

Confucian fusion

The Jewish community of Kaifeng has attracted attention because it is an unusual phenomenon, but the real cultural encounter between the Chinese and Jewish cultures has been textual, beginning mainly in the period of the Enlightenment

By Yaacov Shavit

"Chinese and Jews: Encounters Between Cultures" by Irene Eber, Bialik Institute, Jerusalem, 302 pages

The first parallel between the Chinese and the Jews appears, apparently, in Baruch Spinoza's "Theological-Political Treatise" (1679), in which he attributes the success of the Jews in preserving their identity and uniqueness to the fact that they are differentiated from other peoples by their customs. Spinoza compares the Jews to the Chinese: "They, too, have some distinctive mark on their heads which they most scrupulously observe, and by which they keep themselves apart from everyone else, and have thus kept themselves during so many thousand years that they far surpass all other nations in antiquity."

The antiquity of the two cultures – the Jewish and the Chinese – their historical continuity and the fact that they are both cultures of the book have, since Spinoza's time, given rise to quite a number of statements about the similarities between the Chinese and the Jews (or the Israeli Jews), who seem like "distant brothers," even though there has been no historical and cultural encounter between them. The distance and the difference, apparently, make it easy to make such statements.

What was known in Israel about the culture of China, that remote land, before the Maoist revolution apart from the fact that they had tea and rice there? How could Jewish culture and Chinese culture have met before the departments for East Asian studies in universities in Israel filled up and Chinese students came to study in Israel, and before China opened its gates to the Israeli tourist and merchant? Indeed, these two cultures never met, unless we are talking about the small Jewish community in Kaifeng, which began in the 12th century, or about the small communities of Jewish immigrants and refugees in a few cities (Shanghai, Harbin and Tienjin) in the 20th century. It is difficult to call this an encounter, and certainly not a cultural encounter that has left any impression and certainly any mark on the two sides.

The first three articles in the volume "Chinese and Jews" deal with the history of the three communities mentioned above, which have been described extensively in research literature and memoirs. In her article on the Kaifeng community, where the renovated synagogue has become a tourism site, Irene Eber (professor emerita of East Asian studies at Hebrew University in Jerusalem) writes that the research has not devoted sufficient attention to the process of the "Sinification" of the community, which in her opinion did not lead to its assimilation and complete disappearance. It is possible to dispute this description. In any case, I will mention Father Henri Baptiste Gregoire, who wrote in his well-known pamphlet "A Treatise on the Physical, Moral and Political Regeneration of the Jews" (1798) that the Jews of the Hunan province "have adopted part of the Chinese rite and give honor to Confucius." In his opinion, this is evidence that the Jews can give

up most of their rules of observance and adopt the surrounding culture.

Repertoire of images

I shall also mention that the fact of the existence of the Jewish community in Kaifeng gave rise in the 17th century to the idea of looking for the original version of the Five Books of Moses in the synagogue of the Kaifeng Jews (which was built in 1163).

The Kaifeng community attracted attention because it was an unusual phenomenon, but the real cultural encounter between Chinese culture and Jewish culture was textual, and manifested in the attempt made by several Jews, and several Chinese, to learn something about the other culture. These attempts gave rise to a repertoire of images and parallels that arose from the similarities – and the differences – the various writers were trying to find, for various reasons, between the two ancient cultures. But these are comparisons that are indicative mainly of the world of those who made them.

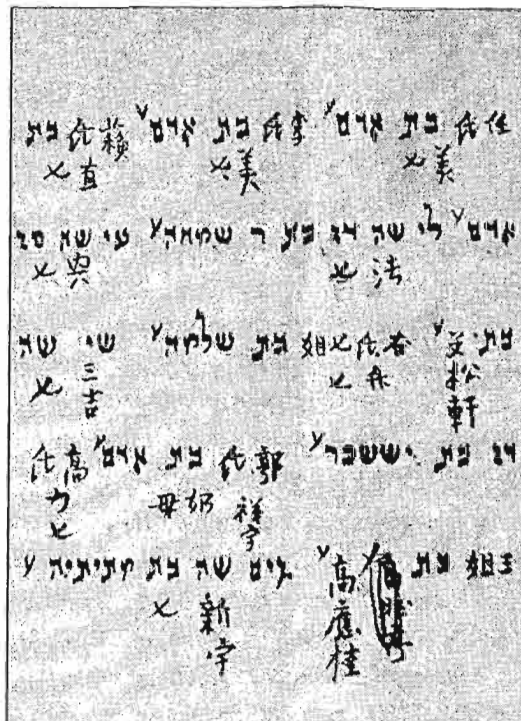
The Chinese interest in the Jews and Judaism began only in the 19th century. The first Chinese book about the Jews (I learned this from the article by Xiao Xian in the collection of papers "Sino-Judaica," published in 1999 by Tel Aviv University) was written by a priest named Friedrich Russell Graves and was printed in 1882. However, the Chinese interest in ancient Judaism stemmed from the interest in the origin of Christianity much more than from an interest in Jews and Judaism in the modern period.

The Bible, which was brought to China by the Protestant missionaries, was the major "encounter" between the Chinese and Judaism. Edith Maud Eton (whose Chinese name is Sui Sin Sar), the first American woman writer of Asian origin, relates: "My Chinese husband told me one day that he thought the stories in the Bible were more like Chinese than American stories, and added: 'If you had not told me what you have about it, I should say it was composed by the Chinese.'"

In the same spirit, the 19th-century writer Liu Changxing wrote that the Ten Commandments of Moses were equivalent to one of the classic Confucian texts. There were those who found that they are similar with respect to moral values as well as with respect to the usefulness of offering sacrifices, the decision to be observant and the setting of rules.

Eber tells about a fascinating figure among the Protestant missionaries: Shmuel Yitzhak Yosef Schereschewsky (1831-1906), who was born in Lithuania and converted in the United States and was ordained as a deacon in 1859. He sailed to China and translated the Book of Exodus into the northern dialect (which became the official language of China). The most fascinating of this translation (and of other translations) is the way the translator bridged the abyss between the world view and concepts of the Bible and the Chinese world view and concepts.

Eber notes that Jewish scholarship (a definition that goes a bit far when it refers to one apostate Jew) played an important role in the early days of



From "Chinese and Jews."

The Kaifeng community attracted attention because it was an unusual phenomenon, but the real encounter between Chinese culture and Jewish culture was textual, and manifested in the attempt made by several Jews, and several Chinese, to learn something about the other culture.

Protestant Christianity in China and has "the most far-reaching consequences, of which space does not permit discussion here, but was certainly one of the foundations for the reception of the Bible in the China of the 18th and 19th centuries." It is a pity that she did not expand this point.

The translations of the Bible into classical and vernacular Chinese in the 19th century lead Chinese intellectuals to argue that "the subjects dealt with in the Bible are not very different (and perhaps are not different at all) from the wisdom of the Chinese sages throughout the generations." Chinese writers and intellectuals frequently inserted verses from the biblical text into their works and their polemical writings (and it is a shame that some examples were not offered here).

Buber takes an interest

I shall permit myself to add that by the Middle Ages, knowledge of China had come to Jewish writers in the Muslim expanse, as may be learned from the comments by Yehuda Halevi in "The Book of the Kuzari" (1140). However, the Jewish

"encounter" with the knowledge of China and its images was carried out in texts by Jewish writers from the Enlightenment period on. The sketchy and superficial knowledge of this foreign, strange and distant culture came to them from the European literature about China, which was based mainly on information brought back by the Jesuits. The intellectuals saw Chinese culture as a model, a comparison, an inspiration and a challenge and had an equivocal attitude toward it. On the one hand, they evinced considerable admiration for the achievements of Chinese civilization, and, influenced by the philosophy of the natural religion of Taoism, they expressed admiration for morality that is not anchored in revelation.

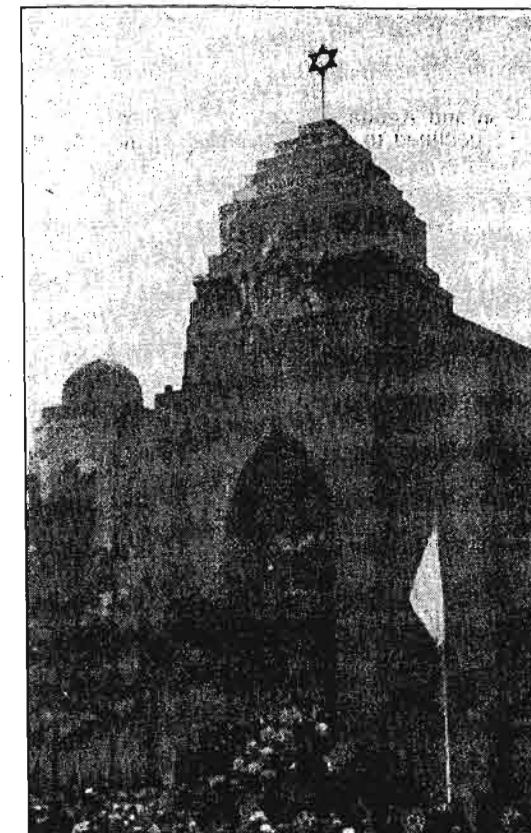
Abraham ben Naphtali Tang (who died in 1792), an English precursor of the Enlightenment who was recently discovered by David Ruderman, translated the "Confucian Catechism" from Voltaire's "Philosophical Dictionary" in his book "The Examination of Man." Naphtali Herz Weisel (1725-1805), who learned about the nature of Confucian ethics, and perhaps also the great esteem for Chinese culture that prevailed in Western Europe from the 17th century on, wrote that it was possible that Confucius was none other than a Jewish sage from the Assyrian exile – a comment that echoes the image of Confucius as a philosopher and prophet in the Jesuit literature. The claim that there are lines of similarity between Confucian morality and *Pirkei Avot* ("Ethics of the Fathers," which was recently translated into Chinese by Zhang Ping, from the translation of the tractate *Derekh Eretz Zuta*) has recently resurfaced.

The radical Enlightenment writer Yehuda Leib Mises (1831-1898) suggested learning from the Chinese the need to propagate the principles of modern Judaism among the masses.

However, on the other hand, the Chinese were described as a barbaric and corrupt nation of idol worshippers. The Enlightenment physician Judah Hurwitz wrote in his book "*Ammudei Beit Yehudah*" ("The Pillars of the House of Judah," 1766) that the moral corruption of the Chinese is the worst possible, because they are aware of their sins which, he says, increases their culpability and wickedness.

Needless to say, these contradictory perceptions of Chinese culture were part of the polemic between the Enlightenment "rationalists" and the Orthodox. The English Enlightenment figure Elyakim ben Avraham (Jacob Hart) was the first to take up the challenge in his book "*Milhamot Adonai*" ("Wars of the Lord," 1794), in which he argued that the historical tradition in the Book of Genesis came before the Chinese historical tradition.

It must be noted that both Christian and Jewish writers painted an imaginary picture of "China," and chose from its religious and cultural tradition the elements that seemed to them representative, but they also described it as a monolithic society and many of their successors continued this one-dimensional image. The only Jewish thinker who evinced a great deal of interest in Chinese philosophy, as part of his interest in the cultures of the Far East and the rejection of the "West," was Martin Buber, to whom Eber devotes a special article that reveals this less-known aspect of his thought (see also Jonathan R. Herman's book, "I and Tao," which also deals with this subject). Buber was interested primarily in Lao Tse and Taoism and tried to find congruence between the basic concepts of Taoism and some of the basic concepts of Judaism, in his opinion.



From "Chinese and Jews"

Synagogue in Tienjin.

Shared exploitation

In recent years, quite a few works of Israeli literature have been translated into Chinese. These were preceded by translations from Yiddish. In the article "Translated Literature in Modern China: The Yiddish Writer and his Story," Eber relates that during the 20th century, approximately 40 works of Yiddish literature were translated into Chinese. What attracted Chinese writers to this literature, she says, is its image as representative of a society that is oppressed by its own tradition and hostile surroundings and also expresses universal human values. In modernist poetry in Yiddish, the Chinese, and especially the Chinese immigrant, appears as a representative of an oppressed and exploited society, like the Jewish immigrant. Poet Jacob Glatstein, for example, wrote: "I came with all the baggage / of my people, / like a water-carrier / and I asked impatiently / in cynical anger / Can I stop being a Chinaman for a while."

The character of the Chinese appears not only in Yiddish literature. Bracha Habbas, with the blessing of Berl Katznelson, put together an anthology called "Working Children: A Selection of Stories About Working Children Around the World" (the Histadrut labor federation, 1935). In it, there is the story of a Chinese boy called Tam Shun, who is "all yellow, from head to toe" and "knew shortage and hunger since the day he was born." He began to work in a factory owned by a British capitalist at the age of four and was killed in a work accident.

The bibliography edited by Daniel Wessely, "Jews and Judaism in Traditional China" (1998), shows the surprisingly large extent of the research literature in this area. The articles that Irene Eber has collected allow the Hebrew reader to become familiar with them.

Yaacov Shavit is a lecturer in the department of the history of the Jewish people at Tel Aviv University.