional aspects to weaken the monasteries, but it never concerned itself with the beliefs and religious practices of individuals. No attempt was made to end Buddhism but only to insure the continued existence of the government by weakening a rival institution.

In the mid-eighth century, the chief general of the military staged a coup d'état against the Tang dynasty. The court fled and, seeking financial resources to resist the insurgency, initiated the sale of certificates of ordination. Many thousands purchased these certificates, since Buddhist monks were released from the obligation of paying taxes for the rest of their lives, although there was no requirement that they actually live as monks. While these certificates of ordination had the immediate effect of raising funds to put down the revolt, China ended up with a huge number of non-tax-paying monks and monasteries. The tax burden on the remaining part of the population increased to the point where it was cheaper for whole villages to nominally become monks and nuns, donate their farmland to monasteries, and rent it back for less than the land tax.

With the government finally teetering on financial ruin in the mid-ninth century, it again cracked down on the monasteries. Regulations were promulgated that limited the number of monasteries in a district, the amount of land a monastery could own, the number of monks and nuns resident in a monastery, and the number and size of its bronze images (the melting of bronze coins to cast images created a monetary crisis). This was suppression of institutions rather than persecution of beliefs and ritual practices. Lay Buddhists seem to have been unaffected.

During the preceding centuries, with the re-establishment of a unified China, a homogeneous culture, and pride in it, Buddhism was increasingly being viewed as an alien religion. Buddhism was perceived as un-Chinese for many reasons, especially with regard to filial piety. At that time, becoming a monk or nun meant denying family ties, and, by being chaste, monks and nuns do not continue the family line. This, for a religion, society, and culture that focused on family and filial piety, was anathema. Besides, Chinese did not consider chastity a healthy practice
The Theology of the Chinese Jews

and assumed that the monks and nuns—who shared the same monasteries—were illicitly having sex. Given that many of these monks and nuns were so only for tax-exempt status, there may have been some truth to many of the folktales about the licentiousness of monks (similar to those in England at the time of Chaucer).

The removal of the economic basis of the monasteries, which ended their power, combined with the increase in anti-Buddhist feelings led to the demise of Buddhism in China as a powerful force and a dominant aspect of religion. Only those forms that had become fully sinicized survived, and Buddhism continued as a minor aspect of Chinese religion. Not until the twentieth century did Buddhism again become popular among Chinese as an institutional alternative to Christianity, which was detested by the majority of Chinese for reasons that will become clear in the following. In present-day Hong Kong and Taiwan, Buddhism is surging in popular appeal.

But major aspects of Buddhism had become integrated into normative Chinese religion. By the time of the founding of the Kaifeng synagogue, Chinese religion had become partially transformed by Buddhism, particularly with regard to concepts of life after death, although these were far removed from the original Buddhist concepts from India.

Buddhism along with Daoism came to function as adjuncts to normative Chinese religion. They became similar to the role of the mystery cults in relation to the family and civic rites of Hellenistic and Roman culture, or Masonry with regard to Christianity and Judaism in modern Western culture. The concept of the Bodhisattva led to a transformation of Chinese deities, who by the Song period were ghosts of particular deceased human beings who could shower divine beneficence on living humans. The Buddhist concept of Nirvana was transformed into one of salvation into a pleasant realm of the dead modelled on life on earth, a sino-Buddhist heaven. The integration of these institutional adjuncts into non-institutional Chinese religion saw the previously mentioned customs of bringing in Daoist priests to officiate at funerals and Buddhist monks or nuns to say masses for the dead.  

Christianity to the Mid-Nineteenth Century

Not until the Tang period is there evidence for Christianity in China. A stele (inscribed stone monument) dated to 781 was erected by a Syrian Nestorian Christian to commemorate the building of a monastery for twenty-one monks in the capital by order of the imperial government. (It was common for the government as a courtesy to build monasteries—given the Buddhist model—for communities of foreign merchants.)
There is no indication of proselytizing, suggesting that these priests were serving a community of foreign Christians. Thus, Nestorian Christian merchants resided in the foreign community along with Jews, Muslims, and Manichaeeans. Following the collapse of the Tang dynasty, no further indication exists of a Nestorian presence in China.

A few Christian clergy made it to the Mongol capital (thirteenth to fourteenth centuries), but the Polo family are the first Christians we know of to have reached China itself. Even fewer Christian missionaries went beyond Mongolia to China. The last we can be certain of is the papal legate, John of Marignolli, who arrived in 1342 and stayed for several years.

For the next two centuries there is no record of a Christian presence until missionaries attempted to enter China when the Portuguese arrived, in the second half of the sixteenth century. There begins one of the most bizarre chapters in Christian history as well as in Chinese religious history. It is a chapter that is still being written, as it continues to inform US foreign policy and attitudes toward China today. The history of Christianity in China is essentially one of European—and, later, American—colonial imperialism that clashed with China’s sense of its own sovereignty and destiny.

A papal bull of 1493, followed a year later by a treaty, split the world outside of Europe between Spain and Portugal. Of course, the papal bull was not recognized by Protestant countries—or, for that matter, by the established civilizations in Asia. It was based on an understanding that Spain would colonize westward into the “New World,” also known as “New Spain.” Portugal would colonize eastward, going around the Cape of Good Hope to India and China. But the dividing line put most of Brazil in the hands of Portugal, and Spain, by going around the tip of South America, could establish a foothold in East Asia by attaching the Philippines to New Spain. Thus the Spanish could bring Chinese goods across the Pacific to Acapulco, where the yearly galleon was off-loaded and the goods transported overland to Veracruz, from where they could be shipped across the Atlantic to Spain. Jesuit missionaries, whether German, Italian, or French, thus necessarily worked either with the Portuguese or the Spanish fleets and military.

Portugal attained from the Chinese government the right to trade through Macau in 1535 and began a settlement that became permanent in 1557. The Spanish reached the Philippines in 1521 with their Portuguese admiral, Magellan, and began their first settlement in 1565. There they massacred tens of thousands of Chinese merchants in 1603. Foreign trade in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, for both Portugal and Spain, was simple brigandage. A town would be attacked,
its inhabitants massacred, and its valuables stolen. The Chinese at first considered, quite rightfully, the Europeans to be no different than the Japanese pirates wreaking havoc on the Chinese coast, which had led the Chinese court to attempt to halt Chinese from trading abroad and foreigners from entering China by sea.

From the beginning of the Portuguese settlement in Macau, Jesuit missionaries sought permission to penetrate into China. While in Macau, they studied Chinese language and culture. In 1583, two Jesuits received permission to live in a town near Guangdong (Canton), close to Macau. To fit in, being monks themselves, they at first wore the garb of Buddhist monks. They soon learned that Buddhist monks were then held in disrepute and sought to blend in among the elite by becoming literati. They studied the Classics, learned the language of government officials—different from the local languages—and took on the garb, illicitly at first, of the literati. In 1601, one of these two, Matteo Ricci, received permission to reside in the capital of Beijing. Soon he was joined by other Jesuits.

Given their study of the Chinese Classics, along with their knowledge of European science and technology, the Jesuits were accepted as scholars and provided with the usual government support. Eventually some received official titles and offices. Ricci admired the teachings found in the Classics and understood China to be at a stage of development just prior to Christianity and receptive of the Christian message. He promulgated this understanding in Relations (letters) sent to Europe, in which he misleadingly described Chinese religion as triune—Three Religions in China, as discussed in the preceding chapter.

Ricci was successful in “converting”—in the Jesuit mode that added Christian rituals to family, clan, and state rituals—two members of the prestigious Hanlin Academy and an imperial prince. Slowly others among the elite also became Christians. Twice in the early part of the seventeenth century the Jesuit mission was nearly terminated due to suspicion of sedition, but the support it received from powerful members of the government saved it.

When fighting began to take place between the invading Manchu armies and the Ming dynasty, the Jesuits hedged their bets by supporting both sides. That support included the casting of European-style cannon. Thus, when the Manchus took control of China and instituted a new dynasty, Jesuits were highly regarded by the first Manchu emperors. They were given charge of the bureau of astronomy and the calendar, and were also charged with mapping China. They continued to manufacture cannon, and the Jesuit mission increased in size and influence within the court.
By the end of the seventeenth century, Franciscan and Dominican missionaries were arriving in China. Unlike the Jesuits, they proselytized among the general population. The number of conversions was counted by the missionaries to be in the hundreds of thousands. Not only were these figures probably inflated, but most of these numbers reflect *in articulo mortis*—the practice of baptizing dead infants. It must also be taken into account that the Jesuits controlled employment in a major government ministry.

From the mid-seventeenth century, the Christian missions suffered a series of setbacks. The first and most important of these was the Rites Controversy. Franciscans and Dominicans considered the Jesuit mode of Christian conversion heretical; from their perspective, the Jesuits were allowing Christian converts to continue heathenish practices. The Jesuits understood that if the family rites were forbidden Chinese Christians, they would no longer be Chinese. And if the state rites were forbidden Chinese Christians, they could not be among the elite. The Vatican vacillated for well over a century, from 1628 to 1742, but increasingly went against the Jesuit position. Ironically, the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s reversed that position and allowed Chinese Catholics to revere their ancestors. Family shrines with daily offerings of incense are again to be found in Chinese Catholic homes.

The Jesuits had asked the Kangxi Emperor, at the time the most powerful political figure in the world, the Manchu Empire then at its largest and strongest, for his viewpoint. Of course, he decided for the Jesuit position. When the Vatican came down against that position, it meant that a foreign power was not only contradicting him but ordering religious practices for the Chinese in China. Kangxi gave the missionaries the choice of obeying him or leaving China. The results of this insult to Chinese sovereignty remains to this day. Only a Catholic church not beholden to the Vatican is allowed to function in China. No religious organization that is actually controlled by a foreign authority is legitimate there.

The second major setback was the abolition of the Society of Jesus in 1773. Some Jesuits elected to remain in China as secular priests. Although several missionaries were expelled, those that held government offices were allowed to stay. In 1805, the suspicion arose that missionaries were planning an invasion by Europeans, and the edicts against Christianity were more rigorously enforced. From then until the Opium Wars in the mid-nineteenth century, Christianity could continue only underground in China. In any case, after the Vatican dictated that Chinese Christians must, in effect, stop being ethnically Chinese, Christianity held little appeal for most Chinese.
The Theology of the Chinese Jews

Christianity in China after the de Facto Demise of Judaism

The next chapter in the history of Christianity in China begins when Chinese Judaism was in serious decline, and so will be very briefly summarized. These developments in the Christian presence in China still continue and are the essential background to understanding contemporary China, Christianity in China, and the twentieth-century wars involving the West in East Asia.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, China was suffering from the familiar pattern of dynastic decline: weak emperors brought up by eunuchs inside the palace who were ignorant about the world around them, an increasingly corrupt officialdom, peasant land falling into the hands of distant landowners and peasants thereby becoming impoverished, and a poorly equipped and trained military due to corruption and a weak central government. This usual pattern was exacerbated by the increasing difficulty of maintaining the far-flung empire the Manchu attached to China proper when it conquered the Ming dynasty. Simultaneously, Europe was gaining military might through advances in weapons technology and an increased taste for colonial expansion brought about by the Industrial Revolution and the resultant search for raw materials and markets for its manufactured goods.

Britain, in particular, as did the Roman world 2,000 years before, was suffering from an imbalance of trade with China. They sought to solve this economic problem through a triangular trade. The British East India Company sold manufactured goods, particular cotton cloth, to its colony of India, where the ships picked up opium grown in Afghanistan. The opium was sold in China, where the ships picked up tea and other luxury goods to be transported back to Britain. The British pursued this strategy in contravention of Chinese laws that prohibited the importation of opium. China had sufficient opium grown internally for traditional medicinal purposes.

When a British ship brought a load of opium to the extreme south of China in 1839, a strong provincial governor confiscated the shipload and burned it, prompting Britain to declare war on China. After losing the initial sea battle, the by now inept imperial government at the far north of China, which had little interest in the distant south, considered the British navy a minor nuisance not worth the expenditure of building a proper navy, and sued for peace in 1842.

The treaty following the First Opium War saw Hong Kong ceded to the British—to the Chinese government, a distant, tiny, and inconsequential island—and the opening of five ports to foreign trade on the mainland. Foreigners were given extraterritoriality, but they were to remain in the
treaty ports. A most-favoured-nation clause meant that whatever one Western nation obtained through treaty applied to all other Western nations. Religion was left ambiguous in the treaty, but missionaries began to enter the treaty ports. Most important, the West learned that the weak Chinese government would not defend itself, the flood of manufactured Western goods eroded the Chinese economy, and the flood of cheap opium in a time of increasing socio-economic despair debilitated Chinese society.

The European countries soon sought to increase their gains and looked for an excuse for another war. In 1856, a small Chinese ship with a crew of twelve was caught smuggling and the crew arrested by the Chinese government. The British claimed the ship was from Hong Kong, and therefore exempt from Chinese import regulations, and demanded the release of the Chinese crew. At the same time, a French Catholic priest caught in the midst of civil strife was killed in the interior. These were the excuses Britain and France sought, and they declared war on China. The Chinese were caught up in suppressing the Taiping rebellion and again sued for peace in 1860, thus ending the Second Opium War, which was actually a continuation of the first.

The treaty that followed was disastrous for China. More ports were opened to foreign trade as well as the entire Yangtze River, and foreigners could travel anywhere in China with full extraterritoriality. Massive indemnities were claimed, which bankrupted China and were used to support missionaries. The treaty made specific provision for the toleration of Christianity. Most important of all, all Chinese who converted to Christianity were provided with extraterritoriality, which meant that any Chinese who became a Christian was no longer subject to Chinese civil or criminal law. The French-language version of the treaty had one further stipulation not in the Chinese version: French missionaries could seize land and erect buildings anywhere with the protection of the French army.

The treaty resulted in a massive influx of missionaries, who protected their converts under any and all circumstances. The prisons were cleaned out through wholesale conversion of prisoners. Nominally Christian rapists and murderers could continue their activities without fear of arrest. During famines, children were bought by the missions, and food was offered only to those who converted. Missionaries could take any land they wanted to build churches. A Christian convert could claim his neighbour's land, as Christian converts automatically won civil cases. These and other outrages led to increasing massive hatred of missionaries and Chinese converts among the general population.

At the same time, an indigenous Chinese Christian development, the Taiping Movement, snowballed into a revolt against the detested foreign
Manchu (Qing) dynasty. Unlike the partially assimilated Islam and Judaism, the movement was based on a fully fledged Chinese reinterpretation of the Bible and the Christian message.

The Taiping Movement’s roots lay in a vision an educated Chinese had in a fever delirium that years later led him to believe he was the younger brother of Christ. This was attested to by mediums who became possessed by the Holy Spirit and by God. Western monotheism was understood according to the Chinese polytheistic and family model: the Trinity was understood as three separate deities, and a married Christ was perceived as part of a large holy family. This was a Christianity that made sense to a large number of Chinese, and the religio-political military movement that arose from it was quite successful, conquering much of central China.

The leaders of the Taiping Movement instituted a new regime, with this younger brother of Christ and his wife as the Emperor and consort, and their capital in Nanjing as the New Jerusalem. A Chinese translation of the Bible replaced the Classics as the basis of the civil service examinations. They also took from the West religious intolerance and destroyed other religious establishments.23

To the European Christian missionaries a Chinese messiah was anathema, and for the European countries a strong new Chinese government was undesirable. Thus they combined their armies with the Chinese army, under the command of a British general, to put down the Taiping Movement. By 1861, much of China was thoroughly devastated and millions had died, adding further hatred of Christianity and European imperialism. The Manchu government was rendered defunct.

Following a war with Japan that China lost in 1895 and the loss of far northern China to Russia at the same time, an attempt at reform in 1898 resulted in foreigners gaining even more control of China, such as Roman Catholic missionaries having complete sovereignty over their parishes. Severe flooding and a series of poor harvests along with the Chinese hatred of foreign missionaries and their Chinese converts boiled over into the officially sanctioned Boxer Rebellion of 1900. The bottled-up rage exploded throughout China and many missionaries and converts were killed. The foreign legations were besieged in their compounds in Beijing until rescued by Western armies. The result was a reign of terror by foreign armies, the murder of large numbers of non-Christian Chinese (Emperor of Germany: “No quarter will be given, no prisoners will be taken”). Many of the surviving missionaries and Chinese Christians joined in the general mayhem and looting.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Chinese government was in effect taken over by foreigners and China was broken up into Eu-
ropean quasi-colonies. The United States, through its open-door policy, claimed all rights and privileges won by Europeans everywhere in China. The American people came to perceive China as theirs through the expanding number of American missionaries, and American Navy ships patrolled the Yangtze River to protect missionaries and their converts.

Western powers controlled Chinese taxation and used the money to support missionary activities. Some of this money was put toward education. The only entrée to a modern Western education was through Christian missions, schools, and universities, and almost all of the modern educated Chinese elite in the first half of the twentieth century received their education, both in China and the West, via Christianity.

Within a decade, the Manchu dynasty collapsed, and China fragmented into regional warlord rule. A nationalist movement was begun under Chinese Christian political theorists and generals, but initial success led to rampant corruption and the breakaway of a competing communist movement. The aftermath of the Japanese invasion and WW II was a civil war readily won by the Communist Party over the Nationalist Party. One of the first acts of the new government was to rid China of the hated foreign missionaries, with the exception of particular individuals, predominantly those from Canada, who had played no role in imperialism and had not gained the enmity of the people.

The strongest central government China had seen in a century and a half offered the hand of friendship to the United States, but under the influence of the China Lobby the United States viewed the government as godless usurpers of the rightful Christian government allied with the United States, whose remnants they protected and supported in Taiwan. These attitudes, to a degree, still influence American policy and continued covert activity toward China.

Being theoretically Marxist, the government expressed a negative attitude toward religion in general, and adopted the Christian missionary attitude toward nominal Chinese religion as mindless superstition, unworthy of the term "religion." This attitude reached its peak in the gross excesses of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), which saw the destruction of all religious buildings as well as many old structures in general, regardless of religious orientation.

The collapse of the Cultural Revolution, with its enmity toward traditional Chinese culture and a decade-long educational hiatus, saw people flood the few reopened Christian churches, expecting to learn about Western science and technology, given the earlier linkage of Christian missions to an education in Western science. The rejoicing of American Christians over this massive turnout soon faded, as people quickly turned away when they received Christian sermons rather than lectures.
on nuclear physics or computer technology. Presently, a number of Christian sects are legitimate religions in China but none are under foreign control. Thus, the Chinese government allows an indigenous Catholic Church but not one subject to the Vatican. Hence, the effect of the Vatican decision in the Rites Controversy nearly three centuries ago still reverberates in China. The number of Christians in China often claimed by American church statistics tends to be grossly inflated.

Elsewhere in East Asia, the Korean and Vietnam wars were fought by the US in part because of a perceived threat posed by “godless” communism to Christian regimes. In Vietnam, Buddhist monks supported the communist regime, because the government of the south was attempting to force Catholicism over the indigenous Vietnamese religion that combined familism and Buddhism. In Taiwan, the party promoting independence from China is strongly supported by American evangelical Protestant sects. (The Nationalist Party, when it was the single legal party due to martial law, was led by Methodists and considered itself the government of all of China.) Everywhere in East Asia, Christianity and politics have always been inseparable.

Thus, the history of Christianity in China, a record of failure due to a refusal to accommodate to Chinese culture, is vastly different from the history of Islam and Judaism in China, both of which successfully assimilated to become part of the Chinese cultural fabric. For the latter, there was neither proselytizing nor missionaries functioning as an advance for colonial imperialism. Chinese Muslims and Jews maintained their Chinese ethnic identity alongside their religious Muslim and Jewish identities. Chinese Jews were fully accepted in China, for they had neither the inclination nor the ability to raise the ire of the Chinese.24

Islam

As people outside of China often confuse the European Jews who resided in Shanghai from the mid-nineteenth century with the Jews of Kaifeng, so there is considerable confusion today in the West about Chinese Muslims. When the Manchurians conquered China in the seventeenth century and established the last Chinese dynasty, the Qing, they had already conquered the Turkic Uyghurs. The present government of China has kept the borders of the last empire, which includes the land the Uyghurs called East Turkistan. This the Chinese term the province of Xinjiang, and it contains China’s major oil reserves.

The Uyghurs speak a Turkic language and have had their own writing system, derived from Arabic, for many centuries. A thousand years ago, they adopted Islam. Many Uyghurs resent having been forced to be a
part of China, and some have been militarily resisting Chinese imperial sway since the Qing dynasty. In the Western news media, Chinese Muslims are often confused with the Uyghur Muslims and their separatist movement, which is now purportedly being supported to some degree by Arabian money with its Wahhabist orientation, along with training in terrorism.

The present Chinese government has contributed to this confusion by labelling Chinese (Han) Muslims as a national minority within China, along with over fifty others, and calling them Hui. This is in contradiction to the Chinese Muslims' own traditional understanding of themselves as Han. Uyghur Muslims, along with nine other non-Han Muslim nationalities within China's borders, are not called Hui but by their various ethnic identities. As the Chinese Muslims do not have a separate language or culture, save for religious practices, including diet and the occasional wearing of a white cap, they are not meaningfully a distinct ethnic entity, let alone a nationality.

The same confused reasoning has had the government considering requests by Chinese Buddhists and Chinese Christians to be designated as separate nationalities. If granted, this would mean that as one changed one's religious orientation within Chinese culture one would be changing one's national identity within China, which hardly makes sense, since China is officially atheistic and does not consider religious differences significant. The major reason for people now accepting, as well as requesting, this distinction is that "national minorities" have a number of special privileges not accorded the Han, including free education through the university level, free health care, and the right to have more than one child.

In China, Islam was initially called Daishi Jiao (Teachings of the Arabs), when Muslims from the Arab empire first entered China in the Tang period. Later Islam was called both Tianfang Jiao (Teachings from Arabia) and Huihui Jiao, referring to several Central Asian Muslim peoples. By the fifteenth century, Islam was called Qingchen Jiao (Pure and True Teachings), a term also used for Judaism. The confusion becomes considerable, given it is reported that in the early twentieth century in northern China those who wore blue caps (Chinese Jews), those who wore white caps (Chinese Muslims), and those who wore black caps (some Chinese Christians) were all called Huihui. But this is primarily a contemporary rather than a historic confusion.

Since 1949, when the present government began, Islam as a religion is called Islam, but those Chinese who consider themselves Muslim are called Hui or Huihui, and those ethnically and linguistically non-Chinese Muslims who are Chinese citizens are called by their names
for themselves used before they were incorporated into China. The first Chinese Muslim I met, a half-century ago when I began to study literary Chinese, was a fellow graduate student who called himself Han (Chinese), not Hui. Similarly, all of the Chinese Muslims I met during my sojourns in Taiwan considered themselves Han. Accordingly, in this section I use the term Chinese Muslim (Han Muslim) rather than Hui.

Unlike the histories of Buddhism, Christianity, and Judaism in China, no uncertainty attaches to the early history of Islam in China, save that Chinese scholars debate the specific year that Islam entered. Islam has been present in China from the early seventh century, when the expanding new Arab Islamic empire came into contact with the farthest extent of the Tang empire. Both had reached their maximum practical extent to the east for the Arabs and the west for the Chinese. Thus no serious conflict erupted between the two. In 651, an Arab diplomatic envoy reached the Tang capital, Changan. Within a century, an Arab and Persian Islamic community of over 4,000 lived in the capital. In the mid-eighth century, when a non-Chinese general of the Chinese army staged a coup d'état and captured the capital, the fleeing government requested military assistance from the Arab empire, which was granted. When the revolt was finally put down, these Arab soldiers were given land in China as a reward.

By the Song period, large Muslim communities of foreign merchants were established both in cities along the border with Central Asia and in the ocean seaports. Four mosques in China (in the port cities of Guangzhou, Quanzhou, Yangshou, and Hangzhou) trace their origins to this early period. In the mercantile cities at the terminus of the caravan routes and the seaports, Muslims were granted extraterritoriality; that is, they were allowed to govern themselves according to their own customs. Thus, they could live their lives as they had in their home countries.

The largest expansion of Muslims in China took place during the Mongol period, the Yuan dynasty. The Mongol Empire encompassed many Muslim countries. In the period leading up to the collapse of the Mongol regime, various Muslim peoples supported the emerging Ming dynasty against the Mongol government. After the Ming government became successful, these armies were welcomed into the Chinese matrix and their officers were made officials, some rising to high office. Many settled in the then capital, Nanjing, and a number of Muslims distinguished themselves during this period. The last dynasty incorporated Uyghurs and other peoples into its vast empire, some of whom as mentioned above have continually resisted first Manchu and subsequently Chinese rule. Manchus were thus led to be suspicious of all Muslims.

Many Muslims took Chinese wives who converted to the household’s religion and who encouraged indentured servants (slaves) and salaried
servants to convert also. As there came to be mosques scattered throughout China, Muslims could readily travel while maintaining their religious practices. Muslim schools teaching Arabic were created. The proximity to Central Asia, Malaysia, and Indonesia enabled the Muslim communities in China to remain in continuous contact with Muslim communities elsewhere.

Yet Muslims also studied the Chinese classics and became familiar with Chinese culture, else so many would not have achieved high offices in the civil government and in the military from the tenth century on. Arabic texts were translated into Chinese, and tracts were written in Chinese comparing and contrasting Islam and Chinese religion. Writing in literary Chinese, Han Muslims used the same rujia and daojia terminology to reflect their theology that was utilized by the Chinese Jews.

Like the Chinese Jews, Chinese Muslims found that the rujia tradition and Islam were compatible, and ancestral practices filtered into Chinese Muslim religion. Mosques took on the appearance of Chinese temples, the Chinese Buddhist pagoda substituting for the minaret. In contrast, Uyghur mosques in Xinjiang Province retain a Southwest Asian appearance. Over time, the Muslims who resided permanently in China became Chinese while retaining Islam as their religion and the Arabic and Persian languages along with Chinese, thus becoming the ethnic entity that relatively recently came to be called Hui. Since Muslims did not proselytize on a large scale in China, and since they were not subject to a foreign power or religious direction, the Chinese government found no inherent problem with Islam.

Unlike the Christians in China, who were, because of their assumed mandate to convert all of China, failures as a proselytizing presence, and unlike the Jews in China, whose populations were always quite small, Muslims have for over a millennia constituted a significant part of the Chinese population. Even if one considers only Chinese Muslims, the numbers are in the millions; they probably constitute the third-largest body of Muslims in the world, after Indonesia and Pakistan. Given the varying, and to a degree conflicting, histories of Islam in different parts of China, as well as the several different modes of assimilation, Islam in China is too complex a story to adequately cover in a few pages.25

Judaism

While the histories of Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam are well documented, there is a paucity of documentation on Judaism. Indeed, much of our understanding comes from a few Muslim and Christian sources. Extremely little exists in Chinese records on the Chinese Jews, and Jewish documentation is limited to the stelae that were on the
grounds of the Kaifeng synagogue. We know nothing about the other half dozen or so synagogues built in the major port cities. The history of Judaism in China is outlined in chapter 1; unfortunately, to go much further than the outline is an exercise in surmise. But an understanding of Chinese and Jewish history does, however, allow for a plausible scenario.

Although no evidence exists to support the assumption, it is more likely than not that Jews were involved in trade along the Silk Road during the Han dynasty, beginning in the first century of the Common Era. It is not necessary to refer to the mythic Diaspora following 70 CE for such a beginning, as is commonly done. Israelite traders had been active for many centuries before then, and it is merchants who would have travelled to China on business. The Silk Road was not suitable for migration by families as far as China, and Jewish settlements are not expected to have appeared in China at that time. In the early eighteenth century, the Jesuits recorded a legend of the Kaifeng Jews that Jews were first in China during the time of the Han Emperor Ming (58–75 CE). This is quite credible.

When major international trade with China begins again in the seventh century, we have evidence of Jewish involvement in trade both on land and by sea. The evidence for participation in the caravan trade along the Silk Road consists of two documents found at the western edge of the Tang Empire: a fragment in Judeo-Persian and a page of prayer in Hebrew. For the sea route, the ninth-century Arab writer Ibn-Khurdadhbih delineates the routes used by Jewish merchants (Leslie 1972, 6).

Some contemporary authors have taken seriously Ibn-Khurdadhbih’s list of goods traded by the Arabs and Jews in China. He writes of musk, camphor, and spices being brought to the West, and of furs, swords, eunuchs, and slaves being brought to China. This list rather suggests he is making assumptions based on Arab trade elsewhere. It is much more likely that furs were brought to China from Siberia to the north rather than by sea around India and Southeast Asia. More ludicrous would be the bringing of eunuchs. While Arabs used eunuchs in a number of harems, in China eunuchs were commonly found only in the imperial palace, for only the emperor had a large number of wives for political purposes. In China, the position of eunuch was sought after; the eunuch required a fair degree of education, and some eunuchs acquired considerable power and wealth. It is unimaginable that foreigners not speaking Chinese would be chosen. Similarly, since the poor in China when desperate sold some of their children into indentured servitude, and generally there was no lack of them, it would have been prohibitively expensive to maintain slaves for a year or longer to bring them to China.
It is the Arabs who were engaged in the slave trade from Africa to Southwest Asia.

At this time, Arab and Jewish merchants were not only travelling to China but settling there. Abu-Zaid, writing before 916, describes a massacre that took place during a revolt between 877 and 878. He writes of the deaths of 120,000 Muslims, Jews, Christians (probably Nestorians), and Zoroastrians in present-day Kuangdung (Canton), the major seaport for foreigners in the late Tang period (Leslie 1972, 7–8). By that time, Muslim sections were established in the port cities of Quanzhou, Ningpo, and Hangzhou as well. Most likely Jewish quarters existed within the Muslim sections or nearby.

By the Song period—the time of the founding of the Kaifeng Jewish community—the sea trade was flourishing, virtually monopolized by Arab and Jewish merchants, who resided in all of the port cities. Slightly later, Marco Polo mentions coming across Jews in Beijing in 1286, and Ibn-Battütah writes in 1346 of a gate named the Jews' Gate in Hangzhou (Leslie 1972, 15).

While most scholars today assume that the Jews of Kaifeng arrived via the caravan route, as pointed out in chapter 2, this is primarily because of the mistaken assumption that Jews were neither seafarers nor heavily involved in the sea trade. By the Song period, the caravan route was virtually defunct; it was no longer protected, and it was difficult, dangerous, and very long.

The Jews who arrived in Kaifeng seemed to have been invited by the government, although the reason is unclear. Some suggestions point to their expertise as cloth merchants. In any case, to be invited means to have come from some place to which an invitation could be sent, and during the Song period an invitation would not conceivably have been sent to some unknown destination to the west. However, it is conceivable that an invitation was sent to one of the Jewish communities in the port cities, most likely Hangzhou or nearby Ningpo, since there was excellent transportation from Kaifeng to these cities via the Yellow River and the Grand Canal, which linked the Yellow River to the major rice- and silk-producing area surrounding Hangzhou. Travel was by canal barges and riverboats, some of which were quite comfortable; these were by far the most preferred means of travel.

Presumably, the community that received the invitation passed it on to a newly arrived group of merchants, ones who had not yet put down roots. Having just arrived by ship, they would have rented suitable canal boats and continued on to Kaifeng.

These Jews came from present-day Persia or Iraq, which was the origin point for much of the sea trade between the West and China. A scholar of
Judeo-Persian, Herbert Paper, has pointed out with regard to a surviving Haggadah (text for the Pesach *seder* ritual) from the Kaifeng synagogue that "the Judeo-Persian is in the main accurate, well-written, clear and 'normal,'" and the ritual belongs to the Iraqi-Persian mode of the liturgy (Drenger 6). Another scholar understands that the Persian rubrics in the liturgy are in the Bokharan dialect, and assumes from this that they were probably from Bokhara in western Persia (Rabinowitz 73–75).

The date for the arrival of these Jewish merchants in Kaifeng is unknown. Although the synagogue was first built in 1163, after the fall of the northern part of China, including Kaifeng, to Tartars, they must have arrived before 1127, when Kaifeng was the capital of China. It is most likely that the Jews arrived a century or so yet earlier, when Kaifeng was prosperous and the centre of Chinese culture. Hence, one can set the date for their arrival sometime around 1000, give or take a few decades.

Of their life when these Jews arrived in Kaifeng we know nothing. Most likely male merchants were the ones who made the journey rather than families. Once they decided to settle in Kaifeng, they would have taken Chinese wives, perhaps from the families of their Chinese trading partners. As mentioned in chapter 1, evidence clearly indicates that the women who married Jews converted, as they were given Hebrew names (X daughter of Abraham) reserved for women who convert. Given the patrilocal customs of Chinese culture, women were expected to maintain the rituals of the family into which they married, and in a highly dedicated fashion. Thus, these new settlers would have lived in a *kashrut* Jewish household.

Presumably they used one of their homes for a synagogue. Probably they were given the right to govern themselves, as they were then foreigners rather than Chinese. Surely they found it comfortable and remunerative or they would not have stayed. They would have done well for the first century or so but suffered with the rest of the population when Kaifeng was besieged in 1126, the city sacked, and the elite fled to the south. Some or many would have gone with the elite to the new capital of the reduced Southern Song dynasty in Hangzhou, where there was already a synagogue, but obviously some stayed behind and the community was slowly reconstituted.

As the Tartars established their own dynasty in the northern part of China, they rebuilt Kaifeng as their capital. After a generation, the Jewish community had grown in size and prospered to the point where they could purchase a plot of land and build a synagogue. We do not know its size or appearance at that time. The community continued to grow
and thrive, for a century later, in 1279, it received permission from the
government to expand the synagogue. This is the year the Mongols es-
established the Yuan dynasty, bringing China into the vast Mongol Empire,
which stretched from the coast of China to Poland and the Ukraine.

The Mongol period allowed for increased movement of peoples into
China. Probably more Jews moved to Kaifeng. Some seemed to have
been merchants from Yemen, a major centre for maritime mercantilism
for both Arabs and Jews, as some scholars have noted aspects of Yemenite
Jewish practices among the Jews in Kaifeng.

Jews continued to prosper under the Mongols, continuing as mer-
chants and soldiers in the army and served also as financial advisors to
the government. A decree was promulgated that Muslims and Jews must
eat meat killed by others and not maintain their own ritual slaughterers.
The wording implies that someone at the court was incensed because
either a Muslim or a Jew at a banquet did not eat from the lamb dishes
(more on this in chapter 5). It is unlikely that the decree was rigorously
enforced. Jews were also lumped together with Buddhist monks, Daoist
priests, and Nestorian Christians in a regulation regarding taxes. Clearly,
the Mongol regime was aware of the Jews and treated them like any other
religious minority.

The Mongols were replaced by a native regime, the Ming dynasty,
in 1368, and in the early part of this period Judaism flourished in Kai-
feng and elsewhere. In the first century of the Ming dynasty, the Kaifeng
community was granted a larger piece of land and imperial permission
to build a larger synagogue, to which even more buildings were added
within a generation. In 1461, the synagogue was destroyed by a flood
but subsequently rebuilt with an added large hall. The torah scrolls were
replaced by those obtained from the Jewish communities in the port cit-
ies of either Ningpo or Yangzhou. The all-important stela dated to 1489
details these developments.

In the early fifteenth century, a physician of the Kaifeng community,
based on his reporting to the throne sedition taking place in Kaifeng,
was granted titles, an office, and a Chinese surname: Zhao. This incident
is found in the Chinese records as well as the above-mentioned stela.
From this time, the Kaifeng Jews began to take Chinese surnames and
became part of the Kaifeng establishment. From this time also, some
members of the community began to be successful in the civil service
examinations and receive government positions, both scholarly and ad-
ministrative, including that of district magistrate.

Kaifeng Jews passed the examinations at a rate far out of proportion
to their numbers. It is usually estimated that but one in a thousand was
successful in passing the higher examinations, and it seems that at one time there may have been thirty Jewish graduates out of a population of several thousand. The 1489 stela names thirty-two who passed the exams, the 1512 stela names two more, and the 1663 stela names thirty-three between 1642 and 1663, with the 1679 inscription listing five more. The reverse of the 1663 stelae lists 241 distinguished members of the community, including twenty-one community officials and thirty-eight government officials, an extraordinary number for the size of the community.

Government officials were not allowed to serve in their home areas and were usually posted for three-year periods, and the Jewish officials served in locales often far from Kaifeng. For this period of Chinese history, not only does the Kaifeng local history name distinguished Jews but so do the local histories of the places in which they served as officials.

Toward the end of the Ming period, Judaism indirectly suffered a setback that, over several centuries, played a part in its demise. In the early fifteenth century, vast Chinese fleets of huge seagoing ships, under the command of a Muslim eunuch, sailed from China through the Indian Ocean as far as Africa. China was then at the forefront of maritime technology. But these expeditions were solely for prestige and not for commerce. Instead of making money, they cost the government enormously. After they ended, the government reacted to the expenditure by bringing an end to the building of large ships and restricting trade. The ending of Chinese naval power in the mid-fifteenth century encouraged piracy along the coasts. In response, rather than fighting the pirates, the government sought to end piracy by removing the population from the coasts. The great port cities were depopulated. It is from this time that we no longer hear of Jewish communities in the seaports.

At the same time, Mongols and other steppe peoples began attacking China from the west and north. The government response was to cut off trade from that direction and rebuild the Great Wall in the late fifteenth century—a defensive posture doomed to failure. The government had become xenophobic, and the Kaifeng synagogue community was cut off from contact not only with Jews around the world but with the other Chinese-Jewish communities that disappeared in the sixteenth century. Jews from the seaport synagogue communities probably spread out among the general population or converted to a religion close to Judaism: Islam.

A century later, in the chaos attendant on the Manchu conquest of the declining Ming regime, Kaifeng suffered drastically. In 1642, a rebel army besieged Kaifeng for a half year, leading to mass starvation. In desperation, the governor had the dikes broken in an attempt to drown the besieging rebels. Rather than harm the encircling troops, the raging
Yellow River wiped out Kaifeng, drowning many of the residents. At least half of the Kaifeng Jews died. Of the seventeen Jewish clans (surnames) before the disaster, only seven returned after the flood.

Yet but a few years after the flood, the Jewish community was again prospering. Two brothers of the Zhao clan passed the highest of the examinations beginning in 1646 and were given important government positions. The Jewish families seemed to have retained at least some of their wealth, for a decade after the flood they began to rebuild the synagogue, completing it in 1663. It is this synagogue that the Jesuits visited. Unable to attain new Torah scrolls, as they were now cut off from Jewry elsewhere, the community recopied thirteen scrolls themselves, and set up a stela to commemorate the resplendent new synagogue.

By this time, the Qing dynasty, the foreign Manchu rule over China that began in 1644, was well established, and the Kaifeng community continued to flourish. By the middle of the eighteenth century, this was beginning to change. The Manchu regime, never embraced by the Chinese, was beginning to weaken. Intolerance by the Manchu government led to Muslim revolts in a number of areas. The Kaifeng community feared they would suffer accordingly, as the Chinese had always considered Muslims and Jews to be the same but for minor differences. The economic centre of China shifted to the coasts, and inland cities such as Kaifeng became peripheral to both political power and wealth. The Jews of Kaifeng had now been isolated from Judaism elsewhere for over a century and their understanding of Hebrew and Judaism was weakening.

In 1841, the synagogue was again seriously damaged by flooding. A decade and a half later, the peasant army of the Taiping Movement, the religio-political movement that sought to overthrow the Manchu regime and begin its own Chinese Christian government (discussed above), was advancing on Kaifeng. In 1857, to avoid the cataclysm, a large part of the population, including many of the Kaifeng Jews, fled, never to return. In the battle for the city and its being retaken by the English-led Manchu-European army, Kaifeng was devastated. In the midst of this, the Yellow River again flooded in 1860, demolishing the already damaged synagogue. Sometime earlier the last Chinese rabbi had died. By the end of the nineteenth century, only remnants of Jewish practices continued among the few impoverished Chinese Jews in Kaifeng. Yet identity with Judaism remained sufficiently strong that some Passover rituals, eating matzos, for example, continued well into the twentieth century. There are still some in Kaifeng who identify themselves as Jews,26

The Kaifeng Jews are perhaps the most remarkable community in the history of Judaism. Not only did they last as long, if not longer, than any Jewish community outside of North Africa and Southwest Asia, but with
The Theology of the Chinese Jews

a relatively small population they maintained through their last several hundred years a Jewish life in spite of being isolated from the rest of Judaism. Their demise as a viable Jewish community was due to circumstances—economic, political, and natural disasters—beyond their control. The community not only succeeded from the standpoint of Judaism for nearly nine centuries, repeatedly building spectacular synagogues, but they held high socio-political positions in China far out of proportion to their small population.

Thus, the Abrahamic traditions have histories quite different from one another. The Jesuits may have modelled their mode of conversion on the Chinese-Jewish experience, as is discussed in the next chapter, in which Christian converts could remain Chinese by carrying out the family and state rituals even while engaging in Christian worship. But when the Jesuits lost the Rites Controversy over this in the Vatican, the Christian missionary enterprise became in the main an attempt to change the Chinese to a colonized people under European and American sway. The Chinese resisted and ultimately drove the missionaries and their supporting Western armies out of China.

Islam succeeded in China because the Muslims did not attempt to convert the Chinese people and became a part of the Chinese religious gestalt. While there were problems under the foreign Manchu regime, they were relatively short-lived. Millions of Muslims today are an integral part of China proper, although many Muslim Uyghurs continue to strive to lift the yoke of Chinese control to again become an independent state.

Judaism began in China as did Islam: in communities of foreign traders living in seaports in urban sectors under their own control. Similar to the Muslims, but far fewer in number, they too assimilated into Chinese culture, building synagogues in a number of port cities. A single community in the interior, in the city of Kaifeng, continued in spite of numerous vicissitudes, virtually disappearing only relatively recently due to isolation, natural disasters, and political chaos.

One of the factors that allowed the continuation of the Kaifeng community was Islam itself. Not only did the Chinese not perceive a significant difference between the two—mostly they noted only differences in the colour of the skullcaps, whether blue or white—but the Jews lived in a sea of Islam. Muslims were their friends and neighbours; the synagogue in Kaifeng was close to one of the mosques, and there was no animosity between the two, since they were of equally foreign traditions with very similar religious practices within the Chinese religious context. Moreover, as is discussed in the next chapter, the example of the Muslims, as well as the Buddhists, provided a precedent for maintaining a
special diet while socializing with Chinese, and the ubiquity of vegetarian Buddhist restaurants in all cities allowed Jews to travel throughout China for trade and as officials while maintaining Jewish dietary practices.
Chapter 5

The Sinification of Judaism

Veneration of Ancestors: Family, Tribal, Religious, and Cultural

So long as Judaism in China was a religion of foreigners, the religious practices and understandings would follow in virtually every detail the Judaism from where they came. This was the situation in the new port of Shanghai from the mid-nineteenth century and would have been the case for at least the first century following the arrival in Kaifeng. But we know that after a century or so the Judaism of the Jews in Kaifeng, and probably elsewhere in China where there were permanent settlements and synagogues, was modified. This modification was not a matter of changing the normal Jewish practices but of adding practices central to the new cultural milieu in which they were living that were not inimical to Judaism.

A parallel situation to this mode of religious modification is that of American Judaism. Except for those pockets of Jews who wear eighteenth-century Polish and Ukranian clothing on ceremonial occasions, speak Yiddish as much as possible, and refrain from socializing with other Americans, American Jews have adapted to the religion (quasi-religion for some scholars) of Americanism. Thus they speak English, at least outside of the home, wear American-style clothing (although the very Orthodox will add an undergarment with fringes), and celebrate the festivals of Americanism: Thanksgiving, New Year’s Day, and July 4th. In their eyes, this neither contradicts Judaism nor makes them less Jewish. The architecture of their synagogues often reflects the architectural styles where they were built.
The Theology of the Chinese Jews

When the Jews residing in Kaifeng and elsewhere took on Chinese surnames, along with their Hebrew names, which continued in use for religious purposes, they took on all that goes with the Chinese concept of family, which means special rituals for remembering dead parents and grandparents, as well as the concept of clan linked to surname. It should be kept in mind that memorializing the family dead is hardly new to the practice of Judaism. In modern Western synagogues, one finds name plaques of the dead on walls with small electric lights beside them, which are lighted on the anniversary day of the death, and sons (and now increasingly daughters) will say a special prayer for the dead during the daily synagogue service. In the home, a candle that lasts an entire day is lit on the anniversary of the death in memory of the dead person.

Similarly, it is ubiquitous in modern Chinese temples to find name plaques with little electric lights that are used for exactly the same purpose. Buddhist monks or nuns may be asked to chant sutras for the dead on that day. Candles will be lit in the homes for the same purpose. What was added in the sinification of Judaism was an elaboration of the already present memorializing. Thus, paralleling the Qingming festival, it is a common custom in Judaism to visit the graves of one’s parents at least once a year.

The major source of our understanding of the sinification of the Kai-feng Jews are the letters written to Europe by the Jesuits in China during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with regard to the architecture and furnishings of the synagogue and with their comments on the rituals practiced there. Given previous mentions of the synagogue and its construction, it is reasonable to assume that these practices were in place at least by the fifteenth century, when Chinese surnames began to be used, and probably earlier. In the design of the synagogue we can clearly see that the reverencing of ancestors, both clan ancestors and of Judaism as a whole, is additive to rather than substituting for normative practices.

The synagogue as described in the fifteenth-century stela and by the Jesuits in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was undoubtedly magnificent. In size, it was about that of an international football (soccer) pitch, which for an urban plot in a major city would have been enormous and very expensive. The design was that of a very large Chinese temple or mansion. Running down its length were three walled courtyards with three gates, two highly ornamental, and two archways (some understand the last courtyard to be two sections divided by rows of trees rather than a wall). In the last courtyard were the structures for communal religious rituals. The main hall was very large for a single Chinese room, approximately twenty by thirteen meters, flanked by two smaller halls. Unlike Chinese temples, which face south, the whole
arrangement faces east, which means that worshippers entered the main hall from the doorway to the east and would have faced west, where the arc was placed, the direction of Jerusalem from Kaifeng, in accordance with Jewish practice.

On each side of, but walled off from, the second courtyard were small residences, probably for caretakers. At each side of the forepart of the entry courtyard, also separately walled off, were small clan temples of the two most important Jewish clans in the seventeenth century, the Zhao and the Li. The former clan had the highest-ranked government officials, and the latter had the largest proportion of the rabbis throughout the history of the community. The existence of these two rooms is clear evidence that the Chinese Jews reverenced ancestors on a clan basis, as did the Chinese. The placement along the side of the courtyard of these separate clan temples accords with Chinese temple architecture.

Closer to the main hall and built into each side of the wall but not walled off were lecture halls, also used for meetings, and a kitchen, again typical of Chinese temple architecture. There was also an alcove for the removal of the sinews and nerves of ritually slaughtered animals. Not shown in the Jesuit drawing, perhaps because it was hidden by the main hall, but mentioned in the descriptions was a mikvah (ritual bath) near a well.

The two buildings flanking the main hall are those of the greatest relevance to this discussion, though some confusion exists between the written description in the Jesuit records and in their drawing of the synagogue grounds. According to the legend of the drawing, done by Father Jean Domenge in 1722, one hall was called the Hall of the Holy Patriarchs and the other the Hall of the Founder of the Religion—Abraham. But Father Jean-Paul Gozani in a letter of 1781 speaks of entering one hall and lists those who were thus honoured. Possibly he entered both and conflated the description as but a single hall, but one cannot be certain. Thus, it is not possible to know who was being honoured in which hall. In the hall, he reports, was nothing but incense bowls: "The largest of these incense bowls, which is for the Patriarch Abraham, stands in the middle of the hall. After this stands those of Isaac, of Jacob, and his twelve children, called by them Shih-erh-ko-p'ai-tzu [shi er go pai zil], the Twelve Descents or Tribes of Israel. Next are those of Moses, Aaron, Joshua, Ezra, and of several illustrious persons both men and women" (White I, 41).

Perhaps the first two sentences describe the interior of the second above-mentioned hall, and the last sentence the interior of the first-mentioned. Or perhaps the halls were misnamed in the drawing and one hall is for the Patriarchs and other important personages in Judaism and
the second hall is for the more recent ancestors of the Chinese Jews, for Gozani mentions a Hall of the Ancestors (Cintang).

It is puzzling that Gozani makes no mention of name plaques, for otherwise how would the incense burners be identified as to whom they were for? In a postscript in his letter, he mentions that the Hall of the Ancestors was “without Tablets, they being forbid the use of images and of everything of that kind.” But Jews are not forbidden writing for these purposes, only images. Without name plaques there would be no way to make the offerings “with the same ceremonies as are employed in China” (White I, 45). In a Chinese clan temple or in the Temple to the First Teacher there are name plaques and no images. Most likely name plaques are so ubiquitous in temples that it was not worth mentioning. Obviously, by “Tablets” Gozani meant only paintings, not calligraphy. Lists of more recent names of Chinese Jews have been recorded from ancestral tablets, so there can be no question that they were used (White III, 212-18).28 Offering before these incense burners in the Chinese mode were made four times a year, including the spring and autumn equinoxes.

The Jesuits observed that in front of the main hall was a platform where the temporary succah was build for the Feast of Tabernacles. Upon entering the main hall, one would encounter a typical Chinese temple table on which is placed the ubiquitous incense burner flanked by, in order, flower vases, candlesticks, and, in the Jesuit drawing, additional oil lamps. On one side of the table was a drain for the runoff resulting from pouring water over one’s hands for purification upon entering. Presumably a pitcher of water stood nearby.

In the middle of the hall was a large chair with a richly brocaded cushion on a low platform called the Chair of Moses, in the place where a bimah (Ashkenazi) or tebah (Sephardi) would be in a European synagogue. The Kaifeng Jews were following the Mizrachi practice of placing the Torah on a chair or throne when it is read. The Torahs were kept in a round hard covering case. When the Torah was read, the case was placed on the chair in an upright position, the case was opened with the Torah inside, and the scroll was turned to the portion to be read while remaining in the opened case. Above the Chair of Moses was a domed ceiling.

Along the western wall was a raised dias. At the centre of this dias, against the wall, was the Ark that contained at least twelve Torah scrolls. Flanking the Ark were cupboards. In one, the other books of the Tanach (Hebrew Bible) were stored, and in the other, the siddurs (prayer books) and the Talmud. This completes the furnishings of the main hall of the synagogue.
Chinese invite only very close friends to their homes, and none of the Jesuits seemed to have received such invitations. Thus, we have no description of the interiors of the homes of the Chinese Jews. The Jesuits state they were told there were no plaques in the homes. However, the Jesuits did report that on asking they were told there were incense bowls for reverencing the ancestors in their homes. One would assume that these incense bowls, as is invariably the case in Chinese homes, were placed in front of the name plaques of the more recently deceased members of the family. It seems in this regard Gozani again is using “plaques” to stand for painted images rather than name plaques.

The layout of the synagogue leaves no separate place for women, such as a balcony, as found in Iberian synagogues from before the fifteenth-century expulsion or a side room, as found for example in the early Prague synagogue. It is difficult to believe that women were left with no ritual roles, as that is contrary to Chinese spiritual practice (Paper 1997, chap. 4). Since in both traditional Jewish and Chinese religious behaviour it is understood that women’s ritual roles are primarily in the home, and, given the Jesuits’ statements, it is virtually certain that there were altars in the homes with name plaques of the more recently deceased before which were placed incense burners and candles. These would have been cared for by the women of the family.

Susan Sered, in her study of elder Mizrahi Jewish women in Israel, points out that a religious concern for ancestors “is an important part of the religious lives of the women [studied]” (18): “Ancestors can be either biological (parents, grandparents) or mythical saints (saints, Biblical figures). In a variety of rituals the women ‘remember the ancestors.’ These rituals ranging from lighting candles on the Festival of the New Moon to visiting cemeteries and holy tombs. The women primarily seek from their ancestors help in caring for both their living and their as yet unborn descendants” (19). The archeologist William Dever understands Sered’s findings to be relevant to ancient Israelite religion (249ff.). In other words, these religious practices of Mizrahi lower-class women may be continuous since the Israelite period and thus relevant to the religious understanding of those eleventh-century Jews who first took residence in Kaifeng. Comparable practices can also be found in folk Sephardic and Ashkenazic traditions.

The practice discussed by Sered is identical in every nuance to that of Chinese religion regarding ancestors. Hence, while only Jewish males, probably, moved to Kaifeng, the religious practices of their Chinese wives would have been virtually identical to those of the Jewish women from where they came. The only probable difference would be the addition of incense offered to the family dead, though the offerings would have
taken place at the same time of the lunar month. Thus, these Mizrahi Jewish males would not have discouraged these practices of their converted Chinese wives, as they effectively blended nearly identical Mizrahi Jewish and Chinese religious practices in the home.

While the use of incense may seem unrelated to Jewish practices and even understood to be condemned in later Israelite religion, at least in settings outside of the Temple, the Torah offers a precedent for making sweet-smelling offerings. Although the reference is to meat offerings, we do find in Leviticus 3:5: "it is an offering made by fire, of a sweet savour unto the Lord." In any case, the incense is burned not as an offering to God—the biblical referent—but as a sign of respect to the ancestors and Patriarchs, which is quite different. The use of incense by the Chinese Jews reminds one of the use of sweet-smelling spices (b'samim) in the Havdalah ritual at the end of shabbat.

In examining the records that have come down to us, scholars have determined that the Kaifeng Jews were accurately following the Jewish lunar calendar rather than the different Chinese lunar calendar. They honoured shabbat, although the traditional Chinese calendar does not recognize weeks. The 1663 stela specifically mentions that no cooking was done that day and that it was reserved for cultivating purity and enlightenment. The 1489 stela mentions praying three times a day and that four days of each lunar month are days of purification. The Jesuits noted that food to be eaten on the Sabbath was prepared the day before. Prior to reading from the Torah on shabbat, it is specifically mentioned by the Jesuits that they bathe themselves and put on clean clothes. With regard to worshipping, the inscriptions describe decorum with wording identical to that found in the early Chinese ritual texts, mentioning purification, bathing, putting off sensual desires, quieting the mind, properly adjusting one's clothes and head covering, and having a dignified demeanour. They used both chanting and silent worship, moving their bodies to and fro, precisely as is still done in traditional Jewish practice.

The Chinese Jews maintained all of the traditional Jewish holidays. Mentioned specifically by the Jesuits are Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot, Simchat Torah, Tisha B'av, Purim, Chanukah, and of course the High Holidays: Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The last is described in the 1489 stela. Emphasized is fasting, the cessation of all work and travel, and focusing one's heart and mind on a restoration of goodness. Sin and repentance are sinicized, as the relevant reference is a quotation from the Yi, "One acknowledges one's faults and corrects them." Although the reference is to the Chinese Classics, it is little different from the traditional Jewish understanding of sin and repentance; that is, teshuvah. In this process, one considers one's sinful behaviour and seeks
not to repeat it, apologizing to those offended and praying to God for forgiveness.

The Kaifeng Jews prayed after meals, maintained the Kiddush and Havdalah to begin and end the Sabbath, and had ceremonies for circumcision, Bar Mitzvah, marriage, and burial. The Jesuits mention that the ceremonies were conducted in the Chinese fashion, but this makes sense only in that they were celebrated, in similar fashion to the Chinese, with a banquet. Probably the Jesuits, given their training, were unfamiliar with the feasting that follows many Jewish rituals and is the basis of Chinese rituals. This is but a list of what was recorded; it is not a definitive list of their observances.

Thus, in addition to observing the normative Jewish religious practices found everywhere, the Chinese Jews elaborated the traditional memorial services for parents and added the same for the dead of their clans and for the founders of Judaism. These founders, the Patriarchs, would probably have been understood as the ancestors of Judaism as a macro-clan, given that so many prayers in the Siddur (prayer book) begin with reference to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as the forefathers of the Jews as well as the founders of Judaism. In addition, those who passed at least the first of the civil service examinations, the literati, would have taken part as guests at memorial services for the founders of the literati tradition, as discussed in the last part of this chapter.

Education and Its Relationship to Judaism

All the Chinese-Jewish boys received basic training for praying in Hebrew and further uses of the language. The Jesuits wrote in the eighteenth century, "They use truly Hebrew letters, which they learn to read from boyhood, and many even to write [Judeao-Persian?], as I have seen with my own eyes, both reading and writing; and whenever they write they use points to indicate the vowels" (cited in Xu 51). All the children would have received a basic education in Chinese.

Those that sought more than a basic education would have chosen from among study of Talmud and related texts for the rabbinate; study of the Classics, history, and poetry for the civil service examinations; or study for one of the professions. The Jesuits seem to have assumed, perhaps because of their own theological education, that those Jews who studied for the civil service examinations would be no longer truly Jewish and at odds with those who studied for the rabbinate. They seem to have forgotten that their own education also often included the sciences. Xu Xin expresses a similar viewpoint: "The Chinese civil service system was so time-consuming that it inevitably entailed the abandonment of the
The Theology of the Chinese Jews

study of Hebrew and any prospect of becoming learned in Judaism.... [One] who spent almost all of his time studying the Chinese classics had little if any time to learn Hebrew.... The negative effects for Jewish identity were obvious and serious” (Xu 45). This conclusion indicates a fundamental misunderstanding of Judaism, as well as a catering to the contemporary Jewish argument that assimilation is evil because it necessarily leads to Jews leaving Judaism, as discussed in chapter 1.

With the exception of a few contemporary ultra-Orthodox communities, there is no expectation in Judaism that all males focus their studies solely on the Talmud. In modern Orthodox communities it is hoped that a few will specialize in such studies and that many will continue to study Torah and Talmud in their free time throughout their lives, but it is assumed that most will primarily engage in secular studies. In modern Jewish families, as among the Chinese Jews, it is common for those families that can afford it to highly educate their children so that one or a few will study for the rabbinate and others will study medicine, for example, or, in the case of traditional China, study for the civil service examinations. All routes bring benefit to the family and the community. Not becoming a rabbi does not compromise one’s Jewish identity. Were that the case, Judaism would have disappeared in the West long ago.

We know that many of the non-Jewish Chinese who studied for the civil service examinations and passed them involved themselves in historical scholarship, Daoist or Buddhist studies, calligraphy and painting, poetry, and so on. Those Chinese Jews who passed the examinations could continue to study Torah and Talmud, as some Western Jewish professionals or business persons do today. Because they would be holding offices away from Kaifeng, however, this study might not have become feasible until they retired. The point is that doing both secular and Jewish studies is quite common in Judaism.

Maimonides is considered a great Jewish scholar and philosopher, but he made his living as a physician, which involved quite different studies, and he received his higher education at the famous Islamic university in Fez, where he studied Greek philosophy, among other subjects. My own elementary education was in a yeshivah (Baltimore Talmudical Academy), yet the day was split between Talmud–Torah study, primarily in Yiddish, and secular studies in the English language. Of those who graduated from the yeshiva’s secondary school, most went to secular universities. It is an error to assume, from the perspective of the vast majority of Jews either today or in the past, that secular studies automatically renders one a lesser Jew.

The most eminent Chinese Jew of the seventeenth century was Zhao Yingcheng, whose Hebrew name was Moses ben Abram. He passed the
highest examination in 1646 at the age of twenty-seven and had a very successful career in the civil service. He returned to Kaifeng from his government office in the distant Fujian province in 1653, when he was granted the usual approximately three-year leave on the death of his father. While he was home, he was actively involved in the financing and rebuilding of the synagogue, which had been damaged by the 1642 flood, and also assisted in the collation and reconstruction of the Torah scrolls (Leslie 1972, 44-45). Here is a perfect illustration of the fact that success in the Chinese civil service educational system, and being away on government service, did not in itself distance the Chinese Jews from Judaism.

The typical modern Jewish synagogue has one or more rabbis, depending on its size, and a president of the congregation, who is usually a successful business person or a member of a profession. Judaism, save for a few small sects, does not sequester itself from the world. Being a Chinese Jew was not unlike being a Daoist priest in China. Those called Daoists in China are those born into a priestly lineage and trained in the esoteric Daoist rituals. But many Daoist priests had secular occupations as well. It is only the monks and nuns in China, whether Buddhist or Daoist, who eschew the more typical worldly lifestyle. The Jesuits were from a religious tradition that understood monks as truly religious, similar to Buddhists. This has never been the case for Judaism.

Thus, a secular education, along with the training of youth in all those disciplines necessary to becoming part of a minyan (one of at least ten males thirteen years or more of age required for formal prayer), does not reduce one’s Jewishness. Those of the Kaifeng synagogue community who became officials remained Jews; the two forms of education were not contradictory but rather compatible. Becoming a successful community through the success of its members in the larger Chinese world strengthened rather than weakened the Kaifeng Jewish community. Assimilation through education and employment lead not to the community’s demise but to its longevity.

The Kaifeng Jews and Their Neighbours

Minority cultures by definition do not live in complete isolation. The quality of their lives is to a large extent dependent on their interaction with neighbours, both those in the dominant culture and those in neighbouring minority communities. Of course, societies can attempt to live in partial isolation from others. In North America, Amish, Hutterites, and certain other Protestant sects have been able to preserve their language and maintain a traditional lifestyle by living together
in rural communities and being successful in agriculture. But even these communities interact in various ways with the neighbouring communities.

In urban Christian cultures, Jews were usually forced to live together in Jewish communities, whether they wished to or not. Even in North America into the 1960s, Jews were often limited, as were African Americans, as to where they could reside. Those who attempted to reside where they chose could be subject to extreme violence. In more recent times, various Hasidic sects have lived in self-segregated urban communities, but whether these will be viable over the long term is yet to be seen.

As discussed in chapter 2, Jews living in Europe were subject to murder, rape, pillage, and expulsion, even at the hands of their own neighbours. In the Ukraine and contiguous areas, the Russian Orthodox village priest would often set his congregation aflame with anti-Jewish tirades at the Easter service, leading to an explosion of violence against the nearest Jewish shtetl (segregated Jewish rural village) when the service ended. For European Jews, occupations open to them were limited, as was land ownership. In Islamic countries, the communities were more open to Jews, but Jews were always understood as beneath Muslims, paid special taxes, and were subject to occasional expulsions or forced conversions.

In China, none of this held. Chinese culture tends to be homogeneous within any particular region. At least among the educated, those who are different, so long as they accord with what is considered decorous behaviour, were welcomed; they were enjoyed for their differences. When I first resided in Taiwan in the mid-1960s as a graduate student, I was often asked to parties by Chinese intellectual-artists because I was a foreigner with whom they could communicate and was well versed in traditional Chinese culture, especially the arts, and yet had different life experiences and a different lifestyle.

The Kaifeng Jews were apparently invited to come to Kaifeng by the government because of some needed skills or knowledge, but they were not limited in their occupations. This is far from the from the experience of those Jews in Germany who were invited to Poland to take on the role of rent and tax collectors on behalf of the feudal nobility, thereby earning the enmity of the peasantry. The Jews in Kaifeng began as a settlement of foreigners but over time became an urban community whose residents lived together by choice for reasons of convenience (to be near the synagogue and have access to kosher meat). They were granted the right to purchase not just land but, significantly, a large urban tract for their synagogue, as well as permission to build it. Indeed, the synagogues were built with imperial approval and nominal sponsorship, as was the case for all large temples.
On one side, their immediate neighbours were Muslims. In Kaifeng, the synagogue and one of the mosques were close to each other. This is hardly surprising, given that the Chinese consider Islam and Judaism to be virtually the same. Indeed, the most conspicuous difference to the Chinese, as previously mentioned, was the colour of their skullcaps: blue for Jews and white for Muslims. But in at least Kaifeng, their Chinese neighbours were aware that there were differences in the ritual treatment of meat, with the Jews removing sinews and certain nerves. Thus, the street on which the synagogue was found was named the Street of the Plucking Out of Sinews. This helped to distinguish the synagogue from the mosque, as the Chinese tended to use the same name for both: Temple of Purity and Truth.

There is no record, whether from the sparse Chinese writings mentioning Jews or from the Jewish material itself, of any animosity between the Jews and their neighbours. After the first generation or so, intermarriage was reduced to less than a quarter of the marriages. Obviously, non-Jewish Chinese families were willing for their daughters to marry Jews. The reverse, however, was not the case, as female Jews who married outside of the Jewish community would not have been able to maintain a Jewish lifestyle. Marriages were arranged by the families, so individual choice was of little account, as is the case for many traditional societies.

The reason for the continuation of a relatively small number of intermarriages was probably due in part to the Chinese Jews entering the civil service as well as becoming well-off merchants. It is usually among these two groups, aside from the imperial family, that we find Chinese men who have more than one wife. Government officials were not allowed to serve near their home areas, and as the marriage pattern was patrilocal, it was expected of the wife that she remain in the family home to care for her husband’s parents. But officials also need a wife to care for their residences as officials. Thus, it was necessary for officials to have at least two wives. Similarly, the wealthy, living in mansions, found it useful to have more than a single wife to maintain the large establishment (with servants to do the physical labour).

It should be kept in mind that only Ashkenazi Jews made it a rule to have but a single wife, and this rule developed only after Jews began to reside in China. Those Jews coming from Iraq or Persia, where multiple wives were common for men who could afford them, would have followed the Chinese pattern, a pattern with which they were already familiar.

For those Jews who became literati, we know that at least some became close friends with non-Jewish literati, which is hardly surprising, since there would have been only a small number of Jewish literati at any one time. A few of the placards in the synagogue were written by
these non-Jewish friends. Trading calligraphy was common among the literati and continues among the traditionally educated, just as artists in the West often trade paintings. Of course, the statements on these placards would have been discussed in advance and certainly would not have been put up if they did not meet the theological expectations of the congregation.

Jews travelled freely throughout China. Those who held high government positions in far-flung regions are positively mentioned in the local histories with no reference to their Judaism, for that would have been of no relevance. Similarly, officials who were devout lay Buddhists were not usually mentioned in that regard.

From early times, it was understood that being Chinese was primarily a matter of culture, of no more consequence perhaps than having a different way of closing one’s garment, as is mentioned in the Analects of Kongzi. Those who wore the typical Chinese clothing of the day and behaved socially as other Chinese were considered Chinese. Head coverings were inconsequential. Taoist priests and monks wore special caps, as did the literati. Muslims and Jews who passed the first of the civil service examinations would have worn the literati caps, save perhaps in mosques and synagogues, when they would have worn the head covering particular to those traditions.

Thus, for the Chinese, Chinese Jews were Chinese, to be judged not by their religious practices but by their worth as individual human beings. When their Judaism was noted, it was treated as an interesting curiosity. Some went further and admired Judaism and wrote positively about it. As the Jews did not proselytize in China, the admiring of Judaism would not have led to conversion. Thus, the Chinese were not put off by the Jews as they often were by Christian missionaries. As for the Chinese Jews themselves, they did not see their being Jewish as a reason to isolate themselves from the larger Chinese community, and this too led to a positive relationship between the Chinese Jews and their neighbours.

Chinese Judaism

As delineated above, the Chinese Jews maintained as full a Jewish ritual life as to be found anywhere. They strictly observed the dietary practices, although of course not the later elaborations of contemporary North American Judaism. They took keeping kosher so seriously that if one did not do so, according to the Jesuit records, that person would be ostracized by the community.

Those who had to be away from the Kaifeng community and not near the other synagogues would have maintained a slightly restricted diet
while they were gone, as koshered red meat would not have been available (koshering fowl is simpler and could be done by those travelling or residing away from Kaifeng). Actually, these restrictions would have been of little consequence, since in pre-modern times most of the meat eaten in China was pork, which the Chinese Jews would not have eaten anyway, and fish was usually available. They could also have eaten at Buddhist-oriented vegetarian restaurants. Mixing meat and dairy would not have been a problem, as China is a non-dairy culture. China proper has no pasture land, and accordingly many Chinese lack the enzyme necessary to easily digest lactose.

An illustrative event is the edict of the early Mongol period mentioned in the preceding chapter, in which Muslims and Jews were forbidden to slaughter their animals and required to eat meat slaughtered by others. The wording surrounding the edict strongly implies the emperor felt insulted by a Jew or a Muslim who refused to eat at a state banquet. One can assume that the edict was not enforced, and it would have been dropped when the Ming dynasty replaced the Mongol regime. My surmise is that in this early part of the Yuan dynasty, the Mongols in China were still eating Mongol style—that is, from one large bowl in which were combined various foods, including meat, usually lamb. A Jew or a Muslim thus could eat none of the food. Had it been a Chinese-style meal, in which the dishes are brought out in sets of four, they could have eaten from the non-meat dishes, a practice that would not have offended Chinese hosts. Chinese are used to dining with Buddhist monks and devout lay Buddhists who are vegetarians. It should be kept in mind that the major source of protein in China was and remains various *doufu* (tofu, from soybean) preparations.

As discussed above, the Chinese Jews honoured the Sabbath and all of the traditional festivals, following the Jewish calendar. They prayed in Hebrew from their *siddurs*, Haggadahs, and other prayer books. They kept the weekly reading of the Torah and Haftorah and studied the Talmud.

To all of this was added the Chinese primary virtue of *xiao*—filial piety. The 1489 stela emphasizes the importance of “observing the law, worshipping God, venerating ancestors, and being loyal to the sovereign and filial to parents.” The first two are the Jewish aspect of the Chinese Jews; the second two, all being aspects of filial piety, are the Chinese aspect, although “honouring one’s father and mother” is a primary Jewish injunction as well.

Thus we find by the side of the synagogue grounds clan temples and, flanking the synagogue’s main hall, smaller structures for reverencing the Patriarchs and other important persons in the creation of Judaism
The Theology of the Chinese Jews

and for the reverencing of the congregation's own ancestors. There were shrines to dead parents and grandparents in the homes. And on the Chinese festival of Qingming, Jews went to the graves of their departed to clean them and make offerings, as did their Chinese neighbours. The memorial rituals to deceased parents, as well as the visitation to the graves, are paralleled by equivalent rituals in European Judaism. There would have been no parallel to the clan temples and the halls to the Patriarchs and the ancestors, but these would not have been inimical to Judaism, as they did not involve worship but reverence of the Patriarchs, who are repeatedly mentioned in traditional Jewish prayers everywhere.

A final added feature would have been relevant only to those Kaifeng Jews who passed at least the first of the civil service examinations. Father Gonzani asked the Jewish literati whether they took part in the rituals at the Temple to the First Teacher. They answered in the affirmative. Again, this would not be against Jewish law, for the tablets in that temple bear the names not of deities but dead humans honoured for their importance to Chinese civilization. Similarly, even Orthodox Jews can visit the shrines to the former Presidents Jefferson and Lincoln in Washington, D.C., that are in the form of Roman temples, without concern of violating Judaism.

Thus, the Chinese Jews illustrate a fusion of Judaism and Chinese religion that is inimical to neither. The Kaifeng Jews themselves, as indicated on the 1489 stela, understood and presented Judaism to other Chinese as an addition to normative Chinese religion precisely on a par with Buddhism and Daoism:

Considering the three teachings, clearly each has temples in which they pay homage to the principal personage. Accordingly, the ru [the literati] have their Temple of the Great Perfection [later called Temple to the First Teacher] wherein Kongzi is honored. The Buddhists have the Temple of the Holy Countenance where Śākyamuni is honored. The Daoists have the Temple of the Jade Emperor where the Three Purities are honored. And thus the Pure and True [the Jews] have the Temple of Israel where August Sky [God; see next chapter] is honored.

Here, the Jews of Kaifeng are announcing that their religion is as Chinese as any of the other subsets of Chinese religion.

But the Kaifeng synagogue community has been considered by many Western Jews who write on the topic as a perfect example of the dangers of "assimilation"; that by intermarrying with Chinese females who converted to Judaism, speaking Chinese, wearing Chinese clothing, eating kosher Chinese food, and being successful politically, they were doomed to
The Sinification of Judaism

failure. What is not mentioned by these authors is that it took nearly 900 years for this failure to become manifest, and for 800 of those years the community was extraordinarily successful while maintaining as full and complete a traditional Jewish life as to be found anywhere in the world.

Take for example this blurb from the 2003 catalogue of Ktav Publishing House in its promotion of Xu Xin's book *The Jews of Kaifeng*:

The Kaifeng Jews developed a distinctive culture that was unquestionably Jewish but progressively absorbed Chinese elements. Their greatest problem was ... *the openness and toleration of Chinese society*... Over time they were so completely assimilated that few of their descendants carry any memory of Jewish ancestry and physically look much like other Chinese. The story of the Kaifeng Jews is dramatic and colorful, and offers many profound lessons. (emphasis added)

From this perspective, Judaism can survive only by isolation due to persecution, else it will disappear through the dilution of a pure Jewish blood.

I am not alone in holding a perspective on the Chinese Jews and on the value of partial assimilation that is contrary to that of most in the West who have written on the topic. Sinologists—scholars with a deep understanding of Chinese history and culture—are more likely to perceive that it is the partial assimilation of Jews in China that allowed for the creation and survival of Chinese Judaism. Irene Eber, for example, who is the Leo Friedberg Professor of East Asian Studies at the Truman Research Institute of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, writes: "By sinification I mean the gradual adaptation of customs from the Chinese environment that led not to assimilation and disappearance but to the strengthening among at least some Jews of their Jewish identity. A transformation of Jewish identity took place that, rather than keeping them as strangers, allowed Jews to integrate into Chinese society. Sinification permitted their survival within the Chinese environment" (22).

Donald Leslie, who in an earlier publication wrote the definitive history of the Kaifeng Jews, takes an even stronger position:

Instead of asking, "Why did the Chinese Jews not survive?", one might rather ask, "How did they survive so long?" The Kaifeng community and its synagogue survived and flourished for over 700 years, from ca. 1150 to 1850. How many cities in the world can boast such a record? How many other Jewish communities have survived so long without assimilation? Arguments used to demonstrate specific causation for assimilation assume prematurely that total assimilation and absorption, not survival and persistence, is the inevitable outcome. In many cases, however, it was persecution and expulsion rather than assimilation that led to the demise of a Jewish community in a particular city or country. (2000, 71)
Thus, one can easily argue that the Kaifeng synagogue has been one of the most successful Jewish communities in the history of Judaism. Except perhaps for Baghdad and other cities of old Persia, no Jewish community has remained both viable and unbroken for so long. For most of its history, the Kaifeng synagogue was one of the largest and most magnificent synagogues in the world. For its small population, perhaps at its largest 4,000, the community had government officials and wealthy merchants far out of proportion to its numbers in China. And it had a dedication to a Jewish life so strong that it lasted for centuries after it was cut off from Judaism elsewhere. It took a combination of continued isolation, severe flooding, a major shift in the economic and political centres of China, foreign invasions by Europeans, and a massive religious-political insurrection by an intolerant Chinese Christian movement that scattered the entire Kaifeng population to end the viability of the Kaifeng synagogue community 150 years ago. And still there are those in Kaifeng who identify themselves as Jewish. What other Jewish community can make such a claim?
Chapter 6

A Speculative Theology of the Chinese Jews

After several centuries of successfully adapting to Chinese culture and learning while maintaining a full traditional Jewish life, one would expect a synthesis in the theological understanding of the Chinese Jews. Their experience in Chinese culture was vastly different from that of Jews living in Christian culture and moderately different from that of Jews living under Muslim regimes, and undoubtedly it influenced their understanding of deity. So how did the Chinese Jews come to understand God?

As discussed in chapter 1, no explicit writings on theology by the Jews in Kaifeng have come down to us. They did produce at least two books, which we only know by their titles. The 1663 stela refers to *The Vicissitudes of the Holy Scriptures*, by Zhao Yingcheng, and the *Preface to Clarifying the Law*, by his brother, Zhao Yingdou. Both authors passed the highest levels of the civil service examinations and held important government offices, and both were active in the synagogue community. These works were not necessarily theological, and the Kaifeng community of a few thousand people may never have produced a theologian per se.

Nonetheless, members of the Kaifeng synagogue community did produce extensive inscriptions, including large stelae with significant amount of texts in the synagogue courtyard and numerous placards in the worship hall. These necessarily reflected their general theological understanding. We are fortunate that the Jesuits in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were fascinated by the Jews in Kaifeng and meticulously recorded these inscriptions, almost all of which were lost in the last major flood.
Most of the inscriptions were written by literati of the Kaifeng community, but a few seem to have been written by non-Jewish friends of theirs. As previously pointed out, it is most unlikely that those particular inscriptions were not discussed with the Jewish literati and even more improbable that they were put up in the synagogue if they did not reflect the theological understanding of the Chinese Jews. Andrew Plaks, an expert on traditional Chinese literature, referring particularly to the 1663 stelae, points out that "even if some or all of these texts were actually composed on commission by non-Jewish literati, according to the established Chinese custom of the time, I still maintain that they reflect primarily Jewish input, whether in the form of preliminary drafts or of discussion with the writers, so that they can be taken as evidence of Jewish thinking on various subjects" (37).

From these inscriptions in Hebrew and Chinese we have the names used for God. The Chinese terms so chosen reveal the Kaifeng Jews' understanding of the nature of God—that is, their popular theology. Other writings in Chinese on the nature of Judaism and its essential characteristics reveal to us their conceptions of the world, of being Jewish, and their relationship to God as Jews.

These terms in literary Chinese for God were not used by the Chinese Jews only in literary expressions but also in speech. In the eighteenth century, the Jesuit Father Gozani wrote in a letter, "They told me that these names were borrowed from the Chinese books, and they used them to express the Supreme Being, and the First Cause" (White I, 40). The Jesuits noted that the Chinese Jews did not use the term the Jesuits invented as a translation for God, Tianzhu ("The Ruler of Sky"), which the Chinese found illogical. The Chinese Jews seem to have been more perspicacious than the Jesuits in finding Chinese terms that not only made sense to them but also communicated their understanding to their Chinese neighbours.

The Names of God: Hebrew

The inscriptions in Chinese in and around the Kaifeng synagogue are discussed below. But there were also three inscriptions in Hebrew of statements and in locations where they are usually found in synagogues around the world. First, on the western wall—toward which the congregation faced while praying, meaning they faced toward Jerusalem—were the tablets of the Ten Commandments written in golden letters.

Near the dome suspended above the centre of the hall where the Torah scrolls were was an elaborate tablet with the emperor's name in golden Chinese logographs. But above the emperor's name was a tablet
with the second Hebrew inscription, also in letters of gold. This inscription was that of the most important statement in Judaism, its primary creed, the “Sh’ma”: “Listen Israel: YHVH is our God; YHVH is singular [Deut. 6:14] / Blessed is the Name of the glorious majesty forever and ever.” This inscription was repeated on the doors of the two cupboards that held books in Hebrew.

A triple arch over the arc, which contained the Torah scrolls, bore the third Hebrew inscription, which is a slightly modified version of Deut. 10:17: “Blessed be YHVH, God of gods, Lord of lords—great, mighty, awful.” There was a stone tablet in Persian-Hebrew that seems not to have been correctly copied by the Jesuits, who could not read it, and their copy now defies translation.30

Hence, the Kaifeng synagogue accorded with normative Judaism in giving as the name of God the Tetragrammaton—YHVH, the four-letter name that is never pronounced in Judaism, nor is it translatable.31 The meaning of this name is commonly related to a single time in the Torah (Ex. 3:14): when, upon being asked by Moses, God names himself “Eyh-Asher-Eyh” (either “I Am that I Am” or “I Will Be what I Will Be,” depending on which of the two common interpretations is preferred).

Thus the Hebrew name for God that confronted the Kaifeng Jews whenever they entered the synagogue is of a God who first of all is the being of existence itself and of what will be. Second, as found in the Exodus narrative and repeated many times in daily prayers, YHVH is the god of the Jews as a macroclan, from the standpoint of the Chinese understanding of family and society, for YHVH is the God of the clan founders, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Thus the Chinese Jews would probably have conceived of YHVH as supreme but not in opposition to the many deities to be found in China who were not perceived as deities by the Chinese Jews. The Chinese Jews certainly would not reverence them, but neither would they show disrespect to the deities of their Chinese neighbours.

The Tetragrammaton is not the only name in Hebrew that one would have encountered in the synagogue, for there are other names in the Tanach scrolls and the prayer books. The one most frequently encountered is Adonai (Lord), for that is the name substituted for the Tetragrammaton whenever it is spoken. Also common is El and its variations—Elohim and Elyon—meaning simply God. Another term for God encountered in the Tanakh is Shaddai, usually preceded by El. The literal meaning of Shaddai is controversial, as there are several possibilities. The last of the seven names of God that requires special attention when transcribed is Tzevaot, usually preceded by the Tetragrammaton, referring to the armies of Israel, according to the Biblical accounts, in its conflict with Canaanites and Phoenicians.
Aside from Biblical usages, other names are common in the Siddurim, the books of daily and weekly prayers, of which there are extant copies from the Kaifeng synagogue. Among the many terms are Avinu Malkenu (Our Father, Our King), Ha-Kadddosh Baruch Hu (The Holy One, Blessed Be He), and Elohei Avraham, Elohei Yitschak ve Elohei Yaacov (God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob). These names reinforce the exclusive roles of YHVH for the Jews: the god of the forefathers, a protecting deity of Israelites, and the god with whom the Israelites entered into a covenant, a covenant with rewards and punishments. The Chinese Jews would have understood this covenant quite differently from Jews living elsewhere.

Jews living in Christian and Muslim cultures suffered continual minor and periodic severe persecution. Their suffering was greater than and different from that of their non-Jewish neighbours. This suffering, given that God is omnipotent, is usually understood as punishment for violating the Covenant. Thus it is understood that God not only blesses the Jews but punishes them. God is portrayed in the Torah as possessing human traits, including jealousy and anger. The Jews in China, however, did not experience persecution. They did suffer from drought, floods, and warfare, but in this they were no different from their neighbours. They suffered as Chinese, not as Jews. Hence, for the Jews of Kaifeng the Covenant would have meant being true to their heritage: to avoid intermarriage with non-Jews, save for converted females; to maintain the dietary practices; to keep the daily, weekly, and commemorative days' rituals; to maintain circumcision; and to treat the sacred scrolls and all that is written in Hebrew as sacred and Hebrew as a sacred language.

For the Chinese Jews, YHVH was the sole deity, but not one who was conceived as being anthropomorphic. This deity would have been understood as exclusive to the Jews in being the deity of the forefathers of the Jews and, accordingly, the single clan deity of the Jews. YHVH would also have been understood as equivalent to the Chinese notion of the singularity of the cosmos. This brings us to the names of God written in Chinese.

The Kaifeng Synagogue's Stelae and Plaques

As far as is known, the Jews of Kaifeng did not commonly translate from Hebrew to Chinese. Given that their functional Western language had been Persian, written in the Hebrew alphabet, and that all prayers and Torah readings would have been in Hebrew, there was no need to do so. Hebrew and Chinese seem to have been kept relatively separate. Nor do the Jews of Kaifeng seem to have written any manuscripts or books in Chi-
inese about Judaism, save for the two titles mentioned at the beginning of this chapter—titles that probably disappeared in the major floods. But they did write inscriptions, either in stone or in wooden placards.

Two of the stone stelae are still extant, and Jesuits copied these and the third stela, as well as the placard inscriptions, within a generation of their being written. These inscriptions provide for us not only what the Kaifeng Jews wished to present in literary Chinese to non-Jews as the essence of their religion but also what they had before their eyes every time they prayed in the synagogue. All of these inscriptions follow forms that are common in China.

The three stone stelae, all with extensive texts, would have stood in the courtyard of the synagogue. The oldest, and the one generally considered to have been fully written from a Jewish perspective, is five feet in height and dates from 1489, over three centuries after the establishment of the Jewish community in Kaifeng. It commemorates the rebuilding of the synagogue after it was destroyed by a flood in 1461. The inscription provides a history of Judaism in relation to Chinese culture and a history of the synagogue. The inscription on the reverse of this stela dates from 1511 and adds supplementary material about Judaism and its practices.

The second stela, also five feet in height and extensively inscribed on both sides, is dated to 1663, and commemorates another rebuilding of the synagogue after its destruction in a flood in 1642. The third stela, dated to 1679, seven feet high, is a clan commemoration stone of one of the Jewish families, and its inscription is much shorter than the others.

All the other inscriptions are considerably shorter than those on the stelae. There were twenty-four horizontal tablets consisting of four logographs each, aside from flanking smaller logographs that provide information about the inscriptions and three hall name plaques—which are of the typical three logograph hall-name mode—and the name plaque of the synagogue at its entrance. Two of these inscriptions are on memorial arches, not unlike those to be found in contemporary North American Chinatowns. Fifteen other horizontal plaques were within the synagogue itself, two from emperors and others erected for various reasons. Such plaques are usually hung high up on walls, above the heads of those who would view them.

There were also seventeen pairs of vertical plaques. These are parallel statements, often antithetical, written in a poetic mode, which in the case of a temple would surround columns or hang in pairs against walls. Normally these are written on paper or silk mounted as scrolls, but for temple-type structures they are copied via carving onto wooden plaques, often curved to fit the round structural columns of the buildings. They would have been donated at various times by those who wished to do so.
The Theology of the Chinese Jews

Those that bore dates were from 1663 to 1676—that is, shortly after the last rebuilding of the synagogue and a half-millennium after the establishment of the community.

The large number of placards was quite common for temple buildings in China. In Chinese culture, the highest form of aesthetic expression is brushwork, especially when used to render words. Calligraphy is the most common form of decoration, not because it is forbidden to portray humans and nature but because the brushwork of logographs is considered more aesthetically expressive than other forms of brushwork, and because the words themselves express meanings of both aesthetic and ideational importance.

The Names of God: Chinese

In expressing terms for deity and other sacred concepts in Chinese, the Kaifeng Jews had several models to choose from, based on the Buddhist experience in China and going back a millennium before the establishment of the Kaifeng synagogue. The earliest method for translating Buddhist terms into Chinese was "matching terms"—using what were considered possible Chinese equivalents for Pali and Sanskrit words. The terms chosen were taken from early Daoist texts and produced translations that led to the perception that Buddhism was a form of Daoism.

The second and more accurate method was to create a set of Chinese logographs that represented sounds in Sanskrit, thus transliterating important words. The drawback was that the translations then made sense only if one already knew the Sanskrit terms; otherwise they were unintelligible. Chinese Buddhists ended up chanting Sanskrit texts using Chinese logographs for sounds, with the congregants often having no understanding of what they were chanting. Similarly, during my own early education in Judaism, I was taught to chant prayers in Hebrew with no attempt to provide meaning for the words, save for the basic ones. As a child, I could pray from memory for hours without a clue as to the meaning of what I was chanting.

The Kaifeng Jews, except for transliterating names such as Moses, avoided both methods; they did not translate Hebrew texts. Rather they found classic Chinese expressions in a Chinese literary context that had meaning for them as both Jews and Chinese. The wording used on the stelae placed in the courtyard suggests that they were intended to communicate to non-Jewish Chinese. Thus it is possible, though not necessarily the case, that the terminology chosen was skewed for that purpose. But with regard to the placards within the synagogue, they would have been intended to be seen by the worshippers. The placards would not
have been put up in the synagogue in plain view of those praying unless their sentiments expressed an understanding of the numinous meaningful to the Chinese Jews.

Given that the 1489 stela precedes the placards by two centuries, one can begin with that text for the terms used for divinity, of which there are two: *dao*\(^a\) and *tian*\(^b\) (superscript letters refer to Chinese logographs; see Appendix). The word *dao* occurs alone on the stela as meaning God, but the word is also found meaning God in the expression, *dao wu xing xiang*\(^c\), "the Way without Form or Figure." This makes the meaning quite clear, but an excursion into Chinese cosmogony is required to understand it.

The normative Chinese literati understanding of cosmogony is that at the basis of existence is *wu*\(^d\) (nothingness); that is, before there is anything, and at the ultimate root of things, there is absolute nothingness, which is nameless. From this nothingness arises a somethingness, or existence in and of itself. Any name given this somethingness is arbitrary, but for convenience it is called the Dao. In this sense of Dao (for *dao* has many meanings), it is singular without form or figure. Existence as we know it begins when the Dao splits into two in two modes. From the standpoint of substance, it splits into male Sky and female Earth; from the standpoint of energy, it splits into female Yin and male Yang. The conjoining of Sky and Earth and of Yin and Yang brings forth the myriad things and creatures, including ourselves. Hence, Sky and Earth are understood as the parents of all that exists.

Thus, Dao fits with a Chinese understanding of the Jewish name for God. As YHVH, it is a name that is mysterious, that cannot be understood by itself as a word but only in its implied meanings. It is an understanding of God not as anthropomorphic but as all-encompassing, as the source of all life. God is the ultimate that can be named, beyond which is a further ultimate that cannot be named. Thus, the second line in the *Daotejing* (the *Laozi*, the second of the three Daoist philosophical classical texts) reads: "The name that can be named is not the eternal name."

In the 1512 inscription on the reverse of the 1489 stela, *dao* is also used in its sense of "the Way," here the Way of God. Thus, in the 1489 inscription, the Torah is called in Chinese the *Daojing*\(^g\) (Classic of the Way).

*Tian* (literally, "sky" or "day") is one of those Chinese terms for the numinous that has been greatly misunderstood in most Western literature on Chinese religion. When Jesuit missionaries entered China in the late sixteenth century, they sought for a Chinese term to translate God and created the term Tianzhu, the "Ruler of Heaven." Ever since, Western scholars have tended to read the Jesuit usage back into the Chinese meaning and translate the *tian* as "Heaven" and, at times, God,
causing continual misunderstanding of Chinese religious ideology and practice.

Tian is usually part of the binomial expression tiandi (Sky-Earth). In this regard, translating the term as “Heaven” means translating \( d\text{î} \) (Earth) as Hell, given the Christian pairing. The Jesuits were aware of this and criticized the Chinese imperial ritual practice of sacrificing to Sky and Earth, as only the first should be reverenced, Sky being male. Earth being female was understood by the Jesuits as inherently evil—Eve being the source of Original Sin. Thus to sacrifice to Earth was sinful. One of the earliest Chinese responses to Christianity was to chastise the Jesuits for their criticism of worshipping Earth. The Chinese intellectuals also admonished the Jesuits for assuming that there can be a ruler of Sky-Earth, since from the Chinese understanding these are the superior numinous-creating couple in and of themselves.

Sky is also important in the early binomial expression tianming. This term is usually translated in the West as the Mandate of Heaven, given the Western presumption that Tian is an anthropomorphic deity who can promulgate the prerogative of Divine Kingship to selected humans. Again, nothing could be further from the Chinese understanding. The night sky, Tian, encompasses the pattern of the stars, and astrology-astronomy was always a major bureau of traditional governments, in that reading the pattern of the stars was important to government decision making. Some Jesuits, because of their differing Western astronomy, were given government posts in this bureau to enrich the Chinese methods. Hence, Tianming means Sky-Pattern, the way or direction that nature is taking. To accord with it is to succeed; to go against it is a prescription for disaster. Thus, the earliest extant Chinese text is a divination manual, the Yijing (Changes), for determining the direction in which nature is moving, so as to accord with it.

A second major early use of Tian in Chinese religion, going back at least 3,000 years, is as the locus of the ancestral spirits. The Chinese conceive of humans, as do many cultures, as having at least two souls. On death, one resides with the corpse in the earth and with the ancestral tablet on the family altar or in the clan temple, and the other ascends to the sky, thus maintaining the complementary aspects of Sky and Earth as numinous entities. In this sense, especially for the ruling clan, Sky meant the locus of their ancestral spirits and was used to refer to the ruling clan’s ancestral spirits as a single numinous entity to which offerings could be made (different from the offerings to Tiandi). Thus in this sense, Tian is a corporate numinous entity but not an anthropomorphic deity.32

The usage of Tian on the 1489 stela is far closer to the Chinese understanding than the Christian one. It occurs in two expressions: tiandaof
and zhentian⁷. The first means the Way of Sky and is suggestive of the Jewish notion of God as the mover, the cause of all that happens. The second means Ethereal Sky and is suggestive of the locus of the sacred, which for Judaism is upward, as well as the entirety of the sacred, or God, as singular.

There are resonances between Tian and the Hebrew word shamayim, which as tian means both sky and the locus of the sacred. But in the latter sense, shamayim means the abode of God, and thus is the sole locus of the sacred, whereas tian often implies ti, the parallel locus of the sacred, Earth.

There is some disagreement as to whether the later 1663 inscription was written by a Jew or a non-Jew, and the 1679 stela was damaged, so the text is not clear. Hence, our discussion moves to the inscriptions on the archways and placards.

All of the placard inscriptions in the synagogue destroyed in the 1461 flood presumably were lost in the inundation. Given that the following inscriptions were probably written nearly two centuries after the 1489 stela and after the Kaifeng community had become cut off from communication with Judaism elsewhere, it is possible that these inscriptions were different from the earlier ones. In that these inscriptions in content and wording are in complete accord with the earlier 1489 stela inscription, however, there is no need to assume any significant change in understanding.

Let us begin with the archway inscriptions bearing names for God. Being stylistically limited to four logographs, the terminology utilized is necessarily compact and, as with four and five logograph lines of major styles of Chinese poetry, often implies far more words than are present. Frequently the meanings are quite enigmatic.

On the front of the first archway is written “Respect Sky and invoke blessings for the state.” In this instance, the Earth part of the binomial expression tian di is probably implied. Andrew Plaks is in agreement and points out in regard to these inscriptions, “In formulations such as this in Confucian texts, we must normally understand the term tian as a kind of abbreviation for tian di ...” (42).

On the second archway is found “Respectfully accord with the vast Sky.” This is a quotation from the Shih, the Book of Documents, one of the earliest of the Five Classics (jing⁹) and is part of an address by a legendary emperor to his astronomers. Here it is clear that the inscription refers to Sky, with its array of stars signifying the natural pattern; in other words, it means follow the way of nature.

Of the fifteen four-logograph horizontal placards (not on archways), two have the phrase “By imperial decree” over the inscription and are
quotations from the Classics; hence, the implications with regard to theology are uncertain. In these placard inscriptions, the most common term denoting divinity is Sky. Aside from a repeat of the first archway phrase, we find “Honour and be in awe of the vast Sky,” “The teachings and the law are Sky’s truth,” “Receive from Sky the proclamation of changes” (here again referring to astronomy-astrology), “The teachings originate from Sky,” and “Reverence Sky; be in awe of the people.”

The second most common set of references to God relates to the Dao: “The Formless is [the Source] of the law of our ancestors,” “The teachings of our ancestors are [from] the Invisible,” and “[From] the vast emptiness [comes] the pure instruction” (referring to the Dao and the nothingness that precedes it).

Lord (zhu) as a word denoting God is used twice with respect to Judaism itself: “Lord of the Pure and True Teaching [meaning Judaism],” and “Lord of the Pure Teaching.” Zhu here may seem to be a translation for the Hebrew adonai, but zhu means “ruler” in a very broad sense. Zhu not only refers to one who has political power, but it can also mean the manager of a business or a ruling principle. Thus, on the placards, the sense is the “Proprietor of Judaism.”

Finally, the term Shangti (Supreme Power or Power Above) is found on these placards. It is a very early Chinese term for the recipient of sacrifices, which Protestant Christian missionaries latched onto as a translation for God. The early sense most likely meant, similar to the later Tian, the aggregate of the ancestral spirits of the ruling clan. The inscription is a quotation from the very early Odes of the Classics: “With enlightenment serve Supreme Power.”

The vertical placard inscriptions are as long as forty logographs divided into pairs. This arrangement not only furnishes sufficient length to provide a context for terms, but the usual parallel structure of the couplets adds nuances to understanding the hermeneutics of the names for God. Of the seventeen couplets, fourteen have such names. These names are the same four found in the brief horizontal inscriptions.

There is one instance of Ti (the Power part of Shangti), a term which had long passed out of use with regard to the numinous and was later used for “emperor” in distinction from the earlier “king” (wang) with the formation of the first Chinese empire. As with its use on the horizontal placard, it reflects a line from the Odes, thus imparting an archaic quality to its function. It is found in the expression timing, substituting the archaic ti for tian, which, as tianming discussed above, means “Sky-pattern.”

Zhu occurs twice but on two very similar couplets in which “Eternal Lord” is paired with “Creating Sky”; thus, it is essentially a single instance. Aside from the above pairings with zhu, most of the eight in-
stances of Tian on the vertical plaques form part of the binomial Tiandi (Sky-Earth) or the triplet of “Sky, Earth, humans” (or slightly differently worded equivalents). The latter means that humans, as well as all other living creatures and things, not only live between Sky and Earth but are produced by the fecund conjoining of Sky and Earth.

Tian is also found alone as the progenitor of Judaism when given to Abraham. Another instance of Tian not being a part of Tiandi is when it is juxtaposed with zhu (ancestors—a logograph different from the zhu—proprietor—previously discussed) to denote the origin of humans and creatures. Thus, Tian in this usage maintains its function as simultaneously the location of the ancestral spirits as well as the totality of the ancestral spirits. In the parallel second line of this couplet, Tian is part of the Tiandi expression.

There are six explicit instances on these placards of Dao as standing for God and two implied cases. In one of the implied cases, Dao is the unstated origin of Sky, Earth, and humans. In the second case, the term Great Void (taikong) is used. In this sense, in another couplet, we find the expression, “Dao is external to both somethingness and nothingness.” Similarly, in yet another couplet is found “Dao existed prior to form and energy.” This last explicitly captures the cosmogonic understanding that the Dao divided into two in two modes—Tiandi with relation to form and Yinyang with relation to energy—which are the dual parents of all things and creatures. All of these related meanings are found in another vertical inscription: “In understanding the Dao to be the controller of Sky, Earth and humans, we do not conceive of name or appearance.” These explicit Chinese senses are countered in one vertical inscription that reverses the relationship between Dao and Sky from an explicitly traditional Jewish perspective in the Chinese mode: “The Dao has its origin in Sky; the fifty-three weekly portions [of the Torah] records the principles of the creation of Sky, the creation of Earth and the creation of humans."

A final point to be made with regard to the names for God in the Chinese inscriptions is that the term for non-cosmic, non-nature deities, shen, is not used for this purpose even once. This is to be expected for several reasons. First, the Chinese literati made a point of avoiding, or at least giving the appearance of personally avoiding, the numerous deities of importance to the rest of the population. It was one of the means by which they separated themselves from the common culture, although outside of literary statements, the non-Jewish, non-Muslim literati were but marginally different from the rest of the population in this regard. All of the inscriptions are in the literary mode of writing. But beyond stylistics, it is clear that the Chinese Jews avoided normative Chinese
The Theology of the Chinese Jews

non-family, non-clan religious practices. Near the beginning of the 1489 stela, we find an explicit statement in this regard. In speaking of the Patriarchs, it states, "They made no images, did not fawn upon deities (shen) and ghosts (gweimm: non-family dead), and gave no credence to sorcery [certain popular religious practices relating to shamanism and mediumism]."

Even though the Chinese Jews refrained from popular Chinese religious practices, they remained fully Chinese in religion and culture by engaging in the normative practices of reverencing—not worshipping—family and clan dead as well as the Patriarchs. From a Chinese standpoint, their adherence to a god expressed with Chinese names that reference the cosmic deities and the ancestral spirits substituted for the popular Chinese religious practices, just as Buddhist practices did for Chinese lay Buddhists.

The Nature of Creation

The Torah presents time as linear and begins with the beginning of time, of the cosmos itself, for it begins with the word for beginning (bereshit, Genesis, "In the beginning"). Chinese histories also understand time to be linear, although dynasties, perceived as units of history, from historical experience are perceived as cyclic—all eventually collapse and are replaced. China being an amalgamation over time of many related cultures has a number of creation myths, but save for the philosophical formulation for creation summarized above, none of these myths begins with the beginning of time itself (save for the Pangu legend that came from India and has in China the aura of a folktale rather than a religious myth).

In the dual-creation myths at the beginning of the Torah, God creates sky and earth, then everything else, and finally humans. In one version, God creates both males and females in his own image, and, in the second, God creates first the male and then the female from the male. In either case, in traditional Judaism, God came to be commonly understood as an anthropomorphic male deity creating humans. While this is not the understanding of the major Jewish theologians, it remains the popular understanding.

In all of the Chinese creation myths, humans are created either by a divine couple or by a female deity. For in the Chinese mind, it is females that give birth to and nourish life, not males. And it is understood that the creation of life almost always requires the conjoining of complementary female and male energies. When stated as a philosophical formula, invariably it is Sky and Earth, along with Yin and Yang, that create hu-
mans; creation is expressed with the words used for birth and nurture (breastfeeding). Moreover, save for an undifferentiated singularity—the Uncarved Block—nothing precedes Sky and Earth, for these are the primal parents. Thus, when Jesuits in the late sixteenth century taught a theology in China in which God as Tiantzu, the Proprietor of Sky, created Sky and Earth, Chinese scholars objected. They asked, How could anything give birth to Sky and Earth? And how could a single male alone create any living thing?

A second way in which the Chinese understanding of creation differs from that found in the Torah is its relationship to time. In the Torah, God creates the cosmos at the beginning of time, and the recreation after the flood again is also a one-time affair. In Chinese cosmogony, creation is continuous. The movement from nothingness to somethingness to division into two and then the two conjoining and creating everything else is continually occurring, and, in essence, everything continually creates itself. The Chinese term for this is ziran<sup>kn</sup>, which literally means "of itself." This is the term used to translate "nature" into Chinese; but ziran means far more than that. It means that the constituents of the natural world, of which humans are a part, are continually creating themselves out of essentially nothing. Only artificial objects are not created spontaneously, because they are made by humans.

The concept of nature brings us to another major difference between the two concepts of creation. In the Torah, humans are given supremacy over all of nature. Humans are created separately and in the image of God, and God precedes nature. Hence, humans are both separate from and placed in control of nature, or at least of plants and animals. This understanding reflects a herding cultural ecology, where shepherds are oriented toward controlling animals. Having no pasture land, China has never had a herding tradition and is purely agricultural (in China pigs, which do not require pasture, are the primary source of meat). In the Chinese understanding, humans are a part of nature, not apart from or superior to nature. And unless humans live in harmony with nature, the inevitable result will be disaster (in traditional theory—often ignored in the contemporary industrialization of China, although this is now changing).

The Chinese inscriptions in the Kaifeng synagogue described above contain but one reference to the Bible, although even here the mention of the creation of Sky, Earth, and humans is not specifically related to a primal deity. All the other inscriptions provide the Chinese understanding of creation. The 1489 stela, quoting the Analects (<i> Lunyu</i>: xvii, 19), writes of creation as completely natural: "The four seasons follow their course and the myriad creatures are birthed.... Living things [literally:
that which is born] give birth to themselves; that which is transformed, transforms itself. Hence, although the complete term ziran is not explicitly used, its meaning is clearly present with the use of zi (self). According to the inscription, it is this basic understanding that came to Abraham as he meditated on Tian (God) and, upon realizing this profound “mystery” (xuanfei), founded Judaism.

In a vertical interior inscription of a couplet in parallel, we find this understanding continued: “The eternal Lord (zhu) produces life unceasingly; the creating-transforming Tian (Sky) transforms the transformations unendingly.” Here we have combined the Chinese understanding of continuing self-creation, self-transformation, with a creating God. But it is a continuous ever-ongoing creation-transformation rather than a one-time event at the beginning of time. The other inscriptions, as discussed in the first section of this chapter, utilize terminology that, in the main, reflects ongoing creation from the Dao (the term for the undifferentiated oneness) to the duality of Sky-Earth, who then conjoin to produce humans and all other creatures and things.

Of course, the Chinese Jews would have been familiar with the creation versions of the Torah. With regard to gender, they are likely to have been more sympathetic with the first—“And God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He them; male and female created He them”—rather than the second version, where the female human is created from the male human. Removing the willed aspect of creation, this version accords with the Chinese understanding stated above, that from the singular Dao arises male Sky and female Earth, female Yin and male Yang, which give birth to all of existence, including humans. Thus, humans are not in the image of Dao, but they are of the essence of Dao, born male and female simultaneously.

The second Biblical version, in which God created Eve from the rib of Adam—that is, created the female from out of the male, thus giving primacy to the male—would have no resonance with the Chinese understanding. But it is the latter formulation that underscores the belief that men are theologically as well as socially privileged over women. This understanding became predominant in Ashkenazi Judaism, probably due to Christian influence.

Further, while the singular God described in the Torah is indubitably male, a counter-tradition exists in Israelite popular religion, as has been abundantly demonstrated by the last several decades of archeology, of a female counterpart to God: Asherah, who is Earth as well as the wife of El. She is the deity of fertility and nurture (see Dever). From approximately the sixth century BCE, Asherah seems to have gone underground (no pun intended) but was not erased from folk memory. Indeed, She
reappears in various guises throughout Jewish history. Asherah is, however, a very controversial subject in contemporary Jewish scholarship. Nevertheless, the splitting of the singular Dao into the complementary pair of Sky and Earth in the Chinese formulation would not necessarily have been antithetical to the medieval Jewish understanding. The differences between the Chinese understanding of creation and the understanding that the ancestors of the Chinese Jews had when they arrived in Kaifeng may not have been strongly pronounced.

As previously discussed, the Kaifeng Jews would originally have come from Southwest Asia, most likely Persia, sometime in the tenth century. The most important Jewish thinker there at the time was Saadia Gaon (Saadia ben Joseph, known in Arabic as Sa‘id ‘ibn Yusuf al-Fayyūmi). He was born in Egypt in 882 and died in Baghdad in 942, where he had been the chief rabbi of one of the two rabbinic academies there. He is thought to have created the first siddur (daily prayer book), and wrote a number of treatises, including a major one on theology, Kitab al-‘Amanat wal l’tikadat (The Book of Beliefs and Opinions). This influential book was written in Arabic and reflected the classical Greek learning of Arab scholars, and it explicitly countered Christian theology. The Jews who arrived in China from Southwest Asia at this time may well have been aware of his thinking.

In tandem with Chinese cosmogony as regards creation beginning with nothingness (creatio ex nihilo), Saadia writes, “I say that our Lord, exalted be He, made it known to us that all things were created and that He had created them out of nothing” (40). And all that is created is created out of the something that comes from the nothing: “This conclusion that we have reached by means of our reasoning is precisely what is written down in the books of the prophets; namely, that all bodies trace their origin to the Creator” (50). Because God is singular, it cannot be understood literally that humans are created in the image of God, for God being incorporeal has no image. “Image” here is figurative; rather, humans are “created” in the spiritual essence of God (see quotations from The Book of Beliefs and Opinions in the following section). Thus, there is a fundamental accord in these regards, although the working out differs between the theology the Jews brought with them to Kaifeng and the cosmogony of the educated Chinese they encountered.

Nonetheless, there are differences. For one, spontaneity of creation, as well as an ongoing creation, is specifically denied by Saadia, who writes of “the untenability of the hypothesis that a thing could create itself” (47–48). For another, humans are understood to be the “intended purpose of creation” and have “been shown preference by Him above all His creatures.” Thus, for Saadia, humans are above nature (181).
The Theology of the Chinese Jews

Monotheism from a Chinese Perspective

There is a long history of the assimilation of alien religions into Chinese culture. The one with the longest history is Buddhism, and Buddhism happens to be farther removed from major aspects of Chinese religion than Judaism. It is ironic that Buddhism, nominally non-theistic, has had a major impact on Chinese theism.

By the time the Jewish community began in Kaifeng, as discussed in chapter 4, Buddhism survived in China primarily as a supplement to Chinese familism. The major form of Buddhism in China, Pure Land, provided a comfortable place for the spirits of the family dead to dwell in the Western Paradise.

At this time, as mentioned previously, there was a major transformation in popular Chinese religion with the addition of deities who are special dead humans, to which the old term for spirits, shen, was applied. The Mahayana Buddhist figure of the Bodhisattva, who functioned as does a saint in Christianity, was probably at the root of this development in Chinese religion. Bodhisattvas were humans who through meditation attained enlightenment but who refused to enter Nirvana in order to help other living beings do so. Their great spiritual merit, unneeded for themselves, could be used to help others, and they became objects of prayer for practical needs. The first major Chinese deity in this sense probably was the female Guanyin (Kuan Yin), who was originally the male Boddhisattva, Avalokiteśvara. This development took place just as the Jewish community was settling in Kaifeng.

Also following Buddhist models was the addition of images in Chinese worship. As Buddhist temples were full of images of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas, a practice adopted much earlier from the influence of Hellenistic practices following the arrival of Alexander in northwestern India, so Daoist, villages and neighbourhood temples were replete with images of shen. Offerings could be made and prayers directed to these images, just as is the practice in Catholic and Orthodox Christian churches with regard to saints.

The elite Chinese culture of the literati, whose basic religious practices devoted to family and clan were no different from popular religion in that regard, ignored this new development. The transformed concept of the shen made little impact on literati culture. In clan temples, there were and are no images, only name plaques.

So too when the literati developed their own temples in order to have a gathering place distinct from Buddhist and Daoist temples, these temples had no images but only name plaques. As introduced in chapter 3, the Temples to the First Teacher were devoted to Kongzi (Confucius)
and other noted political and social philosophers important in the development of *rujia*[^4], the ideology of the civil service system.

The Jewish synagogue in Kaifeng would have been perceived by the Chinese literati as similar to their own temples. No images were displayed in it. In the side halls dedicated to the patriarchs and the clan temples in the compound, only name plaques appeared, indicating that these were honoured human founders and clan ancestors but not *shen*. That the focus of worship was a book would have met with literati approval as well, for the Classics had a semi-sacred aura. As with Jewish practices, the literati considered it impious to casually discard honoured or revered writings. We know that at least some non-Jewish literati admired Judaism because some of the inscriptions in the synagogue, given their non-Jewish clan names, seem to have been written and presented to the synagogue by non-Jews. Thus, Judaism, from a theological standpoint was not exceptional to elite Chinese religiosity.

Although many of the non-Jewish Chinese literati exhibited an aversion to worshipping *shen*, they were still polytheists, for the family and clan spirits were not simply revered, they were worshipped. The literati also understood Sky and Earth to be cosmic deities, along with relatable cosmic and nature deities, such as particular mountains and rivers, to whom offerings should also be made.

For the Chinese Jews to assimilate to elite culture, a theological assimilation within a monotheistic framework was essential. Much later, the Jesuit missionaries tried this and ultimately failed. The Chinese Christian theology they created was scorned by the Chinese literati for its inherent misogyny and eventually was considered heretical by the Vatican because it in effect allowed the continuation of familism for Chinese converts (a provision reversed later by Vatican II).

But the Jews had several advantages the Jesuits did not have. First, they seem not to have proselytized in China; thus, they had no need to hurry such a theology. What developed would have taken place over several generations, if not centuries, and was organic to the assimilation. Second, Judaism has no explicit, complex theology to which Jews must accede on pain of death, given it was the time of the Inquisition in Europe. Third, the Jews reached Kaifeng at a time of intellectual ferment in China, while the Jesuits entered China at a time of intellectual stultification.

Finally, Judaism is family-oriented, as is Chinese culture, which the monastic Jesuit order certainly is not. While the concept of family in Judaism does not have the historical depth it does in China, the Chinese Jews began to trace their lineages as did the Chinese. Over time, the Jewish families’ lineages were traced as far back into time, if not further, than those of most elite Chinese families. Even more important, given

[^4]: *rujia* term used in Chinese religions that refers to a system of civil service examinations.
the relatively small size of the Jewish community, the Jews perceived themselves as a clan writ large, with ancestors who could be traced back for millennia. The 1489 inscription dates Abraham as the nineteenth generation after Adam and to the 146th year of the Zhou dynasty (approximately 894 BCE). Thus, this family and clan orientation provided a socio-cultural core that accorded with fundamental Chinese understandings. The practice of Judaism was presented as a macroclan practice, and its continuation thus conformed to Chinese values, especially xiao⁵, filial piety.

The cosmology and cosmogony of Chinese literati culture (rujia) is founded on early Daoist thought, especially as found in the Zhuangzi⁷ (Chuang Tzu), familiar to all the educated, and was developed by the rujia intelligentsia during the Han period (third century BCE to third century CE) by synthesizing the various streams of Chinese thought. In the Song period (tenth to thirteenth centuries), the time at which Chinese-Jewish theology was initially developing, these aspects of Daoist thought became integral to a revised rujia intellectual system, known in the West as “Neo-Confucianism.” Fortuitously, this system was not contrary to tenth-century Jewish thought.

In the theological treatise of Saadia Gaon, God is incorporeal and possesses no anthropomorphic traits: “As for those who do not seek to affirm that God is a body but yet insist on arrogating for Him motion or rest or anger or good will or the like, they really arrogate for Him a corporeal character by way of implication, even if they do not it expressly.... Once, then, the demand that the Creator be a physical being has been proved to be absurd, the arrogation to Him of bodily accidents in general must likewise be excluded” (93).

Not only is God singular and incorporeal but He is utterly unlike anything that exists in any sense: “We have been informed by our Lord, magnified and exalted by He, through the pronouncements of His prophets that He is one, living, omnipotent, and omniscient, that there is nothing that resembles Him, and that He does not resemble any of His works” (94).

Later in the text, Saadia argues that all those passages in the Torah that are descriptive of God, including His emotions and His actions, are to be understood as figurative rather than literal (114) and that “these terms must not be construed in a corporeal sense” (127).

Thus, for the Chinese Jews, the Sh'ma could be understood as reiterating the essential oneness of the cosmos without contradicting the Jewish theology they brought to China. YHVH being singular is equivalent to the Dao. As with God, the Dao is at the beginning of all that exists. The Dao is the state of primordial existence before differentiation takes place.
Spontaneously arising out of nothingness, the Dao differentiates into Sky and Earth. In Judaism, God creates the sky and the earth from nothingness. Hence, the Chinese understanding in this regard is but moderately different from the Jewish theology brought from Baghdad to Kaifeng.

The Dao does not create, for the Dao simply is. The division of the Dao itself brings forth Sky and Earth, and it is Sky and Earth, the male–female equal generative couple, that creates. And this creation is not at the beginning of time; it is ever ongoing. God, like the Dao, is not the primal cause of existence as expressed by Saadia; God is existence in and of itself.

Another Chinese understanding of Sky accords with the Jewish understanding of YHVH. As in so many cultures, in China the motion of the stars and planets in the night sky is considered one of the prime indicators of the pattern of change, of the way the cosmos naturally unfolds. Since it behooves humans to act in accordance with the way the cosmos is moving, it is best to model one’s actions, to make one’s choices, as Sky indicates. Thus, Sky in this sense parallels an important aspect of the common Jewish notion of deity as the causative factor of events. But in this understanding, God does not cause events to occur but only indicates how events will occur. As Tian, God does not will natural events; they happen. Human affairs are not caused by God; they are the responsibility of humans, or in medieval Jewish theological terms, the result of “free will.”

A third notion of Sky brings together Chinese and Jewish theology. For the early Chinese, going back at least several thousand years, Sky was the locus of the power of the conjoined ancestral spirits, particularly for the ruling clan. Although not exactly a parallel concept, the Chinese-Jewish understanding of God as the God of the Patriarchs, as the numinous power at the foundation of the macro-clan of the Jews, accords with the Chinese understanding of Sky as a power above. And so the Chinese Jews took this sense of Sky to mean God.

These understandings lie at the heart of the Chinese inscriptions in the Kaifeng synagogue. The theological implications are far-reaching in relation to the Jewish theologies that were simultaneously developing in Christian Europe, theologies that increasingly diverged from the those that earlier arose in Islamic North Africa, Iberia, and Southwest Asia.

A Speculative Chinese-Jewish Theology

Given the above findings, it is possible to make plausible assumptions about how God was understood in general by the members of the Kaifeng synagogue congregation, at least from the fifteenth century on. While no theological discourse has survived, we can to a degree enter
The Theology of the Chinese Jews

the mind of the Chinese Jews in the traditional period, especially those educated for the civil service. One can still be trained in the texts on which this education was based, as I was, and there is a considerable extant literature on the religion and culture of the period.

Thus the following discourse is based on a half-century of studying Chinese philosophy and religion, both through the literature and in the field. The elucidation of the theology indicated by the Kaifeng synagogue inscriptions derives from my understanding of Chinese literati ideology, especially from the Song through the Ming periods, the time when this theological understanding developed. Even before I began to specialize in the study of Chinese religion, I was intensively engaged in the study of literary as well as Buddhist Chinese. As mentioned in the prologue, my doctoral dissertation was the reconstruction and translation of an obscure rusia philosophical text, as well as the biography and poetry of the literati who wrote it. To achieve these ends, I had to enter the mind of the author; I had to think, as best I could, like an early medieval Chinese literati. The translation and interpretation of this text was selected by Jacques Gernet and E. Zürcher as a T'oung Pao monograph a quarter-century ago, the first so chosen in six years. Later, I immersed myself in the text of the Zhuangzi, the primary text of early Daoist ideology. As I expressed in peer-reviewed publications, I came to feel confident that I understood the original meaning of the early strata of this text.

When I first lived in Chinese culture, in mid-1960s Taiwan, I was accepted into a group of Chinese scholar-artists from the Mainland who were among the last generation to have had the traditional education. Hence, the following reconstruction of Chinese-Jewish theology, while faithful to the synagogue inscriptions, is an elaboration of these terse statements by a contemporary Western Jew, raised in the Orthodox tradition, who can, to some extent, think as a pre-modern Chinese literati.

Thus, my reading of the inscriptions in the Kaifeng synagogue differs to varying degrees from previous ones. For example, Bishop White, whose compilation of the material recorded by the Jesuits is my primary source, while well versed in Chinese, was a Christian missionary and not a classical sinologist. Our differences in translation range from minor to major. For example, White's translation "In Obedience to Heaven Proclaiming the Transforming Law" I read as "Receive from Sky the proclamation of changes," with reference to the importance of astrology-astronomy as well as to change as the only constant in nature. Where White's translation reads "Render Pure Service to Majestic Heaven," I read, "[From] the vast emptiness [comes] the pure instruction," referring to the Dao as both divinity and the Torah that flows from divinity, and the nothingness that precedes it. Here White translates kong to
mean the "Lord of Heaven" (134), the Catholic translation for God, but in Chinese cosmogony it means the "void" that precedes the inception of somethingness—the ultimate reality. In each of these examples, the difference is that White provides a Christian read, while I follow the common cosmogony and metaphysics of the literati with a Chinese-Jewish tone.

The Chinese word invariably translated as "man" or "men," 人, has, as Chinese words in general, neither number nor gender. 人 thus means "human" or "humans," depending on the context. As with normative Judaism, humans are not God but, as created from the differentiating singular Dao, humans are of the essence of God, a concept related to the heart of Hellenistic Gnosticism and Jewish mysticism. As with the theology of Saadia Gaon, humans are not actually created in the image of God, for God and the Dao have neither form nor substance and are utterly non-anthropomorphic, and Sky is ethereal but in the reality of God. Humans are a manifestation of primordial existence, of existential potentiality.

As a departure from Saadia's theology, humans are no different from everything else that is created from the differentiation of the Dao. Humans do not have a divine mandate to rule nature. Rather, as but one manifestation of nature, they are a part of nature. Humans were given agriculture by a mythic sage emperor (culture-hero), just as they were taught to build dikes to control rampaging rivers when the snows melt or the monsoon rains arrive, and just as they were given writing to enable civilization. But humans are to utilize nature wisely, carefully following the seasons and not squandering what nature provides, or through their negligence they will suffer famine. Such understanding has been a part of Chinese philosophy at least since the time of Mengzi (fourth century BCE).

As the Dao differentiates into male Sky and female Earth, as well as female Yin and male Yang, so that the myriad creatures can be birthed, so too humans are divided into males and females. As Sky and Earth and Yin and Yang are not only equal but essential to creation in their equality, so too humans as males and females are essential to the continued creation of humans.33

Chinese culture is patrilineal and patrilocal, as to a lesser degree is Judaism,34 and it is patriarchal, but primarily with regard to government, and until recently quite different from Western patriarchy, which was all-encompassing. Chinese women controlled household finances, especially in large, wealthy households. While men controlled the affairs of the family outside of the home, their activities were limited by the funds that the women were willing to provide them.
Ritually, and in contrast to Christian-influenced Judaism, women and men were absolutely equal. For example, imperial rituals required that the emperor and the empress perform the same rituals simultaneously, but the emperor did so outside of the palace while the empress did so inside the palace (see Paper 1997, chs. 4 and 5). Symbolically, equality was essential, but there were strong tendencies, except in the peasantry, to relegate women entirely to the interior of the home. Chinese culture increasingly found it expedient to regulate morality by focusing on females, and social equality between the genders over many centuries became seriously eroded. Thus gender equality existed in theory, especially with regard to spirituality, but not in practice, particularly in the social and political spheres.

The pattern of Chinese religious behaviour was that women maintained the rituals within the home, including daily offerings at the family altar, while males carried out the rituals at the clan and state temples, due to the clans being patrilineal. In local temples dedicated to various shen, women were more likely to be present than males, as in Catholic or Eastern Orthodox churches in the West. Two thousand years ago, women had official religious functions in the Chinese government, but by 1500 women were forbidden to practise as religious functionaries in public.

The Jesuits were programmed not to perceive female ritual roles. This is apparent in their accounts of matrifocal Native American religions, in which significant female ritual roles are completely overlooked. Thus, the Jesuit accounts are unclear as to the roles women played in the synagogue, if any, especially as the synagogue was at least in part a clan temple. But from a theological perspective, given the frequent reference to Tiandi (Sky-Earth), males and females would have been understood as essentially and spiritually equal. Considering Chinese practices, as well as aspects of traditional Judaism, Chinese-Jewish women would have maintained the rituals within the home.

Essential to the Jewish understanding of being human is the particular relationship between God and Jews. The Covenant is central to Jewish theology. In the Torah, the covenant made with Abraham, reinforced during the Exodus and symbolized by male circumcision, provided the entire context for Jewish self-understanding, at least in European Judaism. From this understanding, the vicissitudes of the Jewish experience were completely understood in terms that reflect Hittite contractual language. In the Bible, Jewish history is presented as one of repeated trials and tribulations dependent upon how well, as judged by the Prophets, the Jewish people accorded with the terms of their contract with God. But what would this mean in a benign socio-cultural context?

In the 1489 inscription there is no mention of a covenant. God does not offer to enter into a covenant with Abraham. Rather, the ancestral
teacher Abraham meditating on Sky came to understand the nature of life within the concept of *ziran*, spontaneous creation, and transformation. Awakening to an understanding of the profound mystery, he sought the True Teaching and to assist ethereal Sky. With a unified heart/mind (*xīn*<sup>sp</sup>) he served and worshipped God, establishing the foundation of the religion that has come down to the present.

Through the generations, the True Teaching reached Moses. Like Abraham, Moses was an exceptional person, in whom benevolence (*jīn*<sup>sp</sup>) and righteousness (*yì*<sup>sp</sup>)—the primary *rujia* virtues—and *dào* and *dé*<sup>sp</sup>—the primary Daoist (*dàojia*<sup>sp</sup>) values—were perfected. Moses sought the Scriptures on Sinai, fasting and meditating for forty days and nights. His spiritual endeavours reached Sky’s heart/mind (metaphorically) and thus originated the fifty-three chapters of the True Scriptures (the Torah). The good persons described in the Torah bring forth a good heart/mind in people, and the wicked persons described in the Torah warn us of having a dissolute volition.

The Chinese understanding of morality is far different from the traditional Jewish one, which emphasized *mitzva* (doing good and carrying out the commandments) that are rewarded and sins that are punished. From the *rujia* perspective, especially from around the time the Jewish community arose in Kaifeng, humans are understood as innately good—the viewpoint of the *Mengzi*<sup>bbb</sup>, which became one of the Classics. Nonetheless, a corrupt society can turn people from acting in a good way, meaning for the benefit of social groups, beginning with family and ending with the state. Morality is based on inferiors modelling themselves on superiors. If superiors are good, then so will be those under them.

Hence, the goodness of Abraham and Moses, and that of the other good persons described in the Bible, are paradigms for others to emulate. One is good not out of fear of punishment but because being good is being true to one’s nature, which is essentially divine, while being wicked, which in the Chinese context means acting selfishly, is being perverse to human nature. We inherently seek to be good, and to understand proper behaviour we need models. In that being good is being true to nature, being good is godly.

Thus the forefathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—are to be ritually respected out of filial piety, the core Chinese values. The other transmitters of Judaism, such as Moses and Ezra, are to be ritually respected as founders of Judaism. In the latter aspect, their treatment is similar to that of Kongzi, Mengzi, and others in the *rujia* tradition.

Given the above theological understanding, what are the practical consequences? Without punishment for transgressions, why would one perform *mitzvas* and seek to avoid sinful behaviour? In normative Judaism, the period from Rosh Hashana to Yom Kippur are the Days of
The Theology of the Chinese Jews

Repentance. It is at this time that every human being is judged by God with regard to the good and bad deeds performed during the preceding year, and punishments and rewards are meted out in the New Year accordingly. Unlike Christianity, judgment is not at the end of one’s life but on a yearly basis.

The traditional Chinese perspective on moral behaviour is different from the above. A fundamental concept of ru jia thought is the “rectification of the xin (heart/mind).” In order to govern people, one must first be able to govern oneself. As a leader, ideally one teaches the people proper behaviour through example rather than fear of punishment. (In practice, of course, the Chinese government did punish both miscreants and those perceived as a threat to the government.)

Hence, at the foundation of Chinese morality is self-rectification, the act of making oneself morally upright. From the love one has for one’s family, this behaviour extends to them, and the family is rectified; and as this rectification spreads, if one is the ruler, the whole state is positively affected through this extension of familial love.

Two thousand years ago, with the synthesis of various ideological streams, this concept of self-rectification was combined with that of continual self-creation (ziran), leading to the understanding of being responsible for one’s own behaviour and for improving it. Self-transformation or self-improvement is not only possible but, with the concept of xiao (filial piety), a moral imperative, as one must not dishonour one’s family, clan, and state. If one assumes that humans are innately good, then being good and acting accordingly is a matter of being true to one’s nature. This understanding is summed up by a third-century scholar-official, Fu Xuan: “The gentlemen of antiquity cultivated their characters or governed men by giving priority to rectifying their hearts. This was done merely for the sake of self-fulfilment. If a person has self-fulfilment, then everything will be fulfilled. If the person is himself lost, then everything will be lost” (Paper 1987, 40).

Thus for the Chinese Jews, the Days of Repentance would probably have been a time of reflection on one’s shortcomings, faults, and misdeeds during the past year, and from this understanding one strove to better oneself. This would be done not out of fear of punishment by God but out of love for God. Just as out of love for one’s parents one strives to be a good and successful person, so one strives to be a better human being out of love for the ultimate ground of being, God, which is the basis of one’s existence. For in doing so, one fulfills one’s human potential. And as any creative person knows, there is no greater joy than in bringing forth the best through the realization of one’s potential. Nothing can be a greater creation for us than our very selves. Thus, in performing
mitzvas rather than sins, we honour our parents, our clan, our macro-
clan—the Jewish people—and our God.

On the more mundane level, there are similarities between the Chi-
nese and Jewish Lunar New Years in that in both traditions one strives
to pay one’s debts and to seek reconciliation just before the New Year
begins. Thus, the two traditions would have readily merged in this and
in similar regards.

In the Torah, God introduces himself not only as the god of the fore-
fathers but as the one who led the Chosen People out of the land of
Egypt. In the European celebration of the Pesach [Passover] Seder [rit-
ual meal], much is made of the plagues set upon the Egyptians by God
to encourage them to give the Chosen People their freedom. Perhaps the
equivalent was wished upon their Christian tormentors. But in the Chi-
nese inscriptions, we find no mention of the Exodus, of the conquest of
Canaan, of the destruction of the first temple, or of the Babylonian cap-
tivity. (Of course, the Kaifeng Jews were familiar with the Exodus because
they celebrated Pesach and had the Haggada.) Is this because living in
China and not suffering as Jews for many generations, the Chinese Jews
had no feeling of bitterness about either their situation or that of their
neighbours? In China, the Jews prospered not for short periods of time
but for many centuries, save for suffering exactly as did the non-Jews
around them at times of natural disasters or political anarchy.

Instead, the inscription of 1489 follows the giving of the Torah to
Moses and its transmission through Ezra with a discussion of Jewish re-
ligious practices. These practices are laid out under the categories of
purity, truth, ritual, and worship. Both specifically Jewish practices and
the practices unique to the Chinese Jews (as discussed in chapter 5) are
described.

Hence, the special relationship between God and the Jews seems to
have moved from a covenant basis to one of God being the special and
sole deity for the descendants of the Patriarchs. Adherence to God is
not so much a matter of contract as an aspect of xiao, of filial piety. In-
terestingly, Saadia Gaon in his large theological treatise mentions the
Covenant only once, and that in the context of Jeremiah rather than
the Torah [167]. Perhaps the Covenant became theologically more im-
portant in the West with the beginning of the Crusades in the eleventh
century and the continuing horrors for the Jews. The lack of emphasis
on Covenant per se may have been a part of the understanding of God
that the Jews of Kaifeng had brought with them from Persia.

That the Jews of Kaifeng did not focus on Covenant, but understood
YHVH as existence in and of itself rather than the cause of all that hap-
pens to the Jews, meant that the nemesis of Judaism in Europe, theodicy,
was not a concern for them. Theodicy is the quandary resulting from an understanding of God as omniscient and omnipotent in juxtaposition with terrible things happening to oneself, one’s family, and one’s people as well as the world as a whole. Theodicy is found throughout the Tanach—one only needs to read Job—but it became of even greater concern in Europe. Following centuries of massacres, expulsions, and pogroms, the Holocaust, when understood as God’s punishment, led many Jews at the time and afterwards to become agnostics if not atheists and others to retreat into a self-imposed withdrawal from the societies and cultures around them in order to avoid angering God further.

For the Chinese Jews, little if anything negative that happened could be understood as a punishment for a failure on the part of the Chosen People to conform to the will of God. God is worshipped not out of fear but entirely out of love. This is because YHVH is perceived as the special deity of the Chinese Jews, just as Chinese Buddhists have the Buddha (who in the Chinese Buddhist context functions as a deity) and the Daoists have the Jade Emperor at the top of their pantheon. YHVH has been the God of the Jews since their forefathers in the distant past, and the traditions should be maintained not only out of filial duty to one’s ancestors but because it is beautiful to do so.

Thus God is loved for a number of reasons. As YHVH, God is loved for being the essence of existence, and existence for the Jews in China was on the whole very good. God is also loved as the patron deity of the Jews. As Sky, God is loved as the sum total of all the prior spirits of the Jews, of the chain of being from Abraham to the present as exemplified in the tradition, as well as for the tradition in and of itself. God is loved as the pattern of events, of all that happens. But because God is non-anthropomorphic, what happens is understood as unwilled and not involving human emotions, such as jealousy and anger, or human actions, such as punishment.

How would this theological understanding relate to prayer? We know from the Jesuit observations of the Kaifeng synagogue that the daily prayers were maintained, and we know from the inscriptions that the various special days and their prayers were observed. But the record is silent with regard to the meaning of prayer for the Kaifeng Jews. Nonetheless, we can surmise aspects of this meaning both from Jewish tradition continuing to today and from Chinese attitudes that may have influenced the Chinese Jews.

As with Jewish prayer today, surely the very doing of it promoted a deep sense of continuity. The prayers in the prayer books often have great historical depth; many passages are from the Bible. Those praying understand that in doing so they are part of a continuum going back
millennia. Second, traditional synagogue prayer, which has long periods of silent prayer, often with a swaying back and forth as found in both China and Europe, creates a contemplative mood conducive to spiritual experiences. Chinese Buddhism has long used the chanting of sutras in Sanskrit (using Chinese logographs to transcribe sounds), considered a sacred language in China, as the most common form of meditation, and this practice is little different from the Jewish practice of chanting in Hebrew. Thus, synagogue praying in China would have been understood from a functional standpoint as little different from the chanting that took place in Chinese Buddhist monasteries.

But what of private prayer, of the universal human practice of seeking succor from numinous powers? Aside from the formal, established prayers found in the prayer books, Jews traditionally also prayed to God for help in times of trouble or because of perceived needs. Since God was understood, at least by the Chinese-Jewish literati and probably by the community as a whole, as formless rather than anthropomorphic, to whom would they have prayed in these regards?

In imperial times, offerings to Sky and Earth were a prerogative of the emperor and his consort. In any case, Sky-Earth is too nebulous to be a recipient of prayers for mundane needs (Earth in other aspects alone is another case). Rather, since the time of the early Kaifeng Jewish community, Chinese prayed to dead human beings, either as ancestors or deities, for help with their problems or for the fortunes of their families. As the Chinese have done for millennia, the Chinese Jews made offerings to the dead of their family, as well as to the Patriarchs and others important to the development of Judaism. Did they also pray to them not as deities per se but as ancestors spiritually more powerful than themselves?

Muslims are as strict monotheists as Jews. But individuals in many Islamic sects pray for help to those dead who are considered especially holy, as I have witnessed in Turkey and am aware takes place elsewhere. Jews, too, pray to those who are considered to have been spiritually powerful, as I have observed by the grave of Rabbi Löw (sixteenth century) at the old Jewish cemetery in Prague. Thus it is possible, though not necessarily the case, that the Chinese Jews came to ask their ancestors, rather than God directly, for assistance in the human search for spiritual aid, just as did the Chinese, who also understand their ancestors not to be divine.

The only direct reference to personal prayer from the Kaifeng Jews occurs at the very end of the Jewish experience there. In a letter of 1850 from the Kaifeng Jews to a European Jew in Shanghai bemoaning the loss of their Jewish tradition we find two relevant sentences (White, I, 86). The first, at the beginning of the second paragraph, reads, "Morning and night, with tears in our eyes and with offerings of incense, do we
implore that our religion may again flourish.” But implore to whom, particularly as the letter states that the rituals are defunct and the synagogue is in disrepair? When the synagogue was functioning, incense bowls were placed in front of the ancestral and patriarchal tablets. Thus, the implication is that indeed the Kaifeng Jews did pray for assistance from the departed.

In the middle of the fourth paragraph of the letter we find, “Daily with tears have we called on the Holy Name.” Unfortunately, Bishop White does not provide the Chinese text, so I do not know the Chinese term translated as “the Holy Name.” Certainly, the term is not found in the inscriptions, but there is no reason to assume that it did not survive through the many centuries of the Chinese-Jewish experience. On the other hand, the term may have been picked up from the letters by European Jews to those they were responding to. Hence, in context the sentence is inconclusive as to whether the Chinese Jews prayed directly to God for assistance.

At the time the Jews of Kaifeng were settling in China, Jewish mysticism centred on the emerging tradition of the Kabbalah. Given that one of the primary terms for deity in Chinese, the Dao, was linked to Chinese mysticism, one can speculate that there was no need to create a specific Chinese-Jewish mysticism. The basic Chinese book relating to mysticism, the Zhuangzi, dealt with the understanding of the cosmos and its meaning, as well as how to understand the basic nature and meaning of existence itself, with the same terminology and understandings found in the Kaifeng synagogue inscriptions. Indeed, it was from the Zhuangzi that many of these expressions derived, although they are also found in Han and Song dynasty rujia writings.38 And the educated Jews in China necessarily would have been very familiar with this text.

The Chinese techniques utilized meditation and fasting to achieve a state of “losing one’s self,” of “sitting in forgetfulness,” meaning a total absorption in the Dao, which for the Chinese Jews is God.39 Given that these are the same techniques that the 1489 inscription attributes to having led to Moses being given the Torah, it seems probable that the mysticism of the interrelated rujia and dao jia traditions was virtually one with the mysticism of the Chinese Jews.

For Saadia Gaon, for Maimonides (as is discussed below), and for the Chinese Jews, God is not simply non-anthropomorphic; God is formless and equivalent to nothingness. Although both were philosophers trained in Arabic rationalism following Aristotle, as well as theologians, this understanding of God is found in Christian and Islamic mysticism as well, and continues in Jewish mysticism (see Paper 2004, chap. 6). With the emergence of the Kabbalistic tradition in the thirteenth century, the
term for the ultimate, for God as an undifferentiated unity, as the Nothingness with which one merges in the mystic experience, is ‘Eiyn Sof, the Infinite.

Thus for the Chinese Jews, God is the formless numinous power that continuously gives rise to life and to which life is beholden for its very existence. God is loved beyond one’s mother and father, because God is the ultimate parent, not only for each individual but for the Jewish people, as a macro-clan, as a whole.

The question might arise as to how for the Chinese Jews this accorded with their reverence and love for the Torah, replete with its frequent depictions of a highly anthropomorphic God. A simple answer would be that they dealt with it no differently than did Saadia Gaon, Maimonides, and countless Jewish philosophers and mystics through the ages: they did not see it as a problem.

For the Chinese Jews, the Torah was sacred not because it was the word of God, since God has no mouth from which to speak, but because it has been the very heart of Judaism since it began. It is the text that is sacred, as are the Classics for the rujia traditions, the Tripitika for the Buddhist tradition, and the Canon for the Daoist tradition. All of these texts are sacred because of their central historical significance, because they are written—which in itself is sacred, even more so in China than in traditional Judaism, since writing is the primary means of communication with the numinous—and because the rituals focus on them. All of these texts, as discussed before, are understood to require interpretation. Hence, the anthropomorphism of the Torah would have been perceived as symbolic, metaphorical, and not to be understood literally.

For the last century, there has been a tendency in secular Zionism, and more recently among some of the Haredi in Jerusalem, to treat the Torah as a historical rather than a religious text. But this approach has not been the traditional approach to the Torah in the West. Shlomo Sand (74–75) succinctly lays out the difference:

The centuries-old Jewish communities never thought of the Old Testament as an independent work that could be read without the interpretation and mediation of the “oral Torah” (the Mishnah and the Talmud). It had become, mainly among the Jews of Eastern Europe, a marginal book that could be understood only through the Halakah (religious law) and of course its authorized commentators. The Mishna and Talmud were the Jewish texts in regular use; passages from the Torah (the Pentateuch) were introduced, without any narrative continuity, in the form of a weekly section read aloud in the synagogues.... For most Jews through the centuries, the Bible was holy scripture and thus not really accessible to the mind, just as the Holy Land was barely present in the religious imagination as an actual place on earth.
The Theology of the Chinese Jews

This attitude is probably the one that the forefathers of the Kaifeng Jews brought with them from Southwest Asia, and it seems to have remained among the Chinese Jews for the next millennium.

**Assimilation and Theology**

As discussed in chapter 1, a strong strain in contemporary North American Judaism imagines the existence of a pure Judaism unsullied by assimilation. Those without a traditional Jewish education may assume that Jewish theology has remained unaltered since the Torah was handed down by God. But the point of the Talmud and Mishnah, the “Oral Torah,” is that the written Torah cannot be taken literally and must be interpreted. In traditional Judaism, the Oral Torah takes precedence with regard to interpretation over the written Torah, and Talmud study is one of continually arguing over interpretations of the Torah. Hence, Jewish theology is far from fixed and is constantly evolving.

Broadly speaking, Jewish theology changes according to two factors. As with all the Abrahamic theologies, Jewish theology reflects the evolving ideology of the intellectual environment in which it finds itself. The contemporary movement toward fundamentalism in all three traditions does not reflect theology because it involves a decision not to think. To take the Torah, the New Testament, or the Qur’an literally runs counter to the recognized seminal thinkers of these three traditions. A second factor is particular to Jewish theology, because it arises from persecution by Christianity and Islam. Thus, Jewish theology in the West is in part a response to mass expulsions, forced conversion, massacre, rape, and pillage of Jews simply because they are Jews. Jewish theology in the West has sought to understand God in the context of these terrible events.

A prime example of the influence of the intellectual milieu of the cultures in which Judaism finds itself is the theology of Moshe ben Maimon (RaMBaM: 1135–1204), commonly known in English writings by his Greek name, Moses Maimonides. Jewish theology in both the Christian and Islamic environments since the medieval period, as well as Christian theology—particularly that of Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and Duns Scotus—has been considerably influenced by him.

Maimonides was brought up in Cordoba toward the end of that time when Muslims, Jews, and Christians often but not always lived together amicably and stimulated each other intellectually. His home was a very short distance from the great mosque in Cordoba, and the synagogue at that time was but a few doors from his home.40 After the 1148 forced expulsion from Cordoba of Jews who refused to convert to Islam (later rescinded), he moved about southern Spain for a number of years, seeking
safety, until his family crossed over to North Africa, where Maimonides studied at the great Islamic university in Fez. Later, after living for a short time in Jerusalem, he settled in Egypt, where he made his living as a physician to the Muslim rulers there.

The theology of Maimonides is relevant to the discussion of the theology of the Chinese Jews in three regards. First, his theology slowly became mainstream for both the Ashkenazim and Sephardim and thus is an early medieval theology that can be compared to the theology that developed in China. More important, Maimonides’ theology evolved after those who became the Kaifeng Jews moved from Persia to China. A comparison of his theology to the theology of the Kaifeng Jews indicates that the two developments are not far apart and thus Chinese-Jewish theology remains consonant with what became normative pre-modern Jewish theology, when one excludes the influence of Christian persecution. Finally, as will be discussed in more detail below, even mainstream Jewish theology must be understood as the result of assimilation.

In his commentary on the Mishna (tractate Sanhedrin, chapter 10), Maimonides formulated thirteen essential principles of faith. Controversial in his time and ignored for centuries thereafter, they slowly became so basic to traditional Jewish theology that they are found poetically in two prayers in the traditional siddur, Ani Ma’amin and Yigdal: (1) Existence of God, (2) God’s unity, (3) God’s incorporeality, (4) God as eternal, (5) God alone to be worshipped, (6) Prophecy, (7) Moses the greatest prophet, (8) Divine origin of Torah, (9) Eternal truth of Torah, (10) God’s knowledge of human behaviour, (11) God’s punishment of evil and rewarding of goodness, (12) Coming of Messiah, (13) Resurrection of the dead.

These principles are not as straightforward as they might seem, particularly the last four, for Maimonides’ theology is a synthesis of the Jewish theology of his day with Aristotelian philosophy via Arab learning. His writings seem to contain contradictory understandings in these regards, and disputes as to their meaning remain to today.

By “God,” Maimonides held to Saadia Gaon’s understanding, common in the mystic traditions worldwide, that the ultimate cannot be described, although neither are considered mystics. God, being ineffable, is beyond any descriptive term. Thus we can say only what God is not rather than what God is, an approach termed “negative theology.” Maimonides understood the study of Torah not to be an end in itself but a means to understanding God. Nonetheless, the best way to understand God is to love and worship God.

It is with regard to Maimonides’ principle of resurrection that the greatest controversy exits. Physical resurrection may not have been a
popular Jewish concept before his lifetime, for a major part of Saadia Gaon's *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* consists of arguments for physical resurrection. If physical resurrection were the popular understanding, his treatise need not have focused on it. Maimonides rather seems to have understood a spiritual rather than a physical resurrection. A true knowledge of God gained through personal study of and worshipful focus on God renders death meaningless, and in the unity of God, a spiritual, non-physical existence continues upon physical death. It is this viewpoint that led some rabbis to declare Maimonides a heretic and this in turn led him to attempt to clarify his viewpoint, which may have instead further obfuscated his meaning. For he wrote that physical resurrection was possible but that it would be but temporary and death would again occur. Thus, future generations ended up citing Maimonides as the authority on both sides of the issue.

As Saadia Gaon did, Maimonides exemplifies assimilation in both his theology and lifestyle: both spoke Arabic, wore the typical clothing of Arab Muslims, and would have eaten the same cuisine. Growing up and educated in the post-Aristotelian Islamic world, they understood Moses not as a recorder of the direct word of God but as a prophet, similar to Mohammed, divinely inspired to write God's subtle truth. As a student at a major Islamic university, Maimonides learned to apply Aristotelian logic to the understanding of God, an approach indirectly learned from him by the major Christian Scholastic theologians. But from Christianity, he was imbued with the need for the concept of divine punishment to ensure human goodness. Christianity came to understand humans as innately sinful, so sinful that God had to engender a Son to be sacrificed to save humankind from sin. As Judaism in the main continued to develop in the dual contexts of Christianity and Islam, so Maimonides' thinking became basic to Jewish thought.

A Jewish community existed in Kaifeng while Maimonides was alive, and the milieu from which its inhabitants came would have been similar to the one in which Maimonides later lived. The only difference between them and Maimonides would be that their first language was Persian rather than Arabic (which they probably spoke as well, given that they were originally merchants working with Arabs). Persian was the lingua franca of the foreign merchant communities in China at that time; even Italians such as the Polo family probably spoke it. Maimonides' theology developed when the Jews in China were at their initial stage of assimilation. Did Maimonides' thought later reach them when it became popular? Possibly, given their continuing contact with the Jewish world through the Jewish communities in the Chinese seaports to the sixteenth
century. But would it then have inspired them? Possibly not, given they had reached similar understandings within a far different intellectual milieu.

Let us look at Maimonides’ principles from a hypothetical Chinese-Jewish perspective. The first five principles are clearly present in the understanding of God as both Dao and Tian. That God cannot be described—even more, that God is ineffable—is not due to “negative theology” but from the direct mystic experience of wu (nothingness) as the ultimate reality. In particular, as Maimonides, the Chinese Jews understood God to be non-anthropomorphic, and the anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Torah were there not to be understood literally but as pedagogical devices to help humans get in tune with God. Aristotelian logic itself would not have been compatible with traditional Chinese thought, as Chinese intellectuals gave up on formal logic as a useful means to gain knowledge. Logicians were laughed out of existence 2,400 years ago in that formal logic, particularly deductive logic, could lead to seeming nonsensical statements. Instead, the Chinese use commonsense inductive reasoning; that is, argument from examples.

With regard to principles six and seven, Moses was revered by the Chinese Jews as the foremost prophet, not in the sense of Mohammed but in the sense of the Chinese culture-heroes, those who brought the essential constituents of culture to the Chinese. Thus Moses and Ezra were honoured for having given and then written the Torah, essential to Judaism. As for principles eight and nine, the Classics functioned in Chinese culture much as the Torah was understood by Maimonides. The Classics were an unchanging source of fundamental wisdom but open to considerable and continuing interpretation. Hence, editions of the Chinese Classics are similar to traditional study editions of the Torah; the original texts are surrounded by commentary greater in length than the text itself. And this commentary is printed with commentary of its own.

The last four principles are to a degree problematic. There had long been a debate in Chinese thought as to whether humans were innately good—meaning oriented toward family and society, or innately bad—meaning selfish. By the time Jews settled permanently in Kaifeng, the argument had been won by those understanding human nature to be essentially good. Thus, it is to be expected that humans, unless corrupted by a corrupt society, will act with goodness. The idea that a person cannot be expected to tell the truth unless fearful of divine punishment—an idea that led to the practice of swearing on the Bible in Western judicial proceedings—would have made little sense in traditional China.
Accordingly, fear of divine retribution would not have had the same importance to the Chinese Jews as for Jews living in Christian-influenced cultures.

Would the Chinese Jews have longed for the coming of the messiah, for the ingathering back to the homeland, Jerusalem? The need for being saved from the often intolerable situation of being dominated by Christians or Muslims was not present. Jews had the same opportunities as any other Chinese and achieved high offices. In times of instability they would have longed for a righteous emperor, as did other Chinese. Thus, Moses and Ezra, who gave the Jews the Torah, were reverenced by name plaques in the synagogue rather than King David, the mythic model for the idea of the messiah—the “anointed one”—and King Solomon. Even before the time of the mythic Diaspora in 70 CE, many Jews, scattered in Jewish communities throughout the Roman, Persian, North African, and other realms chose not to live in Jerusalem and its environs when they could have done so. Similarly, the Jews in Kaifeng evidenced no inclination to leave China and return to Persia, let alone Judah.

As for the resurrection of the dead, the Chinese Jews would seem to have had virtually the same understanding as Maimonides (without the possibility of a temporary physical resurrection). The mystical texts known by all educated Chinese provided an understanding of death as meaningless, for all was one in the Dao, and that oneness was essentially nothingness. But the highly educated Chinese and the Chinese Jews understood that the dead lived on in memory and should be accordingly honoured with symbolic gifts of food and wine, along with candles and incense—all to encourage the memory of the deceased members of the family among the living. Hence, for the Chinese Jews, as for many Jews in the West today, the continuation of life after death is a matter of the living remembering the dead.

Thus, for Maimonides, a Jew assimilated to Muslim culture imbued with some Christian notions, and for the Jews assimilated to Chinese culture, a similar theology could arise from vastly different cultural influences. This in itself points to the essential Jewishness of these two developments in spite of assimilation. It further argues that assimilation is not to be feared but embraced as adding new means for perceiving and appreciating the timelessness of a core universal Jewish understanding. This is an understanding that does not cut itself off from thinking and appreciating the thoughts of different cultures but uses these new intellectual modes to enhance Jewish theology.

Jewish theology in Europe, North Africa, and Southwest Asia since Maimonides is deeply indebted to his thinking. His theological understanding was incontrovertibly influenced by classical Greek thinking by
way of the great Islamic universities; that is, Maimonides’ theology is a product of assimilation. Yet those modern Jewish thinkers who value Maimonides and yet dismiss the literary-Chinese-language plaques in the Kaifeng synagogue as irrelevant to the Judaism of the Chinese Jews on the ground that that language reflects the language of Chinese philosophy are being hypocritical. For the statements on the plaques are no more and no less assimilated than those of Maimonides. Similarly, modern Jewish theology from Buber to Fackenheim, imbued as it is with European philosophy arising in a Christian context, is equally assimilated. What then makes the Chinese-Jewish theology invalid as Jewish? Is it because it reflects ideological assimilation or because it is not primarily influenced by Islam and Christianity?

**Historical and Cultural Context**

For the males of the Jewish community in Kaifeng there would have been several educational routes. All would have achieved basic literacy in Chinese, as this was essential for functioning in Chinese business and society. For the first several centuries at least, probably all were literate in Persian-Hebrew as well, this being their language prior to settling in China and the means by which they communicated with Jews arriving in the port cities. Persian-Hebrew would have functioned much as Yiddish did for Jews in northeastern Europe. For those who were merchants, other languages would have been picked up as was useful in their travelling. Those with a penchant for learning would have had two further choices: advanced education in Hebrew and Aramaic for Talmud study with the aim of becoming rabbis, or training in literary Chinese for the civil service examinations that led to posts in Chinese officialdom. Both were arduous routes that required many years of education. As for the women, our knowledge is a blank, although we can assume that most if not all would have been functionally literate at least in Chinese and able to recite the Hebrew prayers, particularly those for women. In literati families, they would minimally have gained training in the writing of poetry in the literary language.

This dual higher education for males would have led to two paths toward theology, with both probably arriving at the same understanding. For those training for the rabbinate, surely their theology would have reflected the theologies their ancestors brought with them to China, those prevalent among Southwest Asian Jews in the tenth to eleventh centuries. As the centuries passed, one might reasonably expect that the relatively benign situation in which they lived moved their theology away from a focus on God’s wrath and punishments. As well, the Chinese
atmosphere of theological sexual egalitarianism, in which the most important Chinese popular deities were female (for example, Guanyin and Mazu), would most likely have moderated the patrifocal nature of the theology they brought to China.

For those educated for the civil service, their mindset would have been highly influenced by the texts and the ways of thinking on which they had been focused for many years. It is they who wrote the 1489 inscription and the seventeenth-century Chinese inscriptions in the synagogue. And it is their probable theology that has been the object of this chapter as detailed above.

As discussed in the history of the Kaifeng synagogue to be found in chapter 4, the community was cut off from contact with Judaism elsewhere in the sixteenth century with the forced relocation by the government of the port city populations. The synagogues in these cities disappeared. The Jesuits in the early eighteenth century were aware of only a single Chinese-Jewish community, the one in Kaifeng, whose inhabitants hungered for news of Judaism elsewhere. A century later, the last Kaifeng rabbi died and knowledge of Hebrew and Jewish practices began to fade. The successful families had long since been reduced in status and wealth due to civil unrest and natural disasters. The synagogue had been badly damaged by a flood and completely destroyed in the battles contingent on the Taiping Movement, and many families fled Kaifeng, never to return. Thus by the end of the nineteenth century, we seem no longer to have either a slightly modified normative Jewish theology or a specific Chinese-Jewish theology. Our story has come to an end.
Erich Gruen, in his study of Judaism in the Greek and Roman worlds, concludes that Judaism is a religion of diaspora, that Jews and Judaism began to spread throughout the world long before the destruction of the Second Temple: "Diaspora lies deeply rooted in Jewish consciousness. It existed in one form or another almost from the start, and it persists as an integral part of the Jews’ experience of history." He further points out that diaspora has had two quite different meanings in various Jewish communities:

At a theoretical level, the experience has been deconstructed from two quite divergent angles. The gloomy approach holds primacy. In this view, diaspora dissolves into galut, exile, a bitter and doleful image, offering a bleak vision that leads either to despair or to a remote reverie of restoration. The negative image dominates modern interpretations of the Jewish psyche. Realization of the people’s destiny rests in achieving the "Return," the acquisition of a real or mythical homeland. The alternative approach takes a very different route. It seeks refuge in a comforting concept: that Jews require no territorial sanction or legitimation. They are "the people of the Book." Their homeland resides in the text ... [t]heir "portable Temple"... A geographic restoration is therefore superfluous ... what really counts [is] the embrace of the text, its ongoing commentary, and its continuous reinterpretation. Diaspora, in short, is no burden, indeed a virtue in the spread of the word. This justifies a primary attachment to the land of one’s residence, rather than the home of the fathers. (232)

Gruen found the latter understanding of diaspora among the many Jews who choose to live throughout the Hellenistic and Roman worlds rather than the Jerusalem area. This understanding fits not only the situation of the Chinese Jews but that of most Jews living in North America and elsewhere today.

While the situation for Jews in North America is not as benign as the situation has been for the Chinese Jews, still there has not been the
suffering for Jews as there was in Europe, the continent of origin of most North American Jews. Although North American Jews tend to focus on Israel as the Jewish homeland, the vast majority evidence no desire to move there.

I remember as a child being aware of a prominent placard on a wall of my father’s office with the well-known line from Psalm 137, “If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand wither.” My father devoted considerable effort to collecting money for Israel throughout his life, but never once did I hear him, or my uncles and aunts, or any of my parents’ friends, speak of moving to Israel. (Two of my cousins did when they married Israelis.) When the statement was made during the Pesach Seder, “next year in Jerusalem,” and I asked in childish innocence why we did not move there after the establishment of the state of Israel, I received a look of incomprehension. As comfortable with their lives, in the main, as are Jews in the United States and Canada, even more so were the Jews in China.

From the above standpoint, then, many contemporary Jews of North America and elsewhere possess a contradictory religious ideology. They hold to the “gloomy approach” to diaspora, while living their lives from the second approach—“having an attachment to the land of one’s residence.” The theology of the Chinese Jews does not evidence this contradiction but seems to fully embrace being Chinese while remaining a “people of the Book.”

The routes from Chicago to Jerusalem and from Kaifeng to Jerusalem are more or less equidistant when travelling by ship. North American Jews and Chinese Jews represent the farthest extensions of the far-flung Diaspora to the west and the east. These populations are similar in that they did not experience the extremes of anti-Judaism experienced by Jews in Europe, but they differ in that North American Jews remain in a Christian-dominated world and still suffer from a lesser form of anti-Judaism, while the Chinese Jews experienced no negativity in that regard whatsoever. Jews in both areas have achieved high government offices, wealth in business, and social acceptance, albeit limited in North America. The two groups differ also in that the Jewish presence in North America increasingly grew through continued immigration, particularly over the last century, while the growth of Chinese Jews was quite limited and ended several centuries ago. Further, their Jewish roots were moderately different in that North American Judaism began on a Sephardi basis, which became predominantly Ashkenazi, while the basis of Chinese Judaism was Mizrahi. But these origins alone would have had little effect on their general (popular) theology. Rather, the combination of a completely benign socio-economic environment combined with different
linguistic—Sinitic (a transition from Persian to Chinese dialects) rather than Indo-European language families (German or Spanish dialects)—and ideological substrates (classical Greek or classical Chinese philosophy) led Chinese-Jewish theology in a moderately different direction.

As a child, I became increasingly aware that for all those I knew at my Orthodox synagogue, prayer was pro forma. It was similar to the expressed devotion to "return" to Jerusalem with no actual intention to do so. Prayer was done out of love for tradition, not out of love for the stated focus of the prayers. Instead, there was much talk of God's punishment, particularly as this was the time of and shortly after the Holocaust. Yet this perception of God seemed not to be taken as actual, otherwise God would be a monster too terrible to contemplate. There seemed to be instead a lack of belief in the existence of God.

In other words, the Judaism with which I was imbued was an empty but beautiful shell, rich in rituals and holy days but empty of a spiritual core. It appeared to me then that the Torah, the word of God, was loved, but not God Himself. As I grew older, I noted that ethical values seemed to have become a substitute for a theological substrate to Judaism, and these values were identical to those of liberal North Americans at that time, regardless of religious orientation.

My childhood experience is hardly unique; American-Jewish literature describes many similar experiences, for example, the recent work by Shalom Auslander, Foreskin's Lament: A Memoir. This lightly fictionalized account captures the angst of an Orthodox boy due to his fear of God's punishment—for himself, his family, and the Jewish people—for essentially behaving like a boy. The constant testing of God's wrath and the resultant spiritual vacuum arising from the consequent lack of punishment leads the boy to realize the unlikeliness of such a punitive deity. Although I am several decades older than Auslander, I found much of his discourse descriptive of my own childhood and youth in these regards.

But it is not only in popular theology that one finds non-belief in God; it is common to post-Holocaust formal theology itself. Richard Rubenstein, two decades after the fact, points out that "No Jewish theology will possess even a remote degree of relevance to contemporary Jewish life if it ignores the question of God and the death camps. This is the question for Jewish theology in our times" (x). Consequently, Rubenstein in part takes the same position as the prevailing popular theology: "Though I believe that a void stands where once we experienced God's presence, I do not think Judaism has lost its meaning or its power. I do not believe that a theistic God is necessary for Jewish religious life" (153).

Although Emile Fackenheim thought of himself as a philosopher, he is frequently referred to as a theologian, often with reference to his
series of lectures *God's Presence in History*. Fackenheim begins with the recognition that, after Auschwitz, “the trauma of contemporary events affects all religious belief. It is Jewish religious belief, however, which is most traumatically affected. The Jewish people were first to affirm the God of history.... Never, within or without Jewish history, have men anywhere had such a dreadful, such a horrifying, reason for turning their backs on the God of history” (6).

Yet by the end of these lectures nothing is said of God. A history of the conundrum is provided, but no theological solution: “The Jew after Auschwitz is a witness to endurance. He is singled out by contradictions which, in our post-holocaust world, are worldwide contradictions. He bears witness that without endurance we shall all perish. He bears witness that we can endure because we must endure; and that we must endure because we are commanded to endure” (95).

Commanded by whom? By what? Fackenheim does not say. The implication is that we are commanded by a God in whom we cannot believe. Thus the Jew must endure because that is what the Jews always do in the face of extreme adversity, because history demands to be continued. There is no love of God here.

So what is Judaism without a God, without a spiritual core, with a void in its centre? A common answer is that the purpose of Judaism is to exist, to flaunt its continution in the face of Christian persecution and the Holocaust. But what then is to continue if it is not religion? It is the notion of a Jew as a Jew. And what does this mean? Racism provides an answer. Blut becomes a substitute for God and maintaining its purity, a holy quest. Thus, assimilation in the physical sense and in the sense of inherited culture (see chapter 1) is the ultimate heresy. A racial fantasy has replaced what has come to be perceived as a theistic and spiritual fantasy.

Many of my own and the following generation, especially those innately oriented toward spiritual experiences, as well as those who detest racism, turned away from the practice of a spiritually empty Judaism, often toward aspects of East and South Asian religions. Thus, I was both surprised and pleased to find as I completed the research for this book that the Chinese Jews provided an alternative theology. They embraced a theology that not only could be understood as contiguous with the medieval Jewish theology of Southwest Asia they brought with them to China as articulated by Saadia Gaon but also was compatible with the ideological understanding of the educated where they came to reside.

Unlike the null and transcendent theologies arising from the Jewish experience in Europe, Chinese-Jewish theology was positive rather
than negative. The theology of the Chinese Jews arose from a love of life, community, and tradition that led to an orientation toward a non-anthropomorphic God as the ground of being based on love rather than fear of angering a jealous and vengeful anthropomorphic God. It was a theology that harmonized with both Jewish and Chinese mysticism and consequently was not only compatible with but supportive of spiritual experiences. These experiences were not transcendent, in that they did not lead to denying life, rather they led to embracing it.

And this theology has its counterparts in contemporary American theology as well. Although Rubenstein writes of “the demise of the God who was the ultimate actor in history,” he does embrace God as Nothingness: “I believe in God, the Holy Nothingness known to mystics of all ages, out of which we have come and to which we shall ultimately return” (154). This is not only the Chinese-Jewish literati understanding of God as well but a universal understanding among those traditions with a mystic strain (see Paper 2004).

A similar understanding from a perspective different from Rubenstein’s, and within a fully developed theology, was recently articulated by Michael Fishbane in a well-received theological treatise. Fishbane writes of God as “the ultimate Source of all things (and actuality). This most primal Depth (beyond the Beyond of all conception), so infinitely disposing, is what we haltingly bring to mind by the word God. We thus gesture the thought-image of a supernal Font of Being; and with it also this more paradoxical, corollary notion: that if all existence is not God as such, it is also not other than God, Life of all life” (34).

Fishbane’s theology arises a half century after the Holocaust and decades after Rubenstein and Fackenheim. Gone is a deity responsible for tragedy and horror; Fishbane’s theology bypasses the European experience and extends from the Arabic theologies of Saadia Gaon and Maimonides, adding selected understandings found in the Zohar, as well as contemporary North American Jewish sensibilities.

Saadia Gaon’s theology, as well as The Guide to the Perplexed of Maimonides, is written in Arabic. The Zohar is written in Aramaic. Richard Rubenstein and Michael Fishbane wrote their theological treatises in English. All of these theologies and theological statements, including those of the literati Jews in Kaifeng, are written in the language of the learned where the authors resided and were educated, not in Hebrew, which was already a dead language by the time of the Diaspora. Hence, Jewish theology, no matter when and where produced, is necessarily a result of assimilation, else it would not speak to the people of the authors’ and later times.
The Theology of the Chinese Jews

Fishbane ends his book with a couplet:

Raza de-razin
stima de-khol stimin
[Mystery of mysteries / the most concealed truth of all] (209)

By happenstance, \(^{41}\) this couplet is virtually identical to the last lines of the *Daodejing* (Tao Te Ching), chapter one, edited over 2,300 years ago, referring to the Dao (meaning God for the Chinese Jews), that would have been most familiar to the literati Kaifeng Jews:

Xuan zhi you xuan
zhēn miao zhi men
[Mystery upon mystery / the gateway of the manifold secrets] (Lau, 57)

This coincidence alone informs us that the Chinese Jews’ understanding of God resonates with contemporary North American theology, at least with those who base their understanding of God not on formal logic or the negative experiences of the Jews but on the very experience of God.

My own preferred language for spiritual experience is neither Arabic nor English, although I write in the latter, but the compact, terse, visually oriented literary Chinese. Hence, my working on this project resulted in an unexpected but personally rewarding outcome: I found in a Judaism halfway around the world, at the extreme extension of the eastward Diaspora, an attractive Jewish theology that was compatible with the culture in which I was raised, that could provide a theological core to my self-identity as a North American Jew and a person oriented toward spiritual experiences, and that provided a spiritual foundation for dealing with many current worldwide problems. Surely, this was the God of the Besht (*Baal-shem-tov*), important in my own Ashkenazi background.

Thus toward the end of my life I come full circle. Whether other contemporary Jews find this theology personally meaningful is not a question for me to answer.
Postscript: What Western Jews Can Learn from the Kaifeng Jews

by Rabbi Anson Laytner

The Problem

The Holocaust rent a tear in the fabric of the Jewish soul that few are willing to address forthrightly. From rabbis to academics to ordinary folk, all prefer to pretend that it never happened because its implications are overwhelming. Baldly stated, either the Holocaust must be part of God's plan—which makes God ultimately responsible for genocide; or God was not in charge—which threatens the entire construct of Jewish faith.

There is another option: to admit that our God-concept is in dire need of updating. This is in fact a time-honoured response to adversity; it is just not acknowledged as such. Deuteronomy rewrote early Jewish history so that it read like a series of rewards or punishments, the better to reinforce its view of a Temple-based God in Jerusalem who zealously monitored His people for idolatry and other moral lapses. The prophets of the Exile conceived of God as the Sovereign of the World, shaping all history toward some ultimately benign end. Contact with Hellenistic thought added a philosophic cast to Jewish theology and tamed some of the wilder behaviour previously attributed to the Jewish God. Christianity and Islam and modern philosophy also have had their impact on European, Middle Eastern, and North American forms of Judaism and their understandings of God. In truth, one could say we have many God concepts linked together by the theological conceit that "God is One."

The problem today is that the Holocaust, particularly when coupled with the impact of modern science, has severely challenged most of the traditional working assumptions of Jewish faith and of our relationship with God, centred on a supernatural deity with an interventionist policy toward humanity. First of all, for many people today, the sciences have wreaked havoc on our traditional god-concepts and our understanding of the universe. The world literally is not the same place it was when the Torah was written. Our sense of place in the scheme of things—and indeed the whole scheme of things—is radically different. Why then should
our god-concepts remain tethered to conceptions and visions from the
dawn of recorded history? It simply makes no sense. While honouring
our story, we need to liberate ourselves from the tyranny of the past,
recognizing that those who stood at Sinai were no better than we are and
that our perceptions of the Divine are as legitimate as theirs, save for the
sanctity that time bestows on things from antiquity.

Second, the Holocaust and other modern genocides significantly
challenge the optimistic traditional perception that whatever happens
is part of God's good plan. In fact, Jews in particular have wrestled with
the issue of theodicy from the very beginning. The Torah is replete
with the protests of the patriarchs from Abraham to Moses questioning
God's sense of justice. Down through the ages, skepticism about God's
job description and/or anger over God's job performance accompanied
confessions of sinfulness and pleas for mercy. For centuries, only the
promise of a "world-to-come," when all would be set right, sustained the
faithful. Today, however, given the enormity of the Holocaust and our
global awareness of other genocides, many Jews and people of other
faiths as well are increasingly questioning whether God has ever inter-
vened in history at all.

As a rabbi/teacher, I have observed how many contemporary Jews
struggle with the theological impact of the Holocaust on our concepts
of God and our understanding of the divine-human relationship. Peo-
ple vote with their feet by not attending worship services except for the
most holy of days or the most special of occasions. Over half of American
Jewry is unaffiliated, and the reason is not simply that Jews want to
assimilate. It is that traditional rabbinic Judaism—be it Orthodox, Con-
servative, Reform, Reconstructionist, or Renewal—has yet to respond
adequately and meaningfully to the Holocaust and the history of Jewish
suffering that has been our cross to bear. (I am not criticizing our rab-
bis and academics here. Recovery from a significant physical, emotional,
and spiritual trauma takes time and energy.) The return to tradition by
some Jews and the experimentation in music, dance, meditation, and so
on by other Jews are two sides of the same coin: they are symptomatic
of our contemporary crisis of faith and the spiritual restlessness of the cur-
rent generation.

It is my belief that it is time for radical change. I believe that many of
the tenets of rabbinic Judaism are as outmoded in our time as the sacri-
ficial cult of the Temple was at the dawn of the rabbinic era. We need a
revolution in Jewish thought, something as radical in our day as the en-
visioning of a form of Judaism without the Temple, priests, or sacrifices
was at the beginning of the common era.
The Kaifeng Jews

Enter the Kaifeng Jews. The Kaifeng Jewish community blazed a trail that was unique both for its history and for its cultural adaptation.

Jordan Paper has drawn attention to the cultural bias of the dominant Ashkenazi Jewish community when it comes to examining the so-called "exotic" Jewish communities. We are all "exotic" Jews; it just depends on where we are living. We have no trouble with—and often no idea of—the extent to which Judaism has borrowed from other theologies and philosophies down through the ages. Biblical Judaism was not born from thin air. Its foundations may be found in ancient Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Canaanite cultures. Post-exilic Judaism borrowed from the Zoroastrian faith and Hellenistic thought. Medieval rabbinic Judaism nourished itself on Aristotelian thought via Islamic thinkers. Later generations took ideas from Christianity and the European philosophers from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries. This is what Jews always do in order to survive and grow.

However, when it comes to Kaifeng Jews, many Jews view the influence of Daoist and Confucian thought as alien or as evidence of the Kaifeng Jewish community's assimilation. While it may indeed be said that the Chinese Jews absorbed foreign ideas into their faith, the same should be said for the Jewish communities of Europe and the Middle East as well.

For too long, we Jews in other parts of the world have seen only what the Kaifeng Jews borrowed from Chinese civilization and not what they created. We presume to judge their assimilation rather than to admire their cultural tenacity and to appreciate their unique synthesis of Chinese and Jewish thought. That the Kaifeng community (as opposed to its Jewish descendants, who to this day maintain a sense of Jewish identity) eventually ceased to exist is due to its centuries of isolation, its minuscule numbers, and to China's own long eclipse during the late Qing dynasty and the subsequent turmoil of the early Republic.

The Kaifeng Jews wanted very much to have their faith and practices be understood in light of the dominant culture, much as Jews everywhere always have. It is not only a matter of community relations, it is a matter of spiritual survival, because by comparing one faith with the other, one understands more clearly what it means to be a Jew. In the Chinese situation, the Jews were fortunate to live in a society that fostered syncretism and that was indifferent to doctrinal differences to an extent unimaginable in the monotheistic Middle East or Europe. Consequently, the Kaifeng community was able to embrace basic Daoist/Confucian concepts and blend them relatively easily with their own Jewish ones. The focus
of both cultures on human relationships rather than theology made this syncretism particularly rich, and the community was thus able to sustain the community for many centuries.43

Instead of viewing the incorporation of Chinese ideas into the Jewish religious thought of the Kaifeng Jews as something regrettable and unfortunate, Paper and I look at the phenomenon as a unique amalgam of two great schools of thought, as syncretism of the highest order. We also believe that this unique Sino-Judaic synthesis might have something to offer the spiritually restless souls of our post-Holocaust, contemporary Jewish world. One might say we are restless souls in search of a spiritual foundation that we sought and found in the Chinese-Jewish experience and that we adapted freely to our own needs.

Regardless, given the problems traditional Judaism has today, particularly with the Holocaust but also with science, and given also the interest many Western Jews have in Eastern faiths (itself a parallel of the European and North American general society’s interest in the same),44 perhaps the Kaifeng Jewish materials can offer something of value to our own Jewish practice and thought.

**About God**

While neither atheist nor agnostic, the Kaifeng texts do not present a theistic perspective either. The standard term for God, Tian, and its variants, is not a proper name, like YHVH, or even a word meaning “God,” like Elohim. It is impersonal, even abstract. At best, like its Hebrew counterpart “Shamayim,” Tian is a word with a dual meaning, referring both to the actual sky and to a figurative or symbolic “Heaven.” Absent from both terms are the anthropomorphic god-concepts of the Torah, Talmud, and siddur (prayer book). Instead, in what is standard for most mystical traditions, the Kaifeng texts assert that the divine—i.e., Heaven (= Sky in preceding chapters)—is a mystery and ultimately unknowable.

As mentioned above, the natural sciences have wreaked havoc on our ancient traditional god-concepts and our understanding of the universe. Yet the yearning for a sense of connection with the divine in some form remains for most people a perpetual part of human experience. What better way to express our changing perception of the physical universe, our awareness of humanity’s multiple perceptions of the divine, our own humble understanding, and our despair at the enormity of human suffering than to embrace the concept that God/Heaven is something truly beyond our comprehension. And of course this is precisely what Jewish tradition teaches by having God self-described as “I am who/what I am” or “I will be who/what I will be,” and by having at its core the un-
pronounceable name of YHVH, which combines the present and future tenses of the verb "to be." This, in our age, is a direction worth pursuing.

God's Role

In the Western religious tradition, God intervenes in history both to execute justice and effect mercy—the Jewish paradigm is Exodus from Egypt and the Revelation at Sinai. In the Chinese-Jewish texts, Heaven's only intervention—if it is that at all—is the giving of Scriptures. In the traditional Jewish perspective, Revelation is something God gives to Moses and, through him, to Israel and the world. However, in the Chinese-Jewish view, revelation is only the attunement of the human being to something that is omnipresent and immanent. It is through human endeavour and self-improvement—not unlike Maimonides' views on the levels of the intellect and the prophetic mind—that an outstanding person like Abraham or Moses can gain enlightenment and perceive the Dao of Heaven. In Abraham's case, his enlightened state made him the first to "know" Heaven and therefore he is honoured as the founder of the faith. In Moses' case, his highly developed personal character led to his perceiving the mystery of Heaven and thereafter to his composing the Scriptures and the commandments therein.

Absent from the Chinese-Jewish view is any sense of a God who intervenes in history. This does not mean, however, that prayer ceased. Good traditionalists that they were, the Chinese Jews both read Torah and used a siddur, praying three times a day as required. We simply do not know how they squared their unique theology with the traditional Jewish views as expressed in Torah and the siddur, but it is entirely possible that they simply used these out of reverence for their ancestors—that is, the past. If so, they were somewhat like contemporary Jews who, under the influence of Reconstructionist ideas, connect with traditional Judaism as their inherited civilization (and must ignore or translate its precepts) rather than as their living faith (which is only in the process of being formulated).

Humanity's Role

What emerges as most striking about the Kaifeng Jewish materials is their humanistic focus. As in traditional Jewish thought, God—or Tian—though ultimately unknowable, can be known both through the creative power of nature and through the Torah/Dao. In the texts, Tian/Dao provides a singular ordering of the natural world and the human world. It is the role of the exceptional human being to perceive it, experience
it, understand it, and try to communicate it to other people. Accepting this, the ordinary person has only to practise the Dao as expressed in the Scriptures—honouring Heaven with appropriate rituals, respecting one’s ancestors, and living ethically—and thereby live his/her life in harmony with the Dao of Heaven. By following the Dao of Scriptures, the mitzvot, humanity puts itself in harmony with the Dao of the natural world and simultaneously with the Dao of Heaven. The mitzvot are intended to help the practitioner put him/herself in harmony with the Dao so that all is one.

The Kaifeng Jews were traditionalists in their observance. This helped them sustain a distinct culture for centuries, although obviously there was a falling-away over time. While acknowledging this, I do not think that fully traditional observance is a requirement in our day and age (or I would be doing it myself). Traditional Jewish thought and practice is important to know and to transmit, but the choice to implement among the mitzvot that which is personally meaningful is something that many contemporary Jews hold too dear to surrender.

For the Chinese Jews, as for us, the mitzvot are what provide for Jewish continuity. They are what constitute “Jewish civilization,” and wherever Jews wandered, there too went the mitzvot. The mitzvot constitute a portable Jewish civilization and to practise them (in any form) is to participate as one link in the chain in the transmission of Jewish culture and values.

Filial Piety and “Ancestor Worship”

This sense of cultural continuity was crucial for the Kaifeng Jews, and their awareness of their role as links in the chain of cultural transmission is something of potential value for us today. The Kaifeng Jews’ adoption of xiao (filial piety) and “ancestor worship” may be seen as their expression of a traditional Jewish perspective and value merged with a Chinese cultural norm. Xiao gave the living a unique sense of being contemporary links in the chain of a proud nation and an ancient civilization, with distinct values and a culture of its own. Xiao was a way of honouring and connecting with the past and emphasizing the responsibility of the present to prepare the way for the future.

Traditional Judaism also reveres the past. The patriarchs (and now the matriarchs, too) are honoured in our prayers; for centuries their merit (zechut avot) was appealed to as a way to mediate against God’s presumed predisposition to strict justice. Every week we relive chapters of the quintessential Jewish story: the Exodus, the Revelation, and the Return to the Promised Land. Sinai was our people’s peak religious ex-
perience; from thence everything was downhill (although we honour the prophets nonetheless in the weekly Haftarah portion). In our homes and in synagogue, immediate family members and spouses are honoured and remembered on the anniversaries of their deaths.

To my mind, the addition of a home altar adapted from the Kaifeng Jewish model would be a wonderful addition to the modern Jewish home, because it builds on a number of Jewish mitzvot and customs. Long ago the rabbis transformed the eating table into an altar; for centuries we have set aside space for Shabbat candles and, perhaps, a mizraḥ on the eastern wall. We light yizkor candles for the dead. Why not a place in the home dedicated to our ancestors, too, a place to honour the patriarchs and matriarchs, the known and unknown martyrs of past centuries, and our own dearly departed family members? It could only help foster a sense of connection with the past and reinforce our role as contemporary links in the chain of Jewish continuity.

**Ethical Living**

One of the challenges of contemporary Jewish life has been its focus on ritual Jewish living at the expense of ethical Jewish living. A good, a pious Jew embraces both. The modern rediscovery of the musar tradition and ideas such as eco-kashrut and the ethical hechsher are positive signs that some Jews are striving to re-emphasize ethical living as something at least as important as ritual—if not more.

Many Jews today think of teshuvah (returning to God's Way—repentance) only as something that is done during the High Holy Days and on one's deathbed. In fact, traditional rabbinic Judaism is based on the concept of continual teshuvah—a constant, ongoing process of analysis and self-correction. This awareness, however, has been lost on many contemporary Jews or obscured by the rabbinic/medieval imagery of God as King and Judge.

The Kaifeng Jewish adoption and adaptation of rujia (literati) cultural norms—and ziran (self-fulfillment) in particular—remind us of the importance of personal spiritual development and the need for self-evaluation/self-cultivation to be an integral part of that process. But it is not just for oneself that one engages in ziran; one's personal behaviour both shows respect for one's ancestors and provides a model for future generations. This emphasis on self-correcting human behaviour—as opposed to a system based on a transcendent God's giving of Torah and on our obligation to observe God's commandments (whether out of fear or love or both)—is also more in keeping with the humanistic tenor of our age.
In sum, I believe that there is much we can learn from the Jews of Kaifeng that can be of value for our own search for meaning in this post-Holocaust, science-based world. Far from serving as a warning to us about the dangers of integration, intermarriage, and assimilation—or, ironically, demonstrating our supposed need of anti-Semitism to ensure our continuity—the Kaifeng Jews show that a successful Jewish culture can flourish in an open society, without hostility, by absorbing the best of the dominant culture and making it one’s own.
Appendix: Chinese Logographs for Terms and Translations in Chapter 6

a 道
b 天
c 道無形像
d 無
e 道德經
f 老子
g 道經
h 地
i 天命
j 易
k 天道
l 真天
m 敬天祝國
n 欽若昊天
o 書
p 經
q 旨奉
r 敬畏昊天
s 教法天真
t 奉天宣化
u 教本於天
v 敬天畏人
w 無象法宗
x 教宗無相
y 皇穹淨業
z 主
aa 清真教主
bb 潔清教主
cc 上帝
dd 詩
ee 昭事上帝
f f 祖
s g 太公
h h 道更在有 無之外
i ii 道居形氣之先
j j 統天 地人 物以為道 不尚名象
k kk 道源於天五十 三卷備生天 生地生人之理
l lll 神
m mm 鬼
n nn 自然
o oo 論語
p pp 四時形而萬物生
q qq 玄
r rr 生生不已 常生 生 化 化無窮 造化天
s ss 儒家
t tt 孝
u uu 莊子
v vv 人
w ww 心
x xx 仁
y yy 義
z zz 德
aaa 道家
bbb 孟子
ccc 吾 喪我
d ddd 坐忘
Notes

1. The reviewers would have been well aware that I had a Chinese wife, Chuang Li, as her role as a research facilitator on projects involving travel to China was detailed in the application, a role that had been approved in previous successful SSHRC-funded research projects. Moreover, she was known to a number of scholars in religious studies as we have presented joint papers at academic conferences around the world.

2. There is no consensus on whether the Falasha were North Africans who converted to Judaism or were Jews who settled in Ethiopia. If the latter, there is a debate as to whether their rituals reflect Israelite religion from the time of the Temple or whether African sacrificial rituals were adopted. A plausible understanding is that the Falasha were indeed Israelites who travelled south from the Jewish community in Alexandria and settled in Ethiopia prior to the so-called Diaspora. For an analysis written prior to their mass exodus to Israel in 1984, see the Introduction in Leslau.

3. For the genetic analysis, see Thomas 2000. Genetic drift theory would place the time of the Jewish ancestors of the Lemba leaving Yemen thousands of years ago, but genetic drift theory is as uncertain as linguistic drift theory. It seems more plausible that the Lemba are descended from Jewish maritime merchants traveling from Yemen down the east coast of Africa many centuries ago.

4. There are too many studies to list for such a complex topic, but all are all covered in the recent work by Shlomo Sand, perhaps the most important Jewish history to date.

5. At the beginning of genetic studies, articles were written claiming that the Ashkenazi, and the Ashkenazi alone, were descended from one to four females going back to biblical times; therefore, the Ashkenazi are the only true Jews. Long discredited by geneticists, this understanding is still being published in newspapers as current, undisputed research, as for example in Jones 2010.

6. This surprising finding is based on an extensive private email correspondence with experts in genetic studies of Jews and Ashkenazim in particular.

7. Surveys indicate that in Israel, while the number of Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) has increased from 3% to 5% in the decade from 1990 to 2000,
the number of those claiming no religion or to be anti-religious grew from 43% to 48%, virtually half the population (Levy, Levinsohn, and Katz). Thus, proportionally, the traditional Orthodox are declining in numbers.

8 For a thorough and detailed analysis of the practices of the Chinese Jews in relation to normative Judaism, see Simon.

9 This recent shift in acceptance is poignantly and powerfully dramatized in the 2005 Israeli film Free Zone, directed by Amos Gitai. The film begins with the protagonist, played by Natalie Portman, hysterically crying alone on the road outside of the Tel Aviv airport. It turns out that she had just flown in from the US to marry an Israeli she had met in America. The rabbis declared her not to be a Jew, so the young man’s mother would not allow him to marry her. As she says through her tears, I was born a Jew, went to Hebrew school, was Bat Mitzvah, how could I not be a Jew! For a Jew to be declared a non-Jew is devastating, as it denies the very core of one’s self-understanding.

10 A recent comprehensive study using the latest brain-imaging techniques will be found in Tan. A more recent study, using functional MRI, found that doing arithmetic used different parts of the brain for Chinese and English language users; see Tang et al. A classic and still the best analysis of the differences between thinking patterns flowing from Indo-European languages and Chinese will be found in Nakamura. In my own experience, my intensive study of literary Chinese from my first year of graduate studies (1960) led to pronounced changes in my own patterns of thinking within three years. Although I had been a philosophy and psychology major in my undergraduate years, I found after several years of focusing on literary Chinese language and thought that Western philosophy and Christian theology in the main, especially when it focused on abstract ideas, became difficult for me to understand and particularly to appreciate. I now realize that my brain had, to a degree, been reprogrammed so that I thought more like a traditional Chinese. This in turn led to my being accepted as Chinese by those of the last generation educated in the traditional Chinese mode when I first resided in Taiwan in 1965.

11 “Prime Minister Ehud Olmert Thursday condemned as ‘hurtful’ and ‘spurious’ comments made by former Sephardi chief rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu that the victims of the Holocaust were made to suffer because of the sins of the Reform Movement” (Rettig).

12 An excellent analysis of the spread of Jews throughout the Hellenistic and Roman realms will be found in Gruen.

13 In 2009, while in Cochin, I picked up a self-published pamphlet (Kerala and Her Jews, n.d.) at the only functioning synagogue—one that traces its history back to the Diaspora—which provides such a history.

14 Material on the Bnei Menash and Andean Indians was gathered from a number of websites and specifically from news articles there by Simon Denyer, Peter Foster, and Neri Livneh.

15 Sources for this section are volumes 3 and 4 of the monumental multi-volume work of Baron, the source book of Marcus, the anthologies edited by Gross and Zohar, and the work by Abrahams.
For Rome, see Potter and Mattingly, 25, 60; for Polynesia, see Pukui, 35; for Israelite religion, see Armstrong, 158–82; for Africa, there are a large number of sources.

For a fuller depiction of the Jesuits and Chinese religion, see Paper 1995, chapter 1; for an outline of the essence of Chinese religion, see chapter 2.

The Chinese Communist Party attempted to change this focus from the family to the Party and the people, especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). At the end of the Cultural Revolution it was realized that all sense of morality and decorum had been destroyed, with nothing to replace it. Family religion slowly came back, and the family, functionally speaking, is again the primary value.

Nonetheless, magical elements have seeped into this ritual. After the completion of the ritual, even to today in Taiwan, the main doors to the temple are thrown open, and students rush in to pluck a hair from the sacrificed animals. It is believed that possessing one of these hairs will ensure good fortune in taking examinations—the Civil Service examinations in traditional times and university entrance examinations today.

As with other dynastic regimes in which the ruler had multiple wives, eunuchs served in the women’s quarters. Once a dynasty was established the children, including future emperors, were raised by eunuchs and came to rely on them to interface with the civil bureaucrats.

For a fuller and highly readable work on life in the Song period, see Gernet. This chapter, however, is based on my own half-century study of Chinese culture, religion and history.

For those interested in furthering their understanding of Chinese Buddhism, Kenneth Ch’en’s classic history remains a solid introduction.

For a comparative analysis of Taiping theology, see Paper 1995, 245–64.

The data and many but not all of the views expressed (to 1926), will be found in the reliable and thorough work by Kenneth Scott Latourette, a former missionary to China and a great scholar of Christian missions worldwide. Latourette early observed that Christianity could survive in China only in one of two ways: either Christianity would need to change to adapt itself to China, or else Chinese society would need to change its basic structure. Otherwise, the two would remain incompatible.

Three sources on Islam in China can be recommended. Mi and You have written a brief history focusing on the modern period following the Communist line. Leslie (1986) provides a more thorough and analytical history. The work by Israeli focuses on more recent history with a series of essays covering a host of issues.

This data for this brief history of Judaism in China and the Kaifeng synagogue is derived from Leslie and Xu. The latter adds to the historical material in Leslie the research of a number of Chinese scholars. The interpretations, in the main, will be found to accord with Leslie but essentially are my own.

The Jesuit drawings of the exterior and the interior of the Kaifeng synagogue reproduced in White’s book can now be found on a number
of websites. A model of the synagogue following the Jesuit drawings can be found in a Qingming Riverside Landscape Garden pavilion in Kaifeng. Photographs of this model too can be found on several websites. (This model is to be distinguished from the one in Israel, which is only of part of a single building of the synagogue complex and provides a misleading representation for that reason.)

28 One of the major problems with many of the writings on the Kaifeng Jews is the tendency to read the Jesuit Relations uncritically. The Jesuit letters are terse, and it is clear from the letters themselves that the authors neither learned or saw everything they wished to see nor understood everything they saw. Even more problematic is the quoting by modern scholars of earlier writings, such as the slim book by Finn, which simply paraphrased and embellished these few letters by the Jesuits. Such scholars often assumed that the paraphrased descriptions of the synagogue and its practices are accurate in every respect.

29 I have visited the two beautiful former synagogues in Toledo, but they would not have been as large in totality as the Kaifeng synagogue.

30 A description of these inscriptions, primarily based on letters from Jesuit missionaries, along with some discussion, will be found in Finn.

31 “Jehovah” in the King James translation and “Yahweh” in later English translations are incorrect assumptions about the pronunciation of YVHV.

32 For a detailed examination of the Chinese concepts of Tian and Taindi, as well as references to Chinese sources and further studies on these themes, see Paper 1995, 8–9 and 217–23.

33 For a full discussion of male–female gender egalitarianism with regard to spirituality, see Paper 1997, chap. 4.

34 In contemporary North American culture there exists a strange understanding that Judaism is matrilineal, based on the requirement, for a reason explained in chapter 1, that to be born a Jew one must have a Jewish mother. But this is solely for identification as a Jew. Judaism has traditionally been and remains today, with regard to ritual participation in the Orthodox tradition, patrilineal.

35 Thus, the adoption of footbinding, which originated with dancers and became a de riguer fashion statement for the middle and upper classes. Footbinding was not only a symbol of conspicuous consumption—it is virtually impossible to labour with a bound foot—but it kept women within the family compound, since women with full bound feet could not hobble and required the support of maid-servants.

36 Rabbi Laytner suggests that another reason for the focus on Covenant for those Jews living in Christian countries is to counter the Christian claim of a “new Covenant” that has replaced the Covenant of the “Old Testament” (Hebrew Bible). Thus, the Jews were in effect claiming that they had the original Covenant.

37 While I have often come across this viewpoint among those of the generation before mine, statements to this effect from ordinary Jews in print are less common. A typical example is from a French Jewish survivor
of the Shoah who lost both parents at Auschwitz: “Not that I blame all
Germans or all the French for what happened. I blame God and no longer
believe in him” (Denise Epstein interviewed by Leigh 62).

In this regard, it is Daoist thought that is being referred to (daojia), not the
Daoist Church (daojiao), which had its own institutions and practices on a
par with Chinese Judaism.

For a fuller description of the mystic experience in both Judaism and
Chinese culture, see Paper 2004.

These are personal observations made on a visit to Cordoba.

Personal correspondence with Michael Fishbane.

I have traced this tradition of protest in my book Arguing with God.

Xu Xin (“Some Thoughts ...”) notes the basic similarity between the two
cultures: “So the Jewish religion does not just mean the religious beliefs of
Jews but also the visible shape of the culture of the Jewish people, and so
it is frequently used to indicate generally Jewish culture or the kernel of
Jewish culture. This is similar to the term ‘Confucianism’ which in reality
points to the heart of Chinese culture.”

This interest is hardly new. It goes back well into the nineteenth century.
Irene Eber (1994), for one, has studied the subject from the perspective
of a European Jewish theologian’s exploration and adaptation of Daoist
ideas in what is probably the most in-depth study of the two “theological”
streams. In a different vein, Vera Schwarcz has compared cross-cultural
perspectives on historical memory.
References


References


References


References


"This fascinating book on the Jewish religion in China is based on existing sources and articles, and places it all in the larger context of Chinese religious life. It is a wonderful, somewhat popular, but also very sophisticated achievement. Paper helps one see the complex ways that religions emerge and attain stability, even within a mighty tradition like Judaism." – Michael Fishbane, Nathan Cummings Professor of Jewish Studies, University of Chicago

A thousand years ago, the Chinese government invited merchants from one of the Chinese port synagogue communities to the capital, Kaifeng. The merchants settled there and the community prospered. Over centuries, with government support, the Kaifeng Jews built and rebuilt their synagogue, which became perhaps the world's largest. Some studied for the rabbinate; others prepared for civil service examinations, leading to a disproportionate number of Jewish government officials. While continuing orthodox Jewish practices they added rituals honouring their parents and the patriarchs, in keeping with Chinese custom. However, by the mid-eighteenth century—cut off from Judaism elsewhere for two centuries, their synagogue destroyed by a flood, their community impoverished and dispersed by a civil war that devastated Kaifeng—their Judaism became defunct.

The Theology of the Chinese Jews traces the history of Jews in China and explores how their theology's focus on love, rather than on the fear of a non-anthropomorphic God, may speak to contemporary liberal Jews. Equally relevant to contemporary Jews is that the Chinese Jews remained fully Jewish while harmonizing with the family-centred religion of China. In an illuminating postscript, Rabbi Anson Laytner underscores the point that Jewish culture can thrive in an open society, "without hostility, by absorbing the best of the dominant culture and making it one's own."

Jordan Paper is a professor emeritus at York University (East Asian and Religious Studies) and a fellow at the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society at the University of Victoria. He studied Buddhist Chinese at and received his doctorate in Chinese Language and Literature from the University of Wisconsin (Madison). His many books on religion and Chinese philosophy include The Fu-Tzu: A Post-Han Confucian Text, The Spirits Are Drunk: Comparative Approaches to Chinese Religion, The Chinese Way in Religion (2nd edition), and The Mystic Experience: A Descriptive and Comparative Approach.