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A Distant, Putative Pair: Chinese and Jews in Jewish Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

"If I were compelled to forego England, and to live in China, among Chinese manners and modes of life and scenery, I should go mad," declared Thomas De Quincey in 1821. The reason for his expected "madness" would be the great antiquity of Chinese institutions, histories, and above all, mythologies: "A young Chinese seems to me an antediluvian man renewed."¹

Indeed, it was mainly the antiquity of China that impressed the West. "Chinese seniority," wrote the French writer Chateaubriand, "has the power to question us."² When the British philosopher Bertrand Russell returned in 1924 after a year in China, he said that he had begun to understand that the white race was not as important as he had thought; China was not only the largest country in the world, he said, but also the greatest in intellect.³

Yiddish poet Jacob Glatsteyn wrote in "From the Notebook of Li-Tai-Fu":

I came with all the baggage
of my people,
Like a water carrier,
And she asked impatiently
with cynical anger
could I cease being a Chinaman for a while⁴

1. Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an Opium Eater*, Woodsworth Classics (1994), 243. Could he not say, we may wonder, the same about living among the Jews?

2. Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Rediscovery of India and the East 1680-1880*, trans. G. Patterson-Black and V. Reinking (New York, 1984), 19.

3. Alberto Moravia, *La Rivoluzione Culturale in China* (Milan, 1968).

4. Jacob Glatsteyn, *A Jew from Lublin* (in Yiddish) (New York, 1966), 115. Also see "The Chinese poet Bo Yu-yi writes a letter to his friend Yuan Chen," 101-106, and "Confucius says," 111.

Here, the Chinaman (whose prototype is frequently drawn carrying pails of water) is not depicted as bearing the heritage of ancient wisdom, but rather as the counterpart of the Jewish immigrant in New York. He is the poet's symbol of the common lot of Jewish and Chinese immigrants to the new world, both weighed down by the baggage of a long history.⁵

Although European literature, in awe of China's lengthy historical heritage, often expresses the self-deprecation of a relatively young civilization, there is no such disparagement in Jewish literature. Rather, one would expect Jewish writers to manifest a sense of exhilaration at having found a sister civilization, one as ancient as the Jewish, like the kinship of two elderly people. While reading the European perceptions of China and reflecting on some of the European responses to the challenge posed by Chinese civilization, I have wondered: what would be the response of a modern Jew upon learning that China, not Judaism, is the oldest living civilization?

Moreover, while reading the many things written about the uniqueness of the Jewish people, I found myself noting that Judaism's claim of uniqueness is challenged by the very existence of Chinese civilization. Consequently, I asked myself whether those who wrote about Jewish history were aware of the challenge that the Chinese posed to Judaism's self-awareness.

In his *Kuzari* (1140), Judah Halevi, the Jewish poet and philosopher, who could have learned about the Indian and Chinese civilizations from contemporary Arabic literature, addresses only one aspect of this challenge:

Kuzari: Is not this faith of yours shaken by the claim of the men of India, who say they have places and buildings that are thousands of years old?

Haver: My faith would indeed be challenged if their belief were validated, or if they had a Scripture whose authority was unquestioned. But this is not the case. Rather are they an inchoate people, and nothing of theirs is clearly defined. So they anger the peoples of the Book with claims like these, even as they anger them with their images and their idols. They despise those who claim to have divinely inspired Scripture. In this field they have but few writings, composed by individuals, and capable of convincing only unintelligent people. (*Kuzari*, I:60–61)⁶

Judah Halevi was referring to the Indians, but he could have used the same arguments in regard to the Chinese. His main argument is based on invalidating Indian (and Chinese) historical writings, which are not founded on revelation. This claim stems from the immense value Jews attribute to the

5. Yosef Klausner, the historian and philosopher, wrote that the Jews, the Chinese and the Arabs are peoples in a state of advanced age, but they still desire to live. "The foundation of the New Movement in Israel" (in Hebrew), *Ha-Shiloach* 2, no. 7–12 (1897), 537.

6. Judah Halevi's *Kitab Al Khazri*, trans. H. Hirschfeld (London and New York, 1905), 52. *Haver* was the Jewish participant in the debate. See also II:18–20, which claims that the Sabbath begins when the sun sets behind Sinai (rather than in China, the "eastern commencement of the inhabited earth"), because Palestine "lies in the center of the world."

historical dimension—particularly the truth and validity of the biblical story about the creation of the world and the crystallization of the Jewish people. But it is clear that Halevi had no well-established information for disputing the veracity of the Indian (or Chinese) annals, and that he ignored other challenges that Indian (or Chinese) history poses to the Jewish world view.

Perhaps for this reason—and because at the time it was possible to facilely dismiss the world of faith of Far Eastern cultures, at least in the context of any argument between Jew, Christian and Muslim—none of the cultural polemics mentioned the Chinese. The only comparison of Chinese history with Jewish history earlier than the late eighteenth century, to the best of my knowledge, is in Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Discussing the notion of election in Judaism, he draws a comparison between the rite of circumcision and the Chinese custom of preserving "a lock of hair on the crown of their heads, whereby they are distinguished from all other people; and thus distinguished they have kept themselves apart for thousands of years, so that in point of antiquity they far surpass all other nations."⁷

In Jewish literature through the ages, China has occupied a very limited place. In the current public arena, one often hears the simplistic statement that the Chinese people and the Jewish people share at least one common denominator: both belong to ancient, long-lived civilizations. Some commentators go further and add several cultural traits which the peoples supposedly share or which reveal striking similarities; hence, the two civilizations are perceived as a distant or putative pair. But these are mainly rhetorical remarks which stress alleged or real similarities rather than confronting the issue of comparative antiquity.

My concern here is not with the similarities often mentioned between Jews and Chinese as two peoples who carry the heavy burden of a long history and a rich cultural heritage.⁸ My topic arises from the Jewish world view that regards antiquity, historical-cultural continuity and uniqueness as fundamental characteristics of Jewish distinctiveness (based on the concept of chosenness and the realities of Jewish history)—so that, as Halevi's *Kuzari* shows, it could not be easy for Jews to admit that Chinese civilization was a more ancient and more continuous national-cultural entity with its own self awareness of distinctiveness and singularity. It would be even harder to admit that Chinese annals challenge or undermine the credibility of the biblical accounts of ancient Jewish history.

China posed a grave potential challenge to the Jewish historical world view and to Jewish self-esteem. Here was a civilization with a persistent memory of a long history, with a religion that lacked revelation but contained

7. Benedict De Spinoza, *Tractatus* (London, 1862), 87.

8. Neither do I intend to discuss sociological treatises which compare the structure of Jewish society to Chinese society.

an innate moral and ethical code, which did not share the fundamentals of the Jewish world view. Chinese civilization also posed a severe challenge to the Jewish (and hence Christian) cosmological and historical traditions. It was not possible to take refuge in the claim that the Chinese were primitive pre-Adamite human beings who had survived the great Flood and thus remained primitive and uncivilized. Neither could it be alleged that they had vanished from the earth for a time and reappeared in a new form. Chinese civilization was an ancient advanced literary culture with a continuous history, and it claimed intellectual and cultural seniority and superiority.

How, for example, should a Jew (and a Christian) react to the Chinese conviction that China is the navel of the world that God created? For the Jesuit missionaries, this was not a theoretical question. In his journal of his three decades in China from 1583 to 1610, the Jesuit priest Matthew Ricci (who introduced the Western clock to China in 1601) describes how he tried in vain to explain to the Chinese that they held a wrong impression of the nature of the Earth. He found them to be ignorant, believing that China was the entire world; to appease them he cunningly drew a map of the Earth in which China was the center, which fitted their concept.⁹

The notion that China was the center of the world was prevalent in the first millennium C.E., and the perception of other (outer) nations as barbarians developed as far back as the Chou dynasty, which was engaged in constant wars with China's neighbors. Later, the word *min* (people) was used exclusively for the privileged "hundred clans" of China, and a distinction was drawn between the inner Chinese and the outer barbarians. Chinese history was written "on the assumption that human life was essentially what went on in central China, China itself being the center of the world."¹⁰

Now, imagine how a Jew might react when he hears for the first time that it is not the Land of Israel, nor the city of Jerusalem, but China that stands at the center of the world. Or to the fact that the very word China (*Zhongguo*) has since the Middle Kingdom meant the cosmological center of the human universe.

This discovery, it seems to me, could have shaken basic Jewish beliefs about the uniqueness of Judaism. It could have shaken the Jews' belief in their unique place in the world.

In fact, however, when the Jews learned about China's claims for antiquity and cosmological pre-eminence, it did not shake their beliefs. I will try to explain why, by describing some modern Jewish responses to the discovery of Chinese civilization.

9. Ricci also faced the problem of how to translate "God" and "holy" into Chinese. Did they accord with *T'ien chu* (Lord of Heaven) and *Sheng*? See Stephen Neil, *A History of Christian Missions* (reprint, Penguin Books, 1977), 162–66.

10. Claude Larre, "The Empirical Apperception of Time and the Conception of History in Chinese Thought," in *Cultures and Time* (Paris, 1976), 54.

CHINA AS A USEFUL METAPHOR AND MIRROR

First, of course, China had to be discovered.¹¹

From the Hellenistic period on, classical universal histories—mainly the *Indika* literature about the marvels of India—began to describe the nature, lands and people at the edge of the Earth: the *oikoumene*, *habitatio*, *orbis terrarum* of the Far East.¹² However, China was utterly beyond the horizon of the classical world, even though some attempts had already been made in antiquity to trace the origin of the Chinese back to Babylonia, and fabulous stories were being told about some of China's rulers.¹³

China—known as *Thin* in the *Perpilus of Maris Erythraei* (guidebook to the Erythrean Sea) in the first century C.E.; as *Sinae* by Ptolemy; as *Zin* by Benjamin of Tudela; as *Seres*; and later as *Cathay*—was known mainly as the land of silk. Although vague rumors about Confucian and Taoist ideas may have reached Rome,¹⁴ China remained physically and spiritually far removed from the geographic lore of antiquity. Commercial connections were established between China and the Roman empire, and China imported various goods from the West. Chinese records contain a long and flattering account of how the people lived in Rome's eastern provinces as far as Mesopotamia from 97 C.E.; the Roman empire was called *Ta-ts'in* (Great Rome), and the Emperor Antoninus (Marcus Aurelius) was called *An-tun*. A group of Westerners made their way almost to the border of China in 166 C.E.¹⁵ Theophylactus Simocatta wrote his *History* around 628 C.E.; it presented an accurate description of China, but had no impact.

In 1068 C.E. the Muslim scholar Sā'id al-Andalusī (1029–1070) wrote: "The Chinese are the most numerous of all nations. They have the richest kingdom and occupy the largest territory. . . . They excel in their world and in perfecting their products, but they have no interest in science."¹⁶ In the Middle Ages the Muslims were not unfamiliar with China, but had only a vague knowledge: "We lack all information, which we would dearly like to have, on the history of the Indians and the Chinese, though we know that both these peoples possess exact knowledge and a large literature," wrote another Muslim scholar from Andalusia, Ibn Hazam (994–1064) in his *Marātib al-'Ulūm* (Classes of Science).¹⁷

11. I learned of J. J. Clarke's *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (London and New York, 1997) only after I wrote this article. It is a valuable source of information and enlightened insights concerning the perceptions of China in the West.

12. See Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, II, 3.67 (reprint, Loeb Classical Library, 1956), 145. He refers to China as *Serica*. See also James S. Romm, *The Edges of the Earth in Ancient Thought* (Princeton, 1992), 111–22.

13. J. Oliver Thomson, *History of Ancient Geography* (Cambridge, 1948), 32–33.

14. J. Needham, *Science and Civilization in China* 1 (Cambridge, 1954), 157. Also see Donald F. Lach, *Asia in the Making of Europe* 2, bk. 3, *The Scholarly Disciplines* (Chicago, 1977), 12–19.

15. Lionel Casson, *The Ancient Mariners* (Princeton, 1991), 202.

16. *Kitab Tabaqāt al-'Umam* (The book of the categories of nations), trans. and ed. Sem'an and I. Salem and Alok Kumar (Austin, 1991), 7.

17. F. Rozental, *The Classical Heritage in Islam* (London and New York, 1994), 59.

The prophet Muhammad, in a famous tradition (*hadīth*), had encouraged the Muslims to seek knowledge as far away as China, but it was only in the early thirteenth century that a converted Persian Jew, Rashid al-Din Fazallah, wrote a universal history, *Jami al-Lawarikh* (Collection of Chronicles), in which he described the history of China; however, his work was lost and knowledge of China in medieval Muslim civilization remained meager.¹⁸

The *mapae mundi* of this age in Western Europe is the Catalan Atlas, made in 1375 by Abraham Cresques, a Jew of Majorca, for the King of Spain. It combines remarkable geographic accuracy with mythical geography.¹⁹ Marco Polo, Mandeville and Franciscan missionaries created the image of Cathay of the fifteenth century; this curious but vague knowledge endured until the Age of Discovery. The curtain that hid China from the rest of the world was lifted in 1520 by Portuguese Jesuit missionaries, and knowledge gradually increased through their accounts from the sixteenth century onward. Western tourists in the Far East—mainly Jesuit missionaries such as Father Gonzalez de Mendoza, Matteo Ricci and the Jesuit Martini Martini—brought a wide range of useful knowledge back to Europe.²⁰ Jesuits and Humanists recognized that China was an advanced civilization and that its philosophy ought to be better known. During the nineteenth century, travelers accounts, world histories and morphologies of civilizations continued to take their readers on a grand tour which included China.

And what about the discovery of Chinese culture? While attempts to reconcile biblical traditions and Chinese annals fascinated some minds of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, China's attraction changed during the Enlightenment. It began to be perceived as a model or counter-model to Europe and European culture. The image of China and the Chinese virtues had been developed under the impression of the Ching during the first period of the Ching (Manzo) dynasty (1644–1911), which was conceived as establishing a rational-moral rule. Thus, Chinese political history, societal structure, religion and philosophy became subjects of interest.

18. J. J. Saunders, "Rashid al-Din, the First Universal Historian: A Persian servant of the Mongols Khans wrote the first really global history," *History Today* 21 (1971), 465–72; John Kirtland Wright, *The Geographical Lore of the Time of the Crusades* (New York, 1965), 271–72. Muslim-Arabic knowledge was far more accurate and detailed; see Rose E. Dudd, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta – A Muslim Traveler of the Fourteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989), 241–65. Ibn Battuta found China to be the safest and most agreeable country in the world for the traveler, but experienced the "worst culture shock of his traveling career" because he considered the Chinese to be heathens (*ibid.*, 258). An intriguing question is why the Chinese did not receive translations of scientific Greek and Roman literature from the Muslims and translate it into Chinese.

19. On the Catalan Atlas see Ronald Sanders, *Lost Tribes and Promised Lands* (New York, 1992), 3–16; Lach, *Asia*, 1:20–30.

20. Matteo Ricci, *China in the Sixteenth Century: The Journal of Matteo Ricci 1583–1610*, trans. L. J. Gallagher (New York, 1953). Mendoza's 1590 treatise on China was published in Macao and translated into the principal European languages. See also Lach, *Asia*, 1:730–821; Lach and Boies Penrose, *Travel and Discovery in the Renaissance 1420–1620* (New York, 1962), 264–71; Arthur O. Lovejoy, "The Chinese Origins of Romanticism" in *Essays in the History of Ideas* (Baltimore, 1948), 102–104.

A great step forward in Western knowledge of Chinese philosophy was made in Paris in 1687 when a group of Chinese Jesuits published Latin translations of three Confucian books (*Confucius Sinarum philosophus*). In 1735 Jean-Baptiste Du Halde compiled the *Description . . . de la Chine* on which the eighteenth-century *philosophes* (Voltaire, Montesquieu, Leibniz etc.) relied heavily for their knowledge of China.²¹ As a result, Confucius's fame grew quickly in European intellectual circles, and his philosophy was characterized as "the excellentest Morality that ever was taught . . . a Morality which might be said to proceed from the School of Jesus Christ."²² Confucius became the patron saint of the Enlightenment, which knew only the China of Confucius (St. Confucius, as Ricci called him). Through him (and not through Lao Tzu) the Enlightenment was able to "find a connecting link with China."²³

The image of China as seen through its philosophy emerged as a perfect polity. The kings of China referred to themselves as the "kings of humans" because their people were more obedient to authority and stronger followers of government policies than any other peoples of the world, wrote Sāid al Andalusī.²⁴ The philosophers followed this perception and created an image of the Chinese as perfectly polite and completely skilled in all sciences, in the words of Samuel Johnson in 1735.²⁵ Admiration for China was based on the idea that it possessed a rational political system and was practicing enlightened despotism.

It was, of course, an invented China.

When one culture suddenly discovers a previously unknown people, widening its geographic and cultural horizons, it could react to this discovery in different ways: (a) by developing comparative studies which enrich their understanding of human history in general and specific cultures and cultural subjects in particular; (b) by developing a set of *topoi* based on prejudices and misinformation, resulting in utopian or demonic images; (c) by imposing

21. Baron d' Holbach contributed a group of unsigned articles on China and Chinese philosophy to the *Encyclopédie*. See also A. H. Rowbotham, "The Impact of Confucianism on Seventeenth-Century Europe," *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 4, 5 (1945); D. Mungello, *Leibniz and Confucianism: The Search for Accord* (Honolulu, 1977); B. Guy, *The French Image of China before and after Voltaire* (Geneva, 1963). Under the influence of the Jesuit's interpretations, Confucius, presented as a Chinese philosopher who preached the gospel of monotheism among the Chinese, became the patron saint of eighteenth-century Enlightenment.

22. Lovejoy, "Chinese Origins," 105.

23. Adolf Reichwein, *China and Europe: Intellectual and Artistic Contacts in the Eighteenth Century*, trans. J. C. Powell (London, 1925), 77. More recently, see Zhang Longxi, "Cultural Differences and Cultural Constructs: Reflections of Jewish and Chinese Literalism," *Poetics Today* 19, no. 1 (spring 1998): 305–328. Zhang stresses that while "Confucianism is mostly concerned with moral behavior and political action based on a set of principles of interpersonal relationship, Taoism and Buddhism often delve into metaphysical questions about man and nature in religious and mystical terms."

24. Reichwein, *China and Europe*, 11.

25. Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation – The Science of Freedom* (New York and London, 1977), 320.

its own concepts and experiences and trying to fit the other people into its own world view and historical narrative—and often claiming superiority over it, but sometimes feeling inferior in major aspects; (d) by using the perspective of the other culture as a mirror to better understand its own concepts and historical experience; (e) by creating an oppositional model for contrasting the cultures as a whole and by individual traits; the other culture thus serves as an alter ego, helping to shape one's own image and self-esteem.

All these patterns were active in the case of Europe and China. Chinese civilization gained an enormous reputation in Europe from the late sixteenth century onward, and had both real and alleged influences on European intellectual and artistic life and manners.²⁶

"While the real China has been little known and too distant," wrote Ernest Rose, "an image of China has been constantly available and has lived its own life little affected by advances in commercial and political relations or in scholarship."²⁷ Rose was referring to the German literary arena of the nineteenth century, but his observation also fits modern Hebrew literature and others. Following him we may distinguish between knowledge, perception and intellectual response. Since the Jewish knowledge of China was drawn from European sources, and since Jewish images of China and its culture were totally dependent on Western knowledge and images, there is a need, I feel, to elaborate on this subject.

Voltaire, a great sinophile, asserted in his *Essai sur les moeurs* (Essays on Morals) that the Chinese should be admired mainly because of their "advanced conception of a single deity enjoying a pure morality and demanding no superstitious worship." He used Chinese civilization as a tool in his diatribes against Christian doctrines and sacred biblical history.²⁸ In Voltaire's image of China, it was a moral society conducted without the intervention of heaven. For Voltaire, as for the German philosopher Leibniz, China was the true elder of the family of man. And since China was also perceived as a country where art and science flourished under a benevolent despotism, he called upon the kings of Europe to follow the example of the emperor Ch'ien-lung by studying and patronizing philosophy and the arts.²⁹

Leibniz was extremely impressed by Chinese civil life and by what he believed to be the major role played by ethics in Chinese politics. He wrote a

26. See Reichwein, *China and Europe*; A. H. Rowbotham, *Missionary and Mandarin: The Jesuit at the Court of China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1942); Lewis S. Maverick, *China, A Model for Europe* (San Antonio, 1946); Lovejoy, "Chinese Origins," 99–135. The Chinese model was useful in the revolt against neo-classical standards.

27. Ernest Rose, "China as a Symbol of Reaction in Germany, 1830–1880," *Comparative Literature* 3 (1951): 57.

28. Gay, *Enlightenment*, 391–92. See also Rowbotham, "Voltaire, Sinophile," *Modern Language Association* 47 (1932): 1050–65; W. W. Davis, "China, the Confucian Ideal, and the European Age of Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44 (1983): 523–48.

29. Lach, *Asia*, xii–xiii; Reichwein, *China and Europe*, 75–98.

study called *Novissima Sinica* (1699) comparing the achievements of the Chinese with those of the Europeans, and suggested that the Son of Heaven send missionaries to the West to teach Europe about the precepts governing a civil relationship. In Montesquieu's view, customs could never be changed in China because they were inspired rather than established by law, so any change would result in a severe crisis.³⁰

Significantly, the Chinese were never perceived as "noble savages" since it was generally recognized that China was an advanced civilization, not one of the primitive cultures. The Chinese sages represented the idea of natural religion and natural morality. For those who believed in "natural philosophy" and "inner morality," China became the favorite model of morality without the need for religion and religious sanctions. The paradoxical outcome of the Jesuit interest in China was, as Rowbotham noted, that they placed in the hands of the anti-Christian forces "their most effective weapons against the Church."³¹

Some Europeans were eager to uncover the ancient wisdom of China, believing that the "light comes from the Far East." But others, from Fenelon (in his *Dialogues des Morts*) to Montesquieu and after, saw China as representing the ancient world, lagging behind the Eurocentric idea of progress. Herder rejected the image of China as an ideal constitutional monarchy, terming it an Eastern despotism. In the philosophy of Hegel and his disciples, China was considered to be a symbol of reaction.³²

Another widespread image of China was that of a tolerant society and regime. It is interesting to note that Henri Baptiste Grégoire, in his *Essai sur la Régénération Physique Morale et Politique des Juifs* (1787), cited the Jews of the Honan region as proof that Jews could assimilate into the surrounding culture: they adopted part of the Chinese culture and showed respect for Confucius (ch. 15).

"No people has so strictly a continuous series of writers of the History as the Chinese," wrote Hegel; he perceived Chinese morality to be innate—a "simple morality and right-doing," but an unconstructed one in practice and theory.³³ This hypothetical China was static and lifeless compared to the vital and dynamic West. China was deemed to lack Europe's genius for abstract science and its technophilia, and Taoism was often described as the most unqualified among the Chinese beliefs in its reverence for the natural world and the requisite place of humans in the sacred "web of life." Even when it demonstrated a certain proficiency for mechanical inventiveness, according to

30. Baron De Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Thomas Nugent (New York, 1949), 1:297–98.

31. Rowbotham, *Missionary and Mandarin*, 294.

32. Rose, *China*, 57.

33. George Wilhelm Friderich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York, 1956), 116, 131.

this view, it did not evolve an elaborate abstract system of rationality to go with it—that is, science. Nor did it develop a culture of technology.³⁴

Another German philosopher, Oswald Spengler, when criticizing the poor state of European world history, asked rhetorically: “Do we not relegate the vast complexes of Indian and Chinese cultures to footnotes, with a gesture of embarrassment?”³⁵ What Spengler meant was not the lack of accurate knowledge that Ibn Hazan referred to; rather, it was the narrowness of the Eurocentric outlook which viewed Europe as the cornerstone of world history; it was not interested in China for itself but as a subject of European history. And indeed, Europe had to wait a long time until the picture of the real China became clearer; even then, in non-scholarly writings, Europeans continued to use China, an invented entity, as a metaphor and a mirror.

The image of China in Western eyes changed from one of a marvelous pagan land to a model of rational government and “natural morality,” on one hand, and brutally inhuman and regressive despotism, on the other.³⁶ Some perceived it as a civilization governed by intellect and reason; others, as a mystical-spiritual or mysterious, exotic entity, totally different from the “materialistic-mechanistic” West.³⁷ In nineteenth-century racial theories, the “yellow race” was perceived as an inferior race, taken up, in the words of Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, with “a steady but uncreative drive towards material prosperity,” lacking imagination and using language which was incapable of expressing metaphysical thoughts.³⁸

THE JEWISH DISCOVERY OF CHINA AND CHINESE CULTURE

Traditional Jewish literature rarely refers to the civilization of India, and hardly at all to the civilization (or the land) of China. These subjects were outside the scope of Jewish representations of the inhabited Earth during the Hellenistic-Roman period.³⁹ Until modern times, the Jewish reader who

34. Kirkpatrick Sale, *The Conquest of Paradise* (New York, 1991), 89.

35. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, trans. C. F. Atkinson (New York, 1926), 1:17.

36. In the eyes of V. Belinsky, the key Westernizing Russian philosopher in the nineteenth century, China was an Asiatic civilization in every sense, despite its disparate image, since all of its institutions became stultified as soon as they were established. It was a “grey-haired infant . . . a creature that has never matured but already walks with a bent back.” Michael Confino, *From St. Petersburg to Leningrad: Essays in Russian History* (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv, 1993), 246.

37. Milton Singer, *When Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization* (New York, 1972), 24–31.

38. See George L. Mosse, *Toward the Final Solution: A History of European Racism* (London, 1978), 53.

39. Francis Schmidt, “Jewish Representations of the Inhabited Earth during the Hellenistic and Roman Periods,” in *Greece and Rome in Eretz Israel: Collected Essays*, ed. Kasher et al. (Jerusalem, 1990), 119–34. The biblical *Sin* and *Sinim* (Genesis 10:11, Isaiah 49:12) have nothing to do with China. In the Bible, the land of Syene (*eretz sinim*) (Isaiah 49:12) is mentioned as a distant geographical location at the very edge of the universe. The Septuagint translated it as “Persia,” but the reference is probably to Sunna at the southern border of Egypt. The same name also appears in the literature of the Sages as a symbol of the most remote place of Jewish exile. Nevertheless, in some fundamentalists’ writings, Cathay is a modified name of the Hittites

gained knowledge of the world only through Jewish sources, could have heard about China (*Zin*) in the “uttermost East” from medieval travelers such as Benjamin of Tudela (1165–1173). From the early nineteenth century, Jewish knowledge was drawn from European knowledge, mainly through secondary sources. In books and articles written by Jews about ancient and modern civilizations, China was hardly mentioned.

Kalman Shulman (1819–1899), a prolific Eastern European Jewish writer in the nineteenth century, was a notable exception. He carried on the Jewish tradition as expressed by Maimonides, which held that the Chinese did not write their own history because their deeds were few in number, shrouded by “clouds of darkness,” and full of “words of vain folly” that give historians great difficulty in uncovering the truth. But since the Chinese are a very ancient people, the reasoning goes, one has to write something about them and then “leave them to eternity”; one cannot simply ignore the sheer size of the Chinese empire or its scientific, technological and artistic achievements.⁴⁰

However, Shulman asserts that these achievements amounted to nothing when viewed against the inane beliefs of the Chinese—whom he claims had not made any cultural progress because their conservative society sanctified every age-old custom and isolated them from other nations. (Here, he reflects the attitude of the *maskilim* who viewed conservatism and insularity for their own sake as an expression of reactionism.) Consequently, the Chinese people became “a dry twig on the tree of life” of the nations. Shulman scoffs at the Chinese notion that they are the chosen people and hence have no need to learn from others.

Shulman does have a good opinion of the teachings of Confucius. Although the Confucian tradition contains some absurd tales, he believes, it also has many good things that are very beneficial to man’s life and behavior, as well as moral rules. Overall, however, the Chinese teachings are filled with unfounded foolish laws mixed with morals and doctrines of wisdom. And most important of all:

In all the teachings of the Chinese one cannot find one clear concept about the Divine Spirit that suffuses all material, all form and every image and shape. The Chinese do not even have a special word with which to signify this very momentous subject, nor do they have a picture or sign specifically designated for it. Their teaching is related only to morals and virtues, and all of its commandments and rulings rest on the obligation of the sons to utterly revere their parents, of the women to honor and respect their husbands, and of the slaves to honor, adore and sanctify their kings.⁴¹

(*Khitae*) and *Sin* derives from the Assyrian god *Sin*. Thus, the *Sinae* are *Sin*’s descendants who migrated eastward. Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Record: A Scientific & Devotional Commentary on the Book of Beginnings* (Grand Rapids, 1976), 254–56.

40. Kalman Shulman, “Of Chinese Religion,” in *Divrei Yemi Olam 1* (History of the World (Vilna, 1867); it was based on G. Weber, *Allegemeine Weltgeschichte*, 1–15 (Leipzig, 1882).

41. Shulman, *Chinese Religion*, 33–39.

Shulman repeats these views in another book. He describes the land of China in detail and depicts the marvelous works and cultural achievements of the Chinese, on one hand, and the autocratic and oppressive regime of the Imperial rule, on the other. He notes that the Chinese possess books of ancient wisdom which, according to the European sages, contain all the rules of the sciences from the earliest days of humankind, as well as all the inventions made by Europeans in recent times. However, he regards the religions practiced in China—Confucianism, Lao-tse and Buddhism—as utter idolatries, abounding in strange customs, superstitions and magic. All these, he says, have kept the Chinese from seeing the beacon of enlightenment and learning useful things from other nations. What is important is that he did not perceived China as a challenge to the Jews' world view and self-esteem.⁴²

Jewish public opinion tended to regard nineteenth-century China as a backward country that should have been grateful for the modern influence of the West, and the growing interest in Chinese affairs was marked by an Eurocentric approach. The writers described China as a underdeveloped land to which the light of progress was being brought by the Europeans. In some proto-Zionist visions, such as those of Moses Hess, the German-Jewish socialist, the old-new Jewish civilization in the Near East would cast the light of modern civilization as far as the banks of the Yangtze. Hess believed that one mission of modern Jewish nationalism was to bring universal Jewish values to the Orient. Addressing the Jews in 1860, he wrote:

A great calling is reserved for you: to be a living channel of communication between three continents. You should be the bearers of civilization to the primitive people of Asia, and the teachers of the European sciences to which your race has contributed so much. You should be the mediators between Europe and far Asia, open the roads to India and China—those unknown regions which must ultimately be thrown open to civilization. . . . You will become the moral stay of the East. You have written the Book of Books. Become, then, the educators of the wild Arabian hordes and the African people. Let the ancient wisdom of the East, the revelations of the Zend, the Vedas, as well as the more modern Koran and the Gospels, group themselves around your Bible.⁴³

According to Hess, the universal mission of the Jewish national revival was to convey both morals and industrialization.

After the nineteenth century saw China and Chinese history occupying a very small space in Jewish history books, China's role in world politics received increasing attention in the Jewish press in the twentieth century; it was included in general books on geography and history, and several books on China were published.⁴⁴ Among the many booklets published by the *La'am*

42. Shulman, *Mosdei Eretz* pt. 2 (Vilna, 1871), 149–58.

43. Moses Hess, *Rome and Jerusalem – Last Nationalist Question*, trans. Meyer Waxman (Lincoln and London, 1995), 157–59.

44. See Yaacov Shavit, "Windows on the World," *Qesher* 4 (Nov. 1988), 3–10.

popular library in Tel-Aviv in 1910, one devoted to the ethnography of China was abridged from a Russian book.⁴⁵

Although this is not the place for a survey of what knowledge about China a Jewish reader could acquire from reading popular books and articles in Hebrew and Yiddish, it is evident that the amount of available information grew steadily after the turn of the century. However, it seems to me that this increase had no impact on the Jewish world view and self-understanding.

WERE THERE CHINESE ON NOAH'S ARK?

In the Jewish conception of the origin of man, how could the biblical writer who described the universe God created have known nothing about the Chinese, leaving this great civilization outside our universe?⁴⁶ The Chinese people are not listed in the table of nations in Genesis, nor are they included among the descendants of the sons of Noah. How did the Jewish people react to the discovery that China has its own historical records and its own traditions of the origins of the universe and humankind which are not in accordance with biblical tradition? Do ancient Chinese history and ancient Chinese accounts confirm the Jewish biblical tradition, or undermine it?

From the Renaissance onward, many efforts were made to reconcile the Jewish chronicles with the Chinese accounts, trying to answer such questions as whether the Chinese were the descendants of one of Noah's three sons—Shem, Ham and Japheth. Could these questions shake the foundations of the Judeo-Christian faith? Can one dismiss the Chinese (and Indian) accounts as being mere children's stories (as did Judah Halevi and Maimonides)?

Since the seventeenth century, writers have been called on to explain how the Bible could have excluded the Chinese from the world God created. In 1667, for example, Athanasius Kircher, a German Jesuit and prolific scholar, published his *China Monuments* in Amsterdam. One of his sources was *Novus Atlas Sinesis* (1655), written by his former pupil Marti Martini, mathematician to the Chinese imperial court. Kircher recognized the antiquity of Chinese culture; however, in his desire to fit it into the picture of mankind's history as drawn in the Bible, and as a confirmed Egyptophile, he found what he regarded as sufficient evidence that Chinese culture had derived from Egyptian origins after the Flood. He believed that he had thus connected the biblical story to the Chinese legends, making the Chinese the descendants of Noah's second son, Ham.⁴⁷

45. Some Chinese folk tales were translated into Hebrew, including two collections published in Warsaw and Tel-Aviv in 1922.

46. According to John C. Ferguson, "There has been a surprising lack of interest among the Chinese writers concerning this subject of the origin of their race." *The Mythology of all Races* 8 (London, 1964), 6.

47. Joscelyn Godwin, *Athanasius Kircher: A Renaissance Man and the Quest for Lost Knowledge* (London, 1979), 50–51. See Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge, 1997), 150–55.

After Rymunds Marinus reported in 1667 that the Chinese also had a Flood legend,⁴⁸ John Webb, an English writer, wrote in *The Antiquity of China* (1676) that this was ultimate proof of the biblical account; for him, the Hebrew names in the Bible were translations from the Chinese.⁴⁹ He was followed by Simon Patric and E. Stillingfeet.⁵⁰

In 1692, the hero of an eight-volume book by Isaac La Peyrère entitled *L'Espion Turc* (the full English title: Letters Writ by a Turkish Spy, who lived five and forty years undiscovered at Paris) was a prototype of the Oriental literary tourists created by Montesquieu, Voltaire and Goldsmith. In a letter to Nathan, an Orthodox Jew, the spy revealed his brother had collected information in India and China "indicating that Chinese and Indian cultures predated the biblical world." To another addressee, the spy wrote that when he related Jewish historical traditions to the Chinese, they laughed at them "as a Romance of later Date than their Chronicles." Here was a pre-biblical civilization, a culture of greater antiquity than that of the Jews, that did not correspond to the biblical story and therefore undermined its authority.⁵¹

In 1728, in his *Sacred and Profane History of the World Connected*, Samuel Shuckford presented Chinese chronicles that he believed confirmed some biblical miracles.⁵² Here Chinese history was used to verify the sacred biblical history and the Judeo-Christian historical tradition.

Scholars began trying to place China into global historical frameworks, and a host of speculative and esoteric studies from the seventeenth century onward suggested various theories. Pierre Benoit Hyuet and other writers hypothesized that China was in an ancient Egyptian colony;⁵³ some opined that Chinese writing was but an offspring of hieroglyphics.⁵⁴ Some even suggested that the Chinese were a sub-race of the Atlantean root race.

The French Orientalist Louis-Mathieu Langles was so captivated by the Hindu diffusion theory that he maintained that the Five Books of Moses and the five Chinese Books of Kings were mere derivations of the five *Vedas*.⁵⁵

48. Rymundus Martindus, *Pugio fideli* (Leipzig, 1667).

49. Don Cameron Allen, *The Legend of Noah: Renaissance Rationalism in Art, Science, and Letters* (Urbana, 1963), 92; David S. Katz, *Philo-Semitism and the Readmission of the Jews to England 1603-1655* (Oxford, 1982), 58-49; Shon-i Chen, "John Webb: A Forgotten Page in the Early History of Sinology in Europe," *Chinese Social and Political Science Review* 19 (1935): 295-330.

50. Simon Patric, *A Commentary upon the Historical Books of the Old Testament in Works* (London, 1738); E. Stillingfeet, *Origines Sacrae* (London, 1799).

51. See Richard H. Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère (1596-1676): His Life, Work and Influence* (Leiden, 1987), 115-21.

52. Frank E. Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (New York, 1967), 118-19.

53. Erik Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and Its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition* (Princeton, 1993), 106-107.

54. Godwin, *Athanasius Kircher*, 50-55; Allen, *Noah*, 92.

55. Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century*, 114. On the theory that Sumerian-Babylonian chronologies were adapted for Indian and Chinese legends, see John C. Ferguson, *The Mythology of all Races* 5, 8 (New York, 1964).

In the mid-seventeenth century La Peyrère, a forerunner of the pre-Adamite theorists, believed that the Bible was "wonderfully reconciled with all profane records, whether ancient or new, to wit, those of the Caldeans, Egyptians, Scythians and Chinesian."⁵⁶ The Chinese legend of a great Flood and the fictitious Emperor Yu who subsequently drained the land, as recorded in the *Book of History*, was chief among the Chinese stories used to verify the biblical story of the Flood.

Thus, universal pan-mythologies, pan-religions and pan-theology offered a broad common basis for world religions, mythologies and reason; the chain of universal transmission, including China, was established. Gradually, Western historical research also traced Chinese influences on Western culture and thought (science and philosophy) at least from the Middle Ages. Scholars traced the routes of cultural interferences, not only with India, and established the identity of the cultural agents. China ceased to be an isolated phenomenon and became the subject of learning. European writers created its new image,⁵⁷ and asked themselves what Europe could learn from China.

These pseudo-scholarly and speculative efforts tried in vain to reconcile Chinese ancient history with biblical traditions, and to place China into a global historical framework beginning in primordial time. The episodes show that the discovery of the antiquity of China prompted both believers and non-believers to give free rein to their imaginations. The believers tried hard to reconcile Chinese ancient history and Chinese cosmological legends with Judeo-Christian history; those who rejected the authenticity and authority of the Scriptures revived old counter-arguments from pagan writers of the Hellenistic-Roman period.⁵⁸ The conclusion to be drawn from Chinese tradition was that the biblical antiquity was not the most ancient past known, and that there existed a great civilization which had never heard of the Jewish God. The ancient East Orient was thus perceived as a rival to the Hebrew West Orient, by its very existence undercutting the concept of the Jews as a chosen people with a unique history.⁵⁹

And what was the Jewish reaction to Chinese antiquity? I could find little more than a handful of references to the problem in Jewish literature. Actually, it was India whose antiquity the *Kuzari* indicated was a grave challenge to the antiquity of the Jewish people. According to both Halevi and Maimonides, the Indian narratives are incredible.

56. Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text: The Tradition of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450-1800* (Cambridge, 1991), 207.

57. Fr. Eusebius Renardot, *Dissertation on the Chinese Learning* (London, 1733).

58. Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère*, 115-21.

59. Thomas Huxley said that the Bible was responsible for the fact that even the backward villager in Europe knew about the existence of ancient glorious civilizations. Albert S. Cook, "The Authorized Version and its Influence," *Cambridge History of English Literature* (Cambridge, 1919-31), 4:43. Obviously, much was lacking and historical and geographic misconceptions were widespread.

Maimonides opined in his *Guide for the Perplexed* that “Today [in the tenth century] the majority of mankind agrees on the greatness of Abraham”; other peoples, such as the Sabaeans, manufactured ridiculous stories contradicting the biblical account of the beginning of mankind, “which prove that their authors were very deficient in knowledge.”⁶⁰ In declaring that only the Turks in the north and the Indians further south did not agree with the biblical account, Maimonides (like Judah Halevi) neglected to mention the Chinese religion.

However, Halevi devoted two sections of his *Kuzari* (1:57–60; 2:19–20) to a comparison of Jewish and Chinese numerical and astronomical systems in order to prove, according to the current astronomy, that the sun rises in Palestine at the edge of the West and continues under the earth to China at the edge of the East. Halevi tried to validate the Jewish perception of the universe—that Palestine and the Jewish people were its historical and cosmological core.

The position of Palestine (Eretz-Yisrael) in the world became a more demanding issue after the discovery of America in the late fifteenth century. Jewish scholars tried to reconcile Renaissance geography and ethnography with the biblical picture of the world. They also attempted to adapt the climatic theory to the new geography and the discoveries that had undermined the old concept of a fixed geographic center. Although the discovery of China occurred during the same period, the reconciliation efforts were not directed at China as well.⁶¹ This was partly because China was part of the old world, not the new world. Another reason was that since the discovery of the new world undermined the traditional Jewish geographic world picture, one reaction might have been to forego the idea that Palestine was the geographic center of the world while continuing to view it as the spiritual and cosmic center. On the other hand, China undermined not only the geographic world picture but also the self-confidence of the Jews, because the Chinese, a people of an ancient land of culture with its own high self-awareness, explicitly regarded China as both the geographic center and the cosmic center.

In modern Hebrew literature since the early nineteenth century, there have been extremely few references to China’s ancient history being a challenge to the biblical account. When the *maskil* Mordechai Gumpel Schnaber Levison, perhaps the most colorful Jewish intellect of his time, read in Martinus Martini’s *Sinicae historiae* (1658) that Chinese history predated the Flood, he was aware of the atheistic implications of this information.

60. Moses Ben Maimon, *Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedländer (New York, 1956), 315–16.

61. Abraham Melamed, “The Land of Israel and Climatology in Jewish Thought,” in *The Land of Israel in Medieval Jewish Thought*, ed. M. Hallamish and A. Ravitzky (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1991), 52–78; Melamed, “The Discovery of America in Jewish Literature of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries” (in Hebrew) in *Following Columbus: America 1492–1992*, ed. M. Eliav-Feldon (Jerusalem, 1996), 443–54.

Therefore, following the orthodox Christian defense, he interpreted Martini as doubting and actually mocking the idea of Chinese antiquity. The Chinese themselves, he claimed in his *Thirteen Principles of Torah* (Altona, 1792), do not believe their own chronology, thus affirming the biblical account and indirectly corroborating the doctrine of creation out of nothing.⁶²

Samuel David Luzzatto, the prolific Italian scholar and rabbi, writing in the second half of the nineteenth century, took another line of argument. Chinese historical annals are as ancient as the Book of Moses, he said, but do not contradict it because they knew nothing about Moses; thus no one could use them, as other pagan accounts were used in antiquity, to question the reliability of the biblical narratives.⁶³

The safest response to the claim that the Chinese annals predated the Hebrew scriptures was to declare that nothing in them either confirmed or contradicted the Bible. The Jewish-English *maskil* Eliakim ben Abraham (Jacob Hart), following William Whiston’s *Essay Towards Restoring the True Text of the Old Testament* (1722) and other writings such as the work of Yehuda Halevi, wrote in his *Milchamot Adonai* (God’s Wars) (London, 1794) that pagan Chinese historical accounts on the origins of mankind had no basis, and should stay outside the Jewish world view; even if one accepted their accuracy, there was nothing in them that contradicted the Bible.⁶⁴

Yet another response was that Chinese cosmologies and histories were mere annals that lacked the spiritual ferment “which quivers throughout the biblical histories.” Hence, Chinese religion also lacked a messianic idea. From this point of view, it is not the historical reliability of the Chinese annals that count, but their metahistorical content—and the Chinese annals, unlike the Bible, contained no metahistorical message.⁶⁵

62. David B. Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* (New Haven, 1995), 366; Moshe Peli, *The Age of Haskalah* (Leiden, 1979), 144–45.

63. S. D. Luzzatto, “Hatorah hanidreshet” in *Mechkarei haYahadut* 1, pt. 1 (Warsaw, 1912), 64.

64. *Ibid.*, 5–6. On Hart, see Ruderman, “Was There a *Haskalah* in England? Reconsidering an Old Question” (in Hebrew) *Zion* 42 (1997), 118–21. On Whiston, see James E. Force, *William Whiston: Honest Newtonian* (Cambridge, 1985). Further evidence of the fact that the Jewish *maskil* had some knowledge of Confucius’s teachings is in *Sefer habrit* (Brin, 1797) by the observant East European *maskil* Pinchas Elijah Hurwitz (1765–1821). He criticizes Confucius’s description of the relations between the earth and the sun, which contradicts Ecclesiastes 1, and writes: “Hence, my brother, do not heed the lying words [Confucius] speaks, and keep your distance from falsehood. On Hurwitz, see Ira Robinson, “Kabbala and Science in *Sefer Ha-Berit*: A Modernization Strategy for Orthodox Jews,” *Modern Judaism* 9 (1989), 275–88. The book was very popular among Orthodox *maskilim* in Eastern Europe.

In his autobiography *Toledot chayim* (1872), Chayim Aaronson wrote that under the influence of science, many people were casting doubt on the signs and miracles that Solomon had shown to the Jewish people, and were arguing that he had shaken Mt. Sinai with the aid of gunpowder brought from *eretz hasinim*, “whose people had gained knowledge 10,000 years before the Flood.” Aaronson interpreted “*eretz sinim*,” from the Book of Isaiah, to mean China; this interpretation does not appear in *Sefer habrit*, which, according to Aaronson, totally disclaims this view. My thanks to Dr. David Asaf, who referred me to this manuscript in the archives of the Diaspora Research Institute, Tel-Aviv University.

65. Eliezer Livneh, “Judaism and the Religions of the Far East,” *Judaism* (summer 1952), 224–35.

China's size cut the ground from under the climatic (environmental) theory. It is impossible to squeeze that huge country into a single climatic framework, and it is likewise impossible to explain China's cultural uniformity despite the many climatic differences in a vast land stretching from Siberia to the Pacific. Simply by virtue of existing, China also undermined the cyclic theory formulated in 1852 by Rabbi Nachman Krochmal (Renak) in *Moreh nevukhei hazeman* (The Guide for the Perplexed of Our Time), since Chinese civilization never went through the sequential stages of development, growth and decline that Renak found in the great historical civilizations. However, one can justifiably state that these concepts do not reflect the Jewish world view, but rather constitute an anthropological or philosophical theory advocated by one philosopher or various circles.

In short, Chinese civilization was not assigned a place in the universal historical and philosophical schemas proposed by Jewish authors. Although the role of Jewish history in world history was a central topic, the great ancient civilization of China was missing. Even when China became a terra cognita, it remained incognita in the Jewish literature addressing these issues. Nevertheless, it was impossible to totally disregard China insofar as the study of the link between faith and ethics is concerned.

ETHICS WITHOUT REVELATION

What, then, was the Jewish reaction to the fact that China has its own unique wisdom, literature and moral code without any need of an active god, heavenly laws, rabbinical authority, and so forth? This indeed posed a grave challenge. Here was a civilization with a long history and a prolonged and persistent historical memory, with a religion that lacked revelation, with an innate moral and ethical code that made it difficult to regard the civilization as primitive, heathen and idolatrous, and with none of the fundamentals of the Jewish world view.

No wonder then that upon learning about Confucius (presumably through a German source), Naptali Herz Wessely, at the forefront of the moderate *Haskalah* (Enlightenment) movement, had no hesitation in stating that Confucius surely was a Jewish sage from the exile in Assyria.⁶⁶ On the other hand, the *maskilim*, influenced by the natural philosophy of English Deism and the Enlightenment, claimed that China was proof that morality, moral behavior and religiosity could exist without revelation, Torah and religious rules (*mitzvot* or *Shulkan aruch*).

66. N. H. Wessely, "Magid chadashot," *Ha-Ma'assef* (1789); Shmuel Feiner, *Haskalah and History: The Emergence of a Modern Jewish Awareness of the Past* (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1995), 51. A similar tactic was adopted in relation to Zarathustra. The radical *maskil* Joshua Heschel Schorr was scornful of those who suggested that Zarathustra was Ham, Moses, Elijah's pupil, Jeremiah or Ezra ("Hatorah shebikhtav," *Hechalutz* 7 [1865], 9–16).

In his "Letter to Johan Casper Lavater," Moses Mendelssohn rejected the claim that Judaism was basically hostile to other religions:

If a Confucius or a Solon were to live among our contemporaries, I could, according to my religion, love and admire the great man without succumbing to the ridiculous desire to convert him. Convert a Confucius or Solon? What for? Since he is not a member of the household of Jacob, our religious laws do not apply to him. And as far as the general principles of religion are concerned, we should have little trouble agreeing on them.⁶⁷

This view concerning the universality of morality (ethics) and basic religious premises (and human wisdom) was shared by the *maskilim* who followed. More than a generation later, in his book *Kinath Haemeth* (Vine, 1828), the radical *maskil* Y. L. Meises (1831–1898) used the writings of Confucius, which he knew through the new German translation of Wilhelm Schott's *Werke des tschinesischen Weisen Kung-Fu-Dsue und seiner Schueler* (Halle, 1826), to urge the *maskilim* to spread their teaching of modern rational Judaism among the masses.⁶⁸

One can argue, of course, that the interpretation of Chinese philosophy as a "secular ethical philosophy" without the knowledge and fear of God is a misconception,⁶⁹ and that the truth is that Confucianism and Judaism (and Islam) share a belief in God Almighty.⁷⁰ But these alleged similarities are artificial; even if we can find common ethical instructions in Chinese philosophy and Jewish ethical literature, this does not indicate a common religious or philosophical background and framework.

My knowledge of Chinese philosophy and religiousness is based on secondary sources so I am unable to comment on it,⁷¹ but the fact is that Confucianism was perceived as representing an ethic without revelation or God's intervention—and thus was the best and most impressive example of the idea of *Volkgeist*. It was a great nation that accepted a philosophy created by a *Genie* (genius), and internalized it so that the philosophy became the essence of its collective spirit and the guiding light of its behavior. The ideal China could be perceived as a model of "natural national morality" that was an integral part of the essence of the people—part of its human nature—and not imposed on it by a transcendental force.

Confucian ethical teaching in its philosophical and social context could be seen as evidence of the universality of ethics—not necessarily of natural

67. Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem and Other Jewish Writings*, trans. and ed. Alfred Jospe (New York, 1969), 117.

68. See Yehuda Friedlander, *Bemisterei hasatira: Hebrew Satire in the Nineteenth Century* (in Hebrew) (Ramat Gan, 1994), 3:56, 77–81 (n. 17).

69. Or that the assumption that the Jewish moral code is dependent on the belief in revelation is a misconception.

70. See Marshall Broomhall, *Islam in China: A Neglected Problem* (New York, 1966), 83–87.

71. See Fu Youde, "Confucianism and Judaism: A General Comparison" in the present volume.

morality, but rather as the universality of divine morality; evidence that one God endowed all humans with His spirit. However, this universalism contained an internal contradiction: many human beings (the Chinese in this case) did not ascribe the source of ethics and its force to a god—and, in any case, not to the god known to the Jews, which was a god they knew not.

These few references from the Jewish literature of the late eighteenth century are, to the best of my knowledge, exceptional. As far as I know, Chinese civilization is rarely mentioned in Jewish polemic literature, and hence is rarely seen as a challenge or used as a metaphor or mirror. Even within the Orientalist intellectual group of German-Jewish thinkers at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Chinese spiritual heritage is rarely included in what is generally referred to as the spirit of the Orient. Jews contrasted their spiritual heritage, ontological characteristics and nature with those of the “Indo-European nations”—but not with the Chinese, who do not belong to this hypothetical race.

One exception was Martin Buber, who devoted a few articles to Chinese spirituality.⁷² Buber followed the pan-theological, pan-rational European trend when he tried to find a common ground for the Chinese experience and other spiritual experiences, including that of Judaism. In his 1912 article “Der Geist des Orients und das Judentum” (The spirit of the Orient and Judaism),⁷³ Buber described Judaism as an integral part of the spirituality of the Orient, and contrasted what he called the Occidental type of human being (a person with pronounced sensory faculties) with the Oriental type (a person with pronounced motoric faculties).⁷⁴ Clearly, he did not distinguish among the various Oriental civilizations, religions and philosophies.

Buber returned to Chinese philosophy several times. In 1909 he published his *Ekstatische Konfessionen*, a universal anthology of mysticism and the search for inner experience (*Erlebnis*), which included short sayings of Lao-tse and Tschuang-tse.⁷⁵

In 1910 he translated from the English extracts from Tschung-Tse, and wrote a long article about the teaching of Tao.⁷⁶ In 1928 he gave a lecture in which he described Taoism as a philosophy of existence achieved through wisdom. Buber also spoke of the Chinese concept of the redemptive unity of the world. In Chuang-tzu’s writings, he found deep similarities with “the total shape of Greek philosophy that transferred the teaching from the sphere

72. Zvi Verbolovsky, “Modes of Faith and Modes of Wisdom” (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1987), 28–33.

73. Martin Buber, *On Judaism*, trans. and ed. N. H. Glatzer (New York, 1967), 56–78.

74. Buber, *Ecstatic Confessions: The Heart of Mysticism*, trans. Esther Cameron, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (San Francisco, 1985), 145–48. See also Jonathan R. Herman, *I and Tao: Martin Buber’s Encounter with Chuang Tzu* (New York, 1996).

75. Buber, “The Teaching of Tao,” in *Pointing the Way: Collected Essays* (New York, 1957), 31–58.

76. Buber, “Reden und Gleichnisse des Tschung-Tse, Deutsche Auswahl von Martin Buber” (The Teaching of the Tao) (Zürich, 1951). See Daniel L. Overmyer, *Religions of China: The World as a Living System*, (New York, 1986).

of genuine life into the sphere of the explanation of the world, into an ideological structured theory, thereby, to be sure, creating something wholly individual and powerful in itself.”⁷⁷

By inventing the fictitious Oriental and Occidental types, Buber followed the German morphological school of thought. What should interest us, I believe, is not the content of this morphology but the inner contradictions in this pattern of thought. On one hand, Buber firmly believes in a common human basis in matters of spirituality, and hence compares the mysticism of the Muslim Sufis, Buddhism, Lao tzu, medieval Christianity and Judaism; on the other hand, he describes the Western man as being totally opposed to the imaginary collective Oriental man. This type of contradiction, I believe, can be found not only in Buber (or Spengler) but in many attitudes toward the East in general and China in particular.

Indeed, Chinese civilization helped provide grounds for the pluralistic thesis of faith as well as for a relativistic concept of culture. One way to cope with pluralism and relativism was to seek a common basis for the Chinese and Judeo-Christian faiths and ethics. However, even should such a common basis—real or imagined—be found, the fact still remains that Chinese history has undermined the institutions of Judeo-Christian history.⁷⁸ It could also validate the idea that a world view and ethics are not an outcome of divine revelation, but rather the product of the special spirit of a nation (*Volkgeist*), whether this is a collective creation or the fruit of a genius’ spirit that has been passed on to a people. In other words, it could provide a strong historical-realistic foundation for historicism, as a historical world view, as well as for Romanticism.

TRADITION AND MODERNITY, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

During the months that preceded my trip to China, I read some valuable studies on Chinese intellectual history. What impressed me was that there are quite a few structural similarities between Chinese and Jewish cultures—and, for that matter, Islamic and other cultures. Sociology has already pointed to common patterns in the responses of traditional societies to modernity and to Western influences; intellectual history shows the basic resemblance—within different contexts, of course—in the struggle to define

77. Overmyer, *Religions*, 58.

78. This is dealt with from a Christian viewpoint in *Ferno-stliche Weisheit unter christlicher Glaube*, ed. H. Waldefels & T. Immoos (Mainz, 1985). On the relationship between religious exclusivity and religious pluralism, and the question of whether everything different is contradictory—a position that can lead to invalidation of any other religion, to religious relativism, or to a pluralistic outlook which attributes equal value to every religion—see the recent exchange of views: Avi Sagi, “Hume’s Dilemma and the Defense of Interreligious Pluralism,” *Iyyun* 45 (October 1996), 419–42; Hanna Kasher, “On Interreligious Pluralism: A reply to Avi Sagi,” *Iyyun* 47 (April 1998), 207–15. The same principles can be applied to the connection between different (and contradictory) cosmologies and chronicles relating to the origins of the human species.

one's own intellectual heritage, to preserve its tradition and distinctiveness, but at the same time to react and respond to the Western challenge.

The issues include how to define "this culture of ours" (*ssu-wen*), tradition, distinctive values, the ways of the sages (*sheng-jen chin tao*), the way of the ancients (*ku-jen chin tao*); the distinction between laws and customs, authority and change, transcendent affairs and human affairs; between religion, philosophy and popular beliefs; between ethics (or moral principles: *i-li*) and politics; between preserving the faith (*pao chiao*) and breaking with tradition; the nature of the commitment to the national past; and above all, the prospects of synchronizing or syncretizing Western values and ideas with one's own collective-traditional values, as well as the definition and scope of the textual tradition and learning (*hsueh*).

While reading about Liang chi'i-Chao or Yen Fu, to give only two examples, I was under the impression that I was reading the intellectual biographies of some of the major modern Jewish thinkers.⁷⁹ When I read about Chinese intellectual history in what the West calls the Middle Ages, during the T'ang and Sung China (618–1127),⁸⁰ I was struck by basic similarities between the Chinese men of learning and the Jewish sages of the period (and after).

In 1897, Ahad Ha'am, the national thinker, wrote a critical review of the Hebrew translation of Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, asserting that another book of his, *The Citizen of the World*, ought to have been translated instead. The latter book, he said, was filled with interesting ideas and criticism, and was even better than Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, a far more well-known work. And why did this book merit translation into Hebrew? Because from it, the Hebrew reader could learn what European civilization looked like in the eyes of a Chinese sage, someone who was not tempted by everything that glitters in Western civilization and who knew how to differentiate between what is edible and what is rubbish, what is positive and what is negative.⁸¹

So there is a similarity between the modern Chinese culture and the modern Jewish culture, and it lies in the fact that both of these two ancient civilizations have to cope with the challenge of Western civilization and its spirit of modernization. This important and broad topic is beyond the purview of this article.

Since Chinese history lies outside the orbit of Jewish history, the Chinese do not possess the sacred books which, because they are shared by a number of different cultures, have become a battleground of interpretations and

79. Benjamin Schwarz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (New York, 1964); Joseph R. Levenson, *Liang Ch'i-Ch'ao and the Mind of Modern China* (Berkeley, 1967).

80. Peter K. Bol, *"This Culture of Ours": Intellectual Transmissions in T'ang and Sung China* (Stanford, 1992).

81. Ahad Ha'am, "Sifrei Am" in *Al parashat derakhim 3* (At the parting of the ways: writings) (Berlin, 1930), 12–13.

counter-interpretations, of histories and counter-histories. The Chinese books have an important theological meaning, of course, but not the slightest historical or political aspect. Hence there is no basis for Jews and Chinese to quarrel over the books—that is, over cultural phenomena such as the authority or authenticity of traditions, or the antiquity and original source of traditions and their appropriation by others—which is an integral part of the Jewish-Christian encounter, and to a lesser degree, the Jewish-Muslim encounter.

Chinese history has no place in the Jewish world view (and its encounter with the Christian European world view), so the Jewish and Chinese civilizations are not involved in any confrontations. For this reason, Jewish scholars never took into account the challenge China poses to some of their fundamental beliefs. More than that, they never described China as an antithetical model of Judaism (as they did with classical antiquity, Islam and even Indian culture), and never used it as a mirror. If they are a distant pair, they are a pair which has no reason whatsoever to quarrel over the authenticity, authority and meaning of any shared books or common spiritual heritage. The same is true of the notion of distinctiveness. It seems that the notion of geographic and meta-geographic centrality, and the notion of distinctiveness, from an ethnocentric or theological point of view, often emerged as pair concepts.

The paradox, we may conclude, is that cultures that share a common tradition, understand each other's "language" (symbols, allegories, visions and so forth) and relate to each other, are very often involved in a long-standing controversy over the meaning of their histories—past, present and future. This is not the case here. The profound distance can serve as a high wall of separate cultural languages, but at the same time the path of an endless fight over past and future does not exist. Precisely because Chinese civilization exists outside the horizon of the Jewish world view, its challenge is unnoticed and she can often be regarded as a putative, distant twin of Jewish civilization.

Fifty years ago only a few books about China had been translated into Hebrew, mainly on its revolutionary and pre-revolutionary history. Lately there has been a growing trend of translations of philosophical and literary works which may, among other things, help bridge the gap in knowledge without creating a confrontation. Chinese civilization and Jewish civilization are far from being a distant, putative pair, and they are only theoretical rivals. Consequently, they can become more knowledgeable about and more familiar with each other even though their spiritual-cultural heritages belong to different orbits.