FROM KAIFENG TO SHANGHAI VIA ROME AND PARIS: JESUITS AND THE HISTORY OF JUDAISM IN CHINA

Jeremy Clarke

Matteo Ricci, the famous Jesuit missionary to China, welcomed a stranger called Ai Tian to the Jesuit residence in Beijing. The year was 1605. This scholar official from the city of Kaifeng in the inland province of Henan had heard of the wise man from the West and wished to speak with him. He used the opportunity of visiting Beijing for the doctoral examinations as an excuse to call upon the Jesuit. Ricci subsequently included their encounter in his journal, which was later wrought into a book by another Jesuit, Nicolas Trigault, when he traveled back to Rome to promote the work of the Jesuit missionaries in China. This edited work was published in Augsburg in 1615 as *De Christiana expeditione apud Sinas suscepta ab Societate Jesu* [Concerning the Christian expedition among the Chinese undertaken by the Society of Jesus] and was then republished and translated into other languages very rapidly. Ricci had included this particular encounter because the scholar was both Chinese and Jewish. Ai Tian and his coreligionists aroused great interest throughout Europe as the discovery of a "lost" community of Jews living in the middle of China was exciting, surprising news.

Over the next two centuries, until the banning and expulsion of European Christian missionaries during the 18th century (and the suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773), a number of Jesuits wrote reports about the origins, nature, and history of the Kaifeng community. These writings too were sent back to Europe, not only as part of the general exchange of correspondence between Jesuits but also in response to specific enquiries from a number of interested parties spread across the continent. When China was forcibly opened up to foreign trade in the middle of the 19th century, as a consequence of the defeats inflicted upon

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1 An incomplete English translation of this was completed in the 1940s by a New England Province Jesuit, Louis Gallagher, and published as *The China That Was: China as Discovered by the Jesuits at the Close of the Sixteenth Century* (The Bruce Publishing Company: Milwaukee, 1942).

imperial China during the Opium Wars, a new group of scholars showed interest in the ongoing existence of this community.

They found the community drastically reduced in size and substance, both as a result of natural diminishment (since it was not receiving Jewish settlers from beyond China) and through gradual integration into the broader populace because of intermarriage. The community had come so far from its distinctive origins that some individuals were even willing to sell portions of the community’s sacred scriptures and treasures to foreigners—even though they had rejected similar offers from the Jesuits in earlier centuries.³ From then onwards the study of Chinese Judaism, at least in terms of this ancient community, has largely been limited to the older primary sources of historical enquiry.

Elsewhere during the 19th and 20th centuries, newer Jewish communities were established, not only in the treaty ports (especially Shanghai), but also in regional locations like Harbin, in the northeast. There was a substantial Russian Jewish community in this city, mainly due to the presence of the Chinese Eastern Railway’s headquarters, which connected China and the Russian Far East. White Russian émigrés substantially augmented the Jewish community of Harbin in the early decades of the 20th century after the October Revolution. Likewise, other European refugees settled in Chinese Jewish communities after the rise of Nazism and the terrible persecutions that accompanied it.⁴ By and large, however, these newer communities were not connected to, nor communicated with, their illustrious forebear.

Thus much of the most important information about the Kaifeng community can only be drawn from the pre-Suppression writings of the Jesuits (i.e. prior to 1773). That Jesuits would bother to record the history of a Jewish community on the other side of the world at the same time that their leaders in Rome had recently voted to exclude New Christians from the Society is a story worth exploring further. There has already been much written about the meeting between Ricci and Ai Tian, as well as close analysis of the scriptures in the possession of this community and the various stelae inscriptions that were found within the Kaifeng synagogue.⁵

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³ A number of these are now in the possession of the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati.
⁵ Although published some years ago, Hyman Kublin provides a comprehensive selection of some of the more important selections from these writings in Studies of the Chinese Jews: Selections from Journals East and West (Paragon Book Reprint Corp.: New York, 1971).