A CHINESE-HEBREW MANUSCRIPT, A NEW SOURCE FOR THE HISTORY OF THE CHINESE JEWS*

Berthold Laufer

Reprinted for private circulation from The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures, Vol. XLVI, No. 3, April, 1930, pp. 189-197.

The present article by the late Berthold Laufer, written about fifteen years ago, is a preliminary description of the only known Chinese-Hebrew manuscript. This concise study is as valuable as it is inaccessible. The reprints are no longer available and the **American Journal of Languages and Literatures**, in which the article originally appeared, cannot be obtained in China. Sinologues, missionaries, and ethnologists alike will be grateful for the reprinting of this fundamental piece of research.

Unfortunately, the untimely death of the author prevented him to execute his plans, namely, to edit the described register and to publish a new, authoritative and annotated English translation of the three Kaifeng stone inscriptions. (Editor).

In 1927 when the American Oriental Society held its annual meeting at Cincinnati and enjoyed the hospitality of the Hebrew Union College, President Morgenstern very kindly showed me a collection of Hebrew manuscripts originating from the Chinese Jews of K'ai-fung fu in Honan and preserved in the library of the college. In looking these manuscripts over I was particularly attracted by a booklet of seventy-six small pages, because most of these were inscribed with Hebrew and Chinese characters alternating. The mere fact that it was the only Chinese-Hebrew manuscript I had ever laid my hands on and presumably the only one in existence proved a magnetic attraction in itself. I was permitted to take this manuscript along to Chicago where I had a photostat made of it. It turned out to contain a register of the Jewish congregation of K'ai-fung fu drawn up between the years 1660 and 1670, giving first the names of male individuals, then those of women, both in Hebrew and Chinese. Although practically a dry list of names, this unique manuscript is one of great historical interest. Before proceeding to offer some remarks on its contents and significance, a brief outline of the history of the Chinese Jews is presented, as I cannot expect that everyone is familiar with the subject and especially in view of the fact that many fantastic notions are still current about it in our encyclopedias and among the public in general.

*) Read at the meeting of the American Oriental Society at Cambridge, April 3, 1929.

There are very few well-authenticicated dates and facts to be gleaned from the history of the Chinese Jews. Of the inner life of this small community we are almost ignorant. The principal sources for our information are three Chinese inscriptions of considerable length on stone tablets written by Jews themselves and formerly erected in the synagogue of K'ai-fung, which ceased to exist between 1840 and 1850. These inscriptions are dated 1489, 1512, and 1663, which means that they are of recent date, belonging to the time of the two last dynasties, the Ming and the Ts'ing, so that their chronological data with reference to events prior to the Ming period must be viewed with critical eyes. In 1903, while in China, I obtained rubbings of these three inscriptions, and as I had occasion to meet at that time several Chinese Jews, I became much interested in their history and vicissitudes, and laid the results of my investigations before the International Congress for the History of Religions held at Basel, Switzerland, in September, 1904. This article was subsequently published in *Globus* (1905), and its results have generally been accepted in scientific circles.

Besides the lapidary inscriptions there were twenty-three horizontal inscriptions on wooden tablets hung in the synagogue and containing only brief maxims or devices, but interesting for the names and dates of Chinese Jewish officials who dedicated them to the temple. For the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries we have several reports anent the Jews from Jesuit missionaries beginning from Matteo Ricci, the first European who in 1605 had an interview with a Chinese Jew in Peking. The Jesuit relations contain a great deal of interesting information, but must also be taken with criticism. Two Chinese Protestants were delegated to K'ai-fung in 1850 by the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews, and their report was published in Shanghai by George Smith, Lord Bishop of Victoria, Hongkong. This, as well as the later accounts of several travelers, is merely of secondary or limited, importance, as the Jewish community then was in a deplorable state of disintegration and had forgotten almost all its traditions; the little knowledge they were then able to offer is all traceable to their inscriptions.

At the outset we are confronted by two singular phenomena:

1. The Chinese, with their immense wealth of historical documents, leave us entirely in the lurch as regards the Jews, while they give us many notices of Nestorians, Manicheans, Zoroastrians, Mohammedans, and even Catholics. All that has thus far been discovered are three brief references to Jews in the *Yüan shi,* the annals of the Yüan or Mongol dynasty: under the year 1329 the Jews are mentioned on the occasion of the reinforcement of a law concerning a levy of taxes on dissenters (chap. xxxiii); in 1340 the levirate was interdicted to Mohammedans and Jews (the levirate was an abomination in the eyes of the Chinese, and under the Manchu

dynasty was prohibited on pain of death); in 1354, in consequence of several insurrections, rich Mohammedans and Jews were summoned to Peking and called upon to render services in the army. A few more references occur in the *Yüan tien chang*, "The Statutes of the Yüan Dynasty." For the rest there is complete silence in the Chinese camp, which it is difficult to explain in view of the fact that the Jewish inscriptions refer, for instance, to a Sung emperor permitting the Jews to settle at K'ai-fung, to Yung-lo's consent to rebuild the synagogue, and to other important events in their history which we should expect or should like to see confirmed in the Chinese annals — also considering the fact that many Jews filled high offices in the army, civil administration, and as physicians.

2. Another peculiar deficiency is that the Chinese Jews unfortunately failed to produce any literature, while there is a considerable literary output on the part of Mohammedans both in Chinese and Arabic. The Jewish inscription of 1663 mentions two tracts — one written by Chao Ying-ch'eng on "The History of the Holy Scriptures" (*Sheng king ki pien*), and another treatise by his younger brother Ying-tou entitled *Ming tao sü* ("Introduction to the Understanding of the Doctrine"), in ten sections, a sort of apology of the Jewish religion. Neither of these tracts has survived. The Jesuit Gabriel Brotier informs us that they printed in Chinese only a single very small book on their religion which they presented to the mandarins when menaced by a persecution, and this may be identical with the tract of *Chao Ying-tou*.

Two facts are conspicuous in the history of the Chinese Jews: they hailed from Persia and India and reached China by way of the sea. The historical portion of the earliest inscription of 1489 points to India (T'ien-chu) as the country from which the Jews had started on their way to China — seventy families, bringing cotton goods of the Western countries as tribute to the court of the Sung and settling at Pien-liang (the older name for K'ai-fung). No date for this event is fixed, nor is the name of the Sung emperor given. All that can be safely asserted is that the first settlement of Jews in the Sung capital took place between the years 960 and 1126 when the city was conquered by the Jurchi and the capital was removed to Hang-chou. The first date on record is the year 1163 as that when the construction of the synagogue was commenced. The gift of cotton goods points directly to India, as the cotton plant was not yet cultivated in China under the Sung, and Indian cotton fabrics were highly appreciated there; it thus stands to reason that it was the cotton trade in the interest of which the Jews came to China. In the second inscription of 1512 the origin of the first ancestor, Adam, is traced to India, and in the third inscription of 1663 it is stated that "the Jewish religion took its origin in India." The official designation of the Chinese Jews was

"religion of India," and this name has persisted until recent times and was the only one known to the Chinese Jews whom I had occasion to interrogate in 1903. The Indian Jews had emigrated from Persia, and Persian influence is plainly evident among the Chinese Jews. Like the Persian Jews, they divided the Pentateuch into fifty-three sections (instead of fifty-four), the Masoretic fifty-second and fifty-third sections being combined into one, which was recited during the week of the Feast of Tabernacles. Like the Persian Jews, they counted twenty-seven letters of the Hebrew alphabet (instead of the standard twenty-two) by rating the final kaph, mem, nun, pe, and tsad as separate letters. All directions as to the recitation of prayers were given in Persian, and according to Dr. E. N. Adler,[1] a Judeo-Persian translation is added to some hymns in a prayer-book for the Passover service. The most interesting point is that the Chinese Jews designated the rabbi by the Persian word *ustad* ("teacher", "master"), used in the same sense by the Persian Jews; thus our earliest inscription speaks of a *Lie-wei Wu-se-ta,* "Rabbi Levi." What should be stressed in particular is that not a trace of Pehlevi or Middle Persian has been found among the Chinese Jews, but that the Iranian element in their midst is strictly New Persian which, as generally assumed, developed from about the tenth century, so that their immigration into China could hardly have taken place before that period. The language spoken by them at that time was most probably New Persian, which was the *lingua franca* all over the Far East during the Middle Ages. The best example to illustrate this point is the name of the Jews, as it is on record in the annals of the Yüan dynasty to which I alluded; this name is a very exact phonetic transcription of N. Pers. *Djuhud* or *Djahud* with initial palatal sonant, while in Middle Persian the word is Yahut, corresponding to Heb. *Yehudi* and Arab. *Yahud.* The change of initial *y* into *j* is peculiar to New Persian. For the Chinese it was just as easy to transcribe *ya* as *dja* or *dju,* but the fact that they transcribed *Djuhud* goes to show that they heard the New Persian form and that they could not have learned the name of the Jews before the tenth century.

In the course of a few generations the small band of Jews became almost completely sinicized, adopting the Chinese language, attire, manners, and customs and eagerly absorbing Chinese literature and Confucian ethics. In matters of phonetics they adapted themselves to Chinese to such a degree that in Chinese fashion they dropped the liquid *r,* replacing it by *l,* and forgot how to articulate the sonants; thus they pronounced *Thaula* for *Thora, Tavite* for *David, Etunoi* for *Adonai, I-se-lo-ye* for *Israel, Ie-le mei-hung* for *Jeremiah,* etc. In other words, they applied Chinese phonetics to the pronunciation of Hebrew.

---

1) **Jewish Quarterly Review,** X, 624.

Another point to be emphasized is that the Jewish technical terminology, as revealed in their inscriptions, is much dependent on that of the Chinese Mohammedans. From these the Jews adopted, e.g., the term *Mollah* (transcribed in Chinese *man-la*) and the name of the synagogue, *Ts'ing-chen se,* which the older translators rendered literally, but wrongly, "the pure and true temple." Even Dr. Martin, in 1906, translated it "the Temple of the Pure and True." *Ts'ing-chen,* however, is the technical Islamic term for "Allah," and *Ts'ing-chen se* is simply a mosque; for the Jews it signified "temple of God" or simply "synagogue." The synagogue of K'ai-fung was built after the model of a mosque. In company of Arabic and Persian Mohammedans the Jews must have made their first appearance in China, for the various stages of their migration can be traced with a fair degree of exactness; we meet them in the same ports of southern China as the Arabs and Persians: at Zaitun (the Arabic name for Ts'üan-chou fu in Fu-kien Province), Ning-po, Hang-chou, Nanking, Yang-chou, finally advancing into the metropolis of the Northern Sung, K'ai-fung, and in the fourteenth century also in Peking. It is not necessary to assume that there was but a single stream of their immigration into China; more probably they poured in gradually, in small detachments, but they always entered China from India over the maritime route at the southern ports, not, as was formerly believed without reason, over the land route by way of Central Asia. The first immigration may be assigned to the ninth or tenth century.

The Chinese Hebrew manuscript here in question came from K'ai-fung foo to Shanghai as far back as 1851, and was briefly noticed in the *North-China Herald* of Shanghai[2] together with several copies of the Pentateuch and rituals. It was defined there as "a genealogical table of the principal Jewish families of K'ai-fung." The Chinese characters are crudely written, appearently with a stylus and by several inexperienced scribes. The Chinese Jews used Chinese paper, several sheets of which were pasted together, but they did not use Chinese writing-brushes or ink for sacred purposes; they availed themselves of a bamboo stylus and annually made sufficient ink at the Feast of Tabernacles for the ensuing year.

The register contains first the name of 453 men distributed over 7 clans indicated by the Chinese family names *Ai, Li, Chang, Kao, Chao, Kin,* and *Shi,* and presumably including about 200 individual families. The inscription of 1663 also speaks of about 200 families with reference to the year 1642. These 7 clan names are traceable to the oldest inscription of the year 1489 as among those who first settled at K'ai-fung under the Sung; this inscription mentions 70 families and enumerates 16 clan names;

2) August 16, 1851; reproduced in **Chinese Repository**, XX (1851), 465.

accordingly, 9 names of this inscription do not appear in our register, although several of these are recorded in the names of women. The strongest clan is that of *Li* represented by 109 individuals, followed by the *Kao* with 76, the *Chao* with 74, the *Chang* with 73, the *Ai* with 56, the *Kin* with 42, and the *Shi* with 23 names (total, 453). In order to arrive at a satisfactory date of the register, I drew up a careful list of all the names with biographical data, which occur in the three stone and the twenty-three wooden tablets, with the result that half-a-dozen names listed in the most recent inscription of 1663 recur also in our register, so that the latter must be coeval with the date of this inscription or must have been prepared shortly afterward, say, roughly, during the decade of 1660-70. Moreover, the 7 clan names of the register are contained on the reverse of the inscription tablet of 1663 as the names of those who contributed funds for the reconstruction of the synagogue which had been destroyed by an inundation of the Yellow River in 1642[3]. The register consequently is a thoroughly authentic document. There is no relation between the Chinese and Hebrew names. *Ben Israel, Ben Josef, Ben Aron, Ben Mosheh, Ben Jehosha,* and *Abraham Ben Israel* are among the most frequent Hebrew names.

In the section devoted to the women, a total of 259 names is listed, in most cases only the name of the family from which the woman originated; in some cases, however, her personal name is added. It appears that many of these women were Mohammedans or of pure Chinese stock; in one case there is even a woman from the orthodox clan *K'ung* (Confucius) and another née *Mong* (Mencius). In the Jesuit relations it is asserted that the Jews, while they freely intermarried with Gentiles, did not allow their daughters to contract a marriage with one outside their religion. In several cases it is indicated in the register that "Mme So-and-So" is the wife of "Mr. So-and-So" or the mother of "So-and-So." The most frequent Hebrew names of women are "Daughter of Adam" and "Daughter of Israel". Each section winds up with a prayer in Hebrew. The writer expresses the wish that the men whose names are inscribed in the register may be united with the seven ancient righteous sages — Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Elijah, and Elisha — and meet with them under the tree of life in the gardens of Eden. A similar prayer is devoted to the women. Names and number of children are unfortunately not given, so that the register has but little value to the student of vital statistics. The total number of individuals recorded is 712. Assuming that there were several hundred children and that there were a number of Jewish farmers scattered over the villages in the environment of the city and not officially registered by the synagogue of K'ai-fung, we may arrive

3) Tobar, **Inscriptions juives de K'ai-fong-fou. Variétés sinologiques, No. 17, 1900, p. 83.**

at an estimate of about a thousand souls. This result is in accord with a contemporaneous report of the Portuguese, Pater Gozani, who visited K'ai-fung in 1704 on direct instructions from Rome and who writes that a number of Jewish families (he means, of course, clans) was then reduced to 7 and that the local population amounted to about 1,000. By 1850 the number of Jews in K'ai-fung had diminished to about 200 individuals, but the 7 clan names were still recorded by the Protestant delegates.

The last statistical information I was able to obtain came in a letter of *Li Kin-sheng,* a Chinese Jew then about fifty-two years old who died in 1903, addressed to the Shanghai Society for the Rescue of Chinese Jews and dated April 5, 1901. Li wrote that at that time there were about 50 families in existence of the names *Kao, Li, Chao, Chi, Kin,* and *Chang,* numbering about 250 souls. None of them, he said, could write or read Hebrew; none observed the Mosaic Law. The Sabbath was not kept. They were scattered about all over the city, some employed in government offices as junior assistants, others keeping small shops, and the sole distinction between them and the other Chinese being that they did not worship idols and did abstain from pork.

I have referred above to an interview of the Jesuit Matteo Ricci with a Jew in 1605. Pelliot[4] has devoted a special notice to this Jew. This Jew of whom Ricci gives only his family name *Ai* had come to Peking to obtain an official post. Ricci reports that this man, who was about sixty years old, told him that because he had followed the career of one of the Chinese litterati he had been expelled from the synagogue by the archpriest who is their chief, and had almost been excommunicated, and that he would have easily abandoned his religion if he had been able to obtain the Doctor's degree as the Musulmans do, who if successful in obtaining the Doctor's degree no longer have fear of their Mollahs and abandon their religion. Now Pelliot has identified this interlocutor of Ricci with a certain *Ai T'ien* whose name he traced in the Chinese Gazetteer of K'ai-fung fu as having obtained the degree of licentiate in 1573 and as having reached the positon of district magistrate (*chi-hien*). The fact that the name of a Jewish official is traceable in a local gazetteer is interesting in itself and also encouraging in raising hopes to find more Jewish names in Chinese records. But Pelliot's identification of this *Ai T'ien* with the Mr. Ai of Ricci is not conclusive, for he has overlooked a very important fact, and this is that the said *Ai T'ien* is the author and donor of an Orthodox Jewish inscription tablet to the synagogue of K'ai-fung,[5] and this document signs himself as a disciple of the Jewish religion. Ricci asserts that this Jew, according to his story, had from childhood

4) **Le Juif Ngai, informateur du P. Mathieu Ricci. T'oung Pao, XX, (1920-21)**

5) Tobar, op. cit., p. 28, No. XV.

studied only Chinese and had never learned the Hebrew letters; but in his inscription this alleged sinicized Jew proclaims, "We recite the 53 sections of our sacred books and instruct our families in the knowledge of the 27 letters of our alphabet." Moreover, this alleged heretic *Ai Tien* had a son, *Ai Ying-kwei,* who on his part had five sons, all named in the last inscription of 1663 as having taken an active part in the rebuilding of the synagogue. One of *Ai T'ien's* grandsons even had his grandfather's inscription tablet restored and re-engraved. All these data go to prove incontrovertibly that *Ai T'ien* was not a renegade, as Ricci's story makes him out, but on the contrary was a good and faithful Jew. There is but one alternative: either Pelliot's identification of Ricci's *Ai* with *Ai T'ien* is untenable, or if it be correct, Ricci's story cannot be true — or Ricci, despite his excellent knowledge of Chinese, may have misunderstood his informant, or the Jew *Ai* must have had some reason for mystifying Ricci with a yarn.

I have mentioned this incident not from a desire to antagonize Ricci, for whom I have a keen admiration, but as an example to show that a study of the lives and genealogy of the Chinese Jews is of real historical interest. For this reason I am planning to publish this register *in extenso,* giving the Chinese names in one column with the corresponding Hebrew names in the next column. The importance of this document rests on the fact that it supplies us with an arsenal of weapons, the names of 453 men definitely identified as Jews, and that these names offer us an opportunity of looking for further information in regard to them in Chinese records, especially in the local gazetteers which contain chapters giving lists of the graduates of the districts and officials who served in them.

At the same time I am also planning to publish a new translation of the Jewish inscriptions with an analytic commentary. Despite all that has been written on the Chinese Jews the real work remains to be done. There is not one complete or reliable English translation of their fundamental inscriptions. The only critical edition of the inscriptions we woe to the Jesuit Jerome Tobar,[6] whose translation in general is good, but suffers from many defects in details and lacks interpretation. The whole Jewish terminology remains to be studied at close range.

6) **Inscriptions juives,** op. cit.