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Jordyn Haime

Chinese Philo-Semitism: Why China

Admires the Jewish People

May 8, 2020

I. Introduction

As I sat through Lunar New Year celebrations in China last year, hosted by the family and friends of a Chinese friend of mine, Gen, I began to pick up on a curious pattern. When Gen introduced me to the table, he would often note my Jewish identity. Mention of this sparked conversation about the Holocaust, Israel, and Jewish money.

Questions fired off in my direction: “Do you feel more Israeli or American?” “Why did Europeans hate you so much?” “How can I educate my child as well as the Jews?” “Is it true that you’re not allowed to open certain types of bank accounts?” I was often left shocked and flustered with no answer that could satisfy their curiosity with the Jewish people.

Being greeted with excitement, curiosity and even admiration was a warm and welcome change from the fear I felt walking past security guards every time I went to holiday prayer at synagogue in the United States. The everyday Chinese person’s observations about Jewish people are absolutely stereotypical, but not rooted in the same anti-Semitic history found in the west. Knowledge and understanding of the Jews came to China much later, and Jews throughout China’s history rarely experienced anti-Semitic attacks or policies. In fact, it was rare for the everyday Chinese citizen to know much of anything about the Jewish people until after China’s reform and opening up in the 1980s, when popular writers like He Xiongfei and many others began publishing books about the Jews like *Jewish Wisdom and Family Education: the Cultural Code of the Most Intelligent and Wealthy Nation in the World* (2005), *Secrets of Jewish Success: The Golden Rule of a Miraculous Nation* (2004), *Jewish Life of Money* (2002), *The Pandect of Jewish Intelligence* (2005), and countless others. These books and the myths inside them, often citing the Talmud as the source of Jewish economic success (and many factual errors), have become so popular that your average taxi driver could tell you about the power and cleverness of

the Jews.¹ Stereotypes like these were likely fuel for Chen Guangbiao, one of China's richest men, to state "I am very good at working with Jews" when announcing his intentions to buy the *New York Times* in 2012.²

But the popular stereotypes don't end at Jewish money; stereotypes and impressions of Jews unique to China have emerged over time. I asked a friend from Chengdu University what she thought of the Jews, and she told me: "I think the Jews are very smart, good at business and inventing things. But at the same time, I pity them because they have been persecuted. There were wars in China 80 years ago where many people were also persecuted. So I understand the Jews' grief of losing their home." Her answer encapsulates many popular opinions and stereotypes of Jews that exist in China today, including an important one that seems to form the basis of Chinese opinions of Jews: many Chinese say they pity the stateless, oppressed Jews and can even relate to their historical struggle.

The Chinese government also seems to have a certain affinity for the Jews based on the amount of monetary investment that has gone into restoring Jewish synagogues and historical sites in cities with a Jewish history. In Shanghai, \$60,000 was spent to restore the Ohel Rachel synagogue in 1998, and Jewish sites in Harbin, including a Jewish cemetery, have also been restored and turned into museums and tourist attractions. Previously hostile relations between China and Israel in the Mao era also seem to have cooled and Israel today is one of China's most important relationships. Today, there are nine Chabad Lubavitch religious centers across mainland China staffed by foreign religious leaders, a privilege, according to Xu Xin, not

¹ 27. Ross, James. "Image of Jews in Contemporary Books, Blogs and Films," in *The Image of Jews in Contemporary China: An Identity Without a People*. Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2016, 24-36.

² Butnick, Stephanie. "Chinese Tycoon Buying the New York Times Says He's 'Very Good at Working With Jews'." *Tablet*, 9 Jan. 2014, <https://www.tabletmag.com/scroll/158914/i-am-very-good-at-working-with-jews>.

typically given to other foreign religious groups.³ This is a unique case, however, because the Chinese government only expresses this positive attitude and economic investment toward foreign Jewish populations that have resided in China throughout its history. The same is not true for the Jews of Kaifeng, whose synagogue has never been rebuilt or restored by the Chinese government and recent crackdowns on religious life have caused many Chinese Jews to be forced to practice their religion in private or make *aliyah*, or voluntary migration, to Israel.

II. Research question

China's impressions and policies towards Jews are especially surprising when put in the context of its hostile relationship with other foreign religions. There are five "approved" religions in China today: Buddhism, Daoism, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Islam. The state's relationship with the three "foreign" religions – Protestantism, Catholicism and Islam – has been hostile for hundreds of years and continues to be today, from the internment of millions of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang to the destruction of church steeples across the country and ongoing conflicts between Beijing and the Vatican over who has authority to appoint church leaders. In Kaifeng, the city known for its Chinese Jews who have lived there since the Song dynasty (960-1279), Chinese Jewish descendants have been experiencing increasing hostility from the Chinese government, backing out of a project to rebuild the synagogue as a museum out of fear of a resurgence of Chinese Jewish life, prohibiting holiday and worship gatherings, and removing markers of historical Jewish life.⁴

³ 60. Xu, Xin. "Chinese Policy Toward Kaifeng Jews" in *The Image of Jews in Contemporary China: An Identity Without a People*. Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2016, 54-71.

⁴ Buckley, Chris. "Chinese Jews of Ancient Lineage Huddle Under Pressure." *The New York Times*, 24 Sept. 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/25/world/asia/china-kaifeng-jews.html>.

But as a foreign Jew in China, I can attend Jewish services and holidays with foreign Rabbis who have apparently been given special permission to lead religious life, a privilege not often granted to other foreign religions. I can express and practice my religion openly while others can't. So why does China seem to be a philo-Semitic country and people? Why does it admire the Jewish people and promote their culture and history above other foreign religions?

Understanding the way Chinese people think about Jews will also be important in filling in cultural gaps and misunderstandings. When I tell stories of the stereotypical questions asked about my heritage to other westerners, they are shocked and offended on my behalf, classifying their questions and assumptions as anti-Semitism. Westerners were outraged when Chen Guangbiao, the man who wanted to buy the *New York Times*, made his comments about working with Jews. Analyzing why these stereotypes exist, where they come from, and how they persist in modern China will tell a more accurate story about China's relationship with Jews and why their attitudes are not rooted in ideology similar to Western anti-Semitism, and therefore not as harmful. Therefore, in this paper, I will seek to answer the question: why do the Chinese people and its government admire the Jewish people more than other foreign religions in China?

III. Literature Review

There are few existing hypotheses explaining the origin of Chinese admiration toward Jews, but based on the amount of research that has been done into the history of Jews in China, it can be hypothesized that China has a favorable view of Jews because of China's historically positive relationship with its own Chinese-Jewish community during the Song Dynasty, as well as Jewish immigrants in the 19th and 20th century.

The earliest evidence of the Jews of Kaifeng was found between 960 and 1126, during the Song Dynasty period. Kaifeng Jews had a good relationship with the imperial government in

Kaifeng – then the capital of China – and they were completely free to practice their religion, though often perceived to be part of the Muslim community. Anti-Semitism was irrelevant in Kaifeng Jewish life because of the economic and numerical insignificance of the population. The Jews of Kaifeng also assimilated well into the surrounding Han Chinese community.⁵

Eventually, the Kaifeng Jews almost completely assimilated into Chinese life via intermarriage and conversion to other religions and have become indistinguishable from the greater Chinese population, though a handful today claim to be descendants of the Jews of Kaifeng.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, Jews from Baghdad and Europe came to major Chinese port cities for trade and business opportunities. Jewish families like the Sassoons quickly opened successful trade businesses and purchased major properties in Chinese cities, especially Shanghai.⁶ Though the Sassoon's property, known as Aili garden, was replaced with the Sino-Soviet friendship center in 1955 as a symbol of "new socialist Shanghai in contrast with old capitalist Shanghai," the older generation still remembers the family fondly and the younger generation often read fictional literature about the family.⁷ In a similar vein, Russian Jews who came to the city of Harbin to escape anti-Semitic persecution enjoyed a lifestyle free of prejudice and "generated work for the local Chinese population and poured millions of rubles, and later yen, into Manchuria."⁸ Jews later sought refuge in Shanghai during World War II, an action China and the Chinese people take pride in.

⁵ 100. Isenberg, Shirley Berry. "The Kaifeng Jews and India's Bene Israel: Different Paths," in *The Jews of China*. Edited by Jonathan Goldstein. Vol. 1. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999. 87-103.

⁶ 148. Roland, Joan G. "Baghdadi Jews in India and China in the Nineteenth Century: A Comparison of Economic Roles," in *The Jews of China*. Edited by Jonathan Goldstein. Vol. 1. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999. 141-156.

⁷ 226. Betta, Chiara. "Silas Hardoon and Cross-Cultural Adaptation in Shanghai," in *The Jews of China*. Edited by Jonathan Goldstein. Vol. 1. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999. 216-229.

⁸ 195. Shickman-Bowman, Zvia. "The Construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway and the Origin of the Harbin Jewish Community, 1898-1931" in *The Jews of China*. Edited by Jonathan Goldstein. Vol. 1. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999. 187-199.

While China has a history with the Jews almost completely free from anti-Semitism that reaches as far back as the 10th century, the history alone cannot fully explain the depth and reasoning behind China's relationship with the Jewish people today. In a survey conducted among 214 Chinese students in 2003, 145 said they didn't know anything about the history of Jews in China, while 31 said they were familiar with the Jews of Shanghai and only 8 said they knew of the Jews of Kaifeng.⁹ News reports today indicate that the Chinese government has expressed hostility toward the Kaifeng Jews but have left foreign Jews alone. Studies also note that Jewish stereotypes in China popular today found their roots in the late 19th-early 20th centuries when foreign powers entered China – hundreds of years after Jews came to Kaifeng. Therefore, examining history previous to this time period would not lead to an accurate answer. Rather, examining China's *reasoning* for reacting the way they did to Jews in their own historical timeline, rather than looking at the timeline itself, will lead to a more specific and concrete understanding of China's impressions of Jews.

China's understanding of identity

A more practical answer to the question and one supported by scholars who have researched the subject is China's understanding of identity: both their own sense of identity and how they view the identities of non-Chinese people. Zhou Xun asserts that "...the implications associated with the 'Jews' as a racialized and culturally constructed/reconstructed 'other'...remains a distant mirror in the construction of the 'self' amongst various social groups in modern China."¹⁰

⁹ 97. Wald, Shalom Salomon. "China and the Jewish People: Old Civilizations in a New Era." Jerusalem, Israel: The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, 2004.

¹⁰ 2. Zhou, Xun. *Chinese Perceptions of the Jews and Judaism*. Routledge, 2013.

Many other scholars also assert that China admires the Jews because they see in their constructed image Jews what they aspire to be: powerful, rich, perseverant and well-educated.

China's current image and attitude toward Jews seems to have been established in the late 19th and early 20th century when the Bible was brought to China via Christian missionaries who depicted Jews in a stereotypical manner; Chinese scholars also began venturing to the west during this time period and returning to China with an image of Jews as wielding economic power over the United States as well as being victims of the "white man," especially in places like Russia. The second point is key, as during this time period China was experiencing what is now referred to as a period of great humiliation due to foreign imperialist powers or the "white man" asserting power over China. The presence of foreigners in China – particularly foreign Christian missionaries – led to disasters such as the Opium Wars and the Taiping Rebellion, when a Chinese man who thought he was the younger brother of Jesus Christ sparked nationwide rebellions that ended in the deaths of tens of millions of Chinese. This explains hostility toward foreign religions that has persisted today. And of course, the two Sino-Japanese wars between the late 19th century and the end of World War II victimized and killed hundreds of thousands of Chinese people. As a result, the Communist Party under Mao kicked out nearly all foreigners and enforced extreme nationalistic ideals in order to bring China – even its ethnic minorities – together as one country self-sufficient and independent of foreign powers. This also supports a major and important point in Zhou's above statement: categorization of Jews as a "racialized" group rather than a religious group. The initial step in framing Jews in this way also aides in the way China views them; it separates and distinguishes the Jews from other white Westerners who have used their religion to proselytize in China and ultimately cause chaos and antagonism toward the West there.

As China felt victimized by foreign powers in its own country, China's observations of a stateless ethnic minority prosecuted for thousands of years that now apparently held economic dominance and power over the "white man" was an attractive idea to say the least. Chinese writers' musings about the Jews during this period heavily focused on pity for the Jews' statelessness. Some scholars would go so far as to say that the idea of a stateless, yet powerful Jew gave hope to Chinese under attack.¹¹ This idea has sustained today: many Chinese do not separate a people from their nation and associate all Jewish people with the state of Israel and assume most if not all Israelis are Jewish.

China's strong sense of identity and history of victimization by the "white man" also explain the government's policies toward Jews. Judaism is not a proselytizing religion and has no history of seeking converts in China. Many Kaifeng Jews assimilated with the Han Chinese people (the dominant Chinese ethnic group) through intermarriage rather than the other way around, and many Kaifeng Jews even converted to Islam over time. Therefore, Jewish people are allowed to exist and practice their religion in China free of control even though Judaism is not one of the five recognized religions of China under the condition that *only foreigners* can practice. This is an advantage that other foreign religions in China do not have.

Chinese people even saw themselves in the Kaifeng Jews of a thousand years ago. Records of writings by the Kaifeng Jews show that Judaism was compared to the core Chinese values of Confucianism, values that are still upheld as important and authentically Chinese ideals today.

China's strong sense and understanding of identity as an explanation of China's admiration and tolerance for Jews above other foreign religions is the strongest argument based on the

¹¹ 12. Zhou, Xun. "Perceiving Jews in Modern China," in *The Image of Jews in Contemporary China: An Identity Without a People*. Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2016, 5-23.

quality and volume of evidence available. This idea not only explains the attitudes of everyday Chinese people, but also the actions of the government.

IV. Research Design and Methodology

For the purpose of this paper, as many primary materials are either written in Chinese or only available at select libraries (many in China), I used mostly secondary source research conducted by both Chinese and Western scholars. Many of those secondary sources that have been essential to my research, like Zhou Xun's *Chinese Perceptions of Jews and Judaism* and Sidney Shapiro's *Jews in Old China* contain large sections of primary source material that have been translated and analyzed by the author. Xu Xin's essay in *Perceptions of Jews in Modern China* also contains an important primary source document that has been acquired and translated by the author himself. Sources represent a variety of perspectives and subjects including historical timelines and analyses, contemporary observations, policy papers, and analyses of popular materials like books, films, and blogs. Some of my own personal experiences and interactions were also cited.

Two sources included surveys conducted among several hundred students and non-students that confirmed philo-Semitic views and common stereotypes when compared with other primary and secondary sources studied for this paper. One survey on Chinese perceptions of Jews conducted by M. Avrum Erlich for his book *Jews and Judaism in Modern China* was conducted among college students who have not studied Judaism, students who have taken courses on Judaism, as well as "random people on the street."¹² The other survey is cited in Shalom Salomon Wald's *China and the Jewish People: Old Civilizations in a New Era*, conducted by an

¹² 9. Ehrlich, Avrum M. *Jews and Judaism in Modern China*. London: Routledge, 2009.

American student at Beijing Foreign Studies University among 214 college students who had never studied Judaism.¹³

Some news articles are used to communicate popular opinion and understanding of Chinese impressions of Jews and to track the most up-to-date information about certain cities, especially the Kaifeng Jewish community, as the most recent scholarly research used was published in 2016. The lack of very recent research may be one area at which this paper falls short.

Based on the sources used, it can be hypothesized, as mentioned in the literature review, that China admires and favors the Jewish people over other religious groups because of China's understanding of identity: its own identity and the identity of the Jews. It is hypothesized and observed by many scholars on the image and impression of Jews in China - as well as my observations in this paper - that the Jews represent how Chinese see themselves (victims of imperialism), and also what they hope to become (a wealthy and powerful nation), "with the symbol the 'Jews' merely serving as an image of their hopes and ambitions."¹² A common refrain of Erlich's survey respondents on their feelings about Jews is that they "have an ancient history like the Chinese," "good at business like the Chinese" and have "made great contributions to our world" like the Chinese.¹² These concepts were explored in the sources through the lens of China's understanding of national identity and statelessness as well as its definition of race and ethnicity as it has developed throughout its history, particularly during the late 19th and early 20th centuries when contact between China and the West reached a peak.

As this project is mainly about China's impressions of Jews and how they have emerged and developed, it would have been ideal to conduct a survey exclusive to this project, but lack of

¹³ 93. Wald, Shalom Salomon. "China and the Jewish People: Old Civilizations in a New Era." Jerusalem, Israel: The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, 2004.

time and access to Chinese nationals limited my ability to do so. There are also countless Chinese books, films and blogs that could be analyzed to better understand Chinese philo-Semitism and where it comes from, but this would also require much more time and a base understanding of the issue, the former my intention for the project. A more complete answer to and understanding of Chinese philo-Semitism and how it has developed could be found by dedicating more time to these two research methods, but for the purposes of this shorter project, I have used some primary and mostly secondary sources to gain a base understanding of the historical issue.

V. Evidence and Discussion

i. Modern Chinese Religious Policy

Since this paper compares current Chinese attitudes toward Jews with attitudes toward other foreign religions, it is important first to discuss China's policies toward religion today. Policies toward the Jews before 1949 will be discussed in other sections of this paper.

After the Communist Party founded the People's Republic of China in 1949, the state adopted an ideology of "enlightenment atheism" in which five religions – Buddhism, Daoism, Protestantism, Catholicism and Islam – were permitted but subject to ultimate party control and efforts at Sinicization.¹⁴ By 1963, a policy of militant atheism was adopted amid an effort of total ideological control during the Cultural Revolution that resulted in the imprisonment of anyone who disagreed with Maoist beliefs as well as the widespread closure of religious temples.¹⁵

¹⁴ 3. Reardon, Lawrence C. "Religious Regulation in China." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 23 May 2019, doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.868.

¹⁵ 7. Reardon, Lawrence C. "Religious Regulation in China." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 23 May 2019, doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.868.

Religious policy began to change after the death of Mao in 1976. Alongside the massive “reform and opening up” came Document 19 in 1982, which condemned Mao’s “error” of religious suppression and called for a return to policies of the early 1950s, in which the five approved religions could exist under party control.¹⁶ Today, the domestic religions (宗教 *zongjiao*, Buddhism and Daoism) are revered as traditional Chinese culture and “intangible cultural heritage.” While still subjected to party control, they are generally treated less harshly than the foreign religions, (洋教 *yangjiao*) to whom the CCP is still hostile after disasters like the Taiping rebellion, a Christian uprising that ended in the deaths of tens of millions of Chinese. The CCP is incredibly wary of disruptions and uprisings caused by foreign religions today. Even though they are approved religions, Islam has been heavily suppressed among the Uighur population in Xinjiang as a result of fears over terrorism and Uighur calls for an independent state, and China has been engaged in an ongoing battle with the Vatican over which state should to choose Catholic priests. Non-approved religions, like Falun Gong, which was banned in China the 1990s after peaceful protests in Beijing, are heavily monitored within China, and any practitioners are detained.

ii. The Jews of Kaifeng

The first evidence of Jews in China can be traced back to the widely researched and documented Jews of Kaifeng, the then-capital of the Song Dynasty (960-1279). Specific origins of the Kaifeng Jews cannot be proved, but they are believed to have come from the west via the Silk Road sometime between 960 and 1126.¹⁷ Scholars frequently note that the Kaifeng Jews

¹⁶ 28. Johnson, Ian. *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion after Mao*. New York: Vintage Books, 2018.

¹⁷ 88. Isenberg, Shirley Berry. “The Kaifeng Jews and India’s Bene Israel: Different Paths,” in *The Jews of China*. Edited by Jonathan Goldstein. Vol. 1. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999. 87-103.

experienced no discrimination or anti-Semitism; rather, they garnered respect from the local people and government and were able to practice their religion freely as well as observe *kashrut* and build their own synagogue. According to Shirley Berry Isenberg, two factors explain the Kaifeng Jews' freedom during this period: "the numerical and economic insignificance of their respective Jewish populations; and, most important, the essential characteristic socioreligious emphases that permeated the ways of life at all levels of the host population."¹⁸ In other words, the Kaifeng Jews posed no threat to the imperial government, so they weren't a problem. Also, the Kaifeng Jews easily assimilated into Han Chinese culture over time through intermarriage and even conversion. Many Chinese also saw (and still today see) Jewish culture as holding values similar to Confucian ones, including "respect for elders, honoring of parents, the centrality of scholarship, participation in ritual, and conducting relationships with humaneness and benevolence."¹⁹ On a 1489 stone tablet written by the Kaifeng Jews about their history, they write that Judaism was founded by Abraham, "a 19th generation descendent of Abraham/Pangu,"²⁰ Pangu being the figure in Chinese mythology believed to have created the earth. Shapiro goes on to explain that the writers of the inscriptions "went to pains to stress the similarity of their culture and beliefs to those of the Chinese Confucianists."²⁰ These similarities between cultures were not only another factor that allowed the Jews of Kaifeng to more easily assimilate but may have also contributed to positive attitudes toward Jews both in Kaifeng and in

¹⁸ 100. Isenberg, Shirley Berry. "The Kaifeng Jews and India's Bene Israel: Different Paths," in *The Jews of China*. Edited by Jonathan Goldstein. Vol. 1. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999. 87-103.

¹⁹ 94. Bernstein, Moshe Y. "Sukkot and Mid-Autumn Festivals in Kaifeng: Conundrums at the Crossroads of Sino-Judaic Cultural Identity," in *The Image of Jews in Contemporary China: An Identity Without a People*. Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2016, 72-98.

²⁰ 16. Shapiro, Sidney, trans. *Jews in Old China: Studies by Chinese Scholars*. New York, NY: Hippocrene Books, 2007.

modern times, when Chinese scholars began studying the Jews more deeply and writing about them.

As the “heyday” of Jewish life in Kaifeng is cited as the 17th century, by 1847 only 1,000 Jews were left in Kaifeng and “knowledge of history and religion had faded considerably.”²¹ A series of floods and political upheavals were responsible for the eventual destruction of the temple and the fallout of religious life by the mid-19th century, whittling down to just a few hundred in the 20th century as a result of poverty, intermarriage and conversions. The population of Kaifeng Jews remained low through the 20th century and current estimates show up to 1,000 Jews currently living in Kaifeng today, with far fewer who are active in religious life.

Although China seems to have a philo-Semitic view of the Jewish people, the attitude is not the same toward Kaifeng Jews today. In fact, a survey suggests that few Chinese know about Jewish history in China: some know about the Jews of Shanghai, but even fewer know anything about the Jews of Kaifeng, or that they even existed.²² During the Mao period, although religious practice was restricted to the five approved religions and many foreigners were expelled, Jews were permitted to continue practicing their religion in Kaifeng. Judaism was even an approved religion in Shanghai, Harbin and Tianjin where populations of foreign Jews already existed.²³ However, when the Jews of Kaifeng went to Beijing in 1953 to plead their case to the Chinese government that they should be identified as a minority of China, the request was denied because the Kaifeng Jews are considered to hold no direct relation to the community that existed there

²¹ 72. Abraham, Wendy R. “Memories of Kaifeng’s Jewish Descendants Today: Historical Significance in Light of Observations by Westerners Since 1605,” in *The Jews of China*. Edited by Jonathan Goldstein. Vol. 1. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999. 71-86.

²² 97. Wald, Shalom Salomon. “China and the Jewish People: Old Civilizations in a New Era.” Jerusalem, Israel: The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, 2004.

²³ 11. Xu, Xin. “Tracing Judaism in China.” *Social Sciences in China* 31, no. 1 (2010).
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02529200903565145>.

hundreds of years before. According to a statement approved by China's major government leaders at the time, including Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping, the Kaifeng Jews "have completely mixed and mingled with the majority Han population, in terms of their political, economical and cultural life, neither do they possess any distinctive traits in any other aspect."²⁴ Since the Jews of Kaifeng had lost major parts of their identity over time, including the ability to speak and read Hebrew, as noted in the statement, the Chinese government saw no reason to label them as a distinctive group.

Wald also hypothesizes that Chinese leaders were uncomfortable with the implication of separating Chinese Jews from the Han identity because of the new links of the Jewish people to a new powerful state: Israel.²⁴ Identifying Chinese Jews as a distinct group could also cause a resurgence of religious life and, subsequently, of political dissent, as noted by other scholars. In 1996, the Kaifeng municipal government attempted to rebuild the Kaifeng synagogue as a museum of Kaifeng Jewish history, but the project was suspended "amidst local and international rumors that it would lead to a reinvigorated Kaifeng Jewish culture."²⁵ Three years later, the Israeli organization Shavei Israel – whose goal is to assist Jews around the world in their "return" to the Jewish "homeland" – attempted to have Kaifeng Jews' Jewish status on their household registry cards recognized by the Israeli embassy. The consequence of this was the rescinding of the Jewish listing on all registry cards of Kaifeng Jews.²⁶ Before 2016, Jews were still generally allowed to practice and worship in a public setting, as described by Moshe Bernstein in his

²⁴ 75-76. Wald, Shalom Salomon. "China and the Jewish People: Old Civilizations in a New Era." Jerusalem, Israel: The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, 2004.

²⁵ 83. Bernstein, Moshe Y. "Sukkot and Mid-Autumn Festivals in Kaifeng: Conundrums at the Crossroads of Sino-Judaic Cultural Identity," in *The Image of Jews in Contemporary China: An Identity Without a People*. Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2016, 72-98.

²⁶ 81-82. Bernstein, Moshe Y. "Sukkot and Mid-Autumn Festivals in Kaifeng: Conundrums at the Crossroads of Sino-Judaic Cultural Identity," in *The Image of Jews in Contemporary China: An Identity Without a People*. Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2016, 72-98.

account of a Sukkot festival with the Kaifeng Jews in 2013. However, press reports in 2016 detail heavy crackdowns the Kaifeng Jews had not seen previously: the shutdown of Jewish revival organizations in Kaifeng, removal of plaques and signs indicating the city's Jewish history, and the prohibition of large gatherings for Passover and other holidays.⁴ All of these actions suggest an attempt at further Sinicizing the Kaifeng Jewish descendants as well as a fear from the Chinese government of losing control over even a comparatively tiny group of religious believers in China whose identification with a foreign religion with great international connections has the potential to cause political upheaval as has happened in the past with other foreign religions.

The division between the rather negative attitudes toward China's Kaifeng Jews and the positive ones toward Kaifeng Jews can also be attributed to the way China looked at Jews when foreigners began more frequently entering China: as their own ethnic group with distinct characteristics, rather than just a religion that and race or ethnicity can be part of.

iii. Creating the Jew in modern China: late 19th-early 20th centuries

Based on the available evidence, it is clear that many of the Chinese stereotypes of Jews that exist today seem to have been formulated in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a result of greater western influence, particularly following the Anglo-Chinese treaty of 1842, which opened five Chinese trade ports to the rest of the world.²⁷ This attracted Western traders, including Jews, of whom the first major wave came from Baghdad. The Sassoons, a family of Baghdadi Jewish traders who converted properties in Shanghai into high-rent bungalows and shops, helped form the Sephardic community in Shanghai complete with a synagogue, a school and a Jewish

²⁷ 145. Roland, Joan G. "Baghdadi Jews in India and China in the Nineteenth Century: A Comparison of Economic Roles," in *The Jews of China*. Edited by Jonathan Goldstein. Vol. 1. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999. 141-156.

cemetery.²⁸ Silas Hardoon, a Baghdadi Jew who initially worked for the Sassoons, went on to start his own trade company in Shanghai and developed valuable 关系 *guanxi* (connections) with important Chinese figures like Sun Yatsen. Although during the Mao era these business owners were categorized alongside all other Western imperialist capitalists who “exploite[d]...the Chinese masses [and] whose evil deeds need to be continuously exorcised through the exposure of his “bloodsucker” behavior,”²⁹ many Shanghainese look back on these characters fondly, the younger generations reading fictionalized literature on the Hardoons.³⁰ The Jewish influence from this time period can still be seen in Shanghai: the Hardoons’ old property, Aili Garden, remains in Shanghai today as the Shanghai Exhibition center, and the Sephardic Ohel Rachel Synagogue built by the Sassoons has been refurbished by the Chinese government and remains open to be rented out for religious ceremonies today.

Even more influential during this time period however were western Protestant missionaries. Scholars cite the influx of missionaries in the 1830s and 40s as responsible for introducing knowledge of Jews and Jewish stereotypes to the Chinese through translations of the Bible as well as other Protestant magazines and publications. These missionaries also gave the Chinese name to the Jews that remains in use today in a new version of the Chinese bible published in 1837: 犹太 *youtai*. Chinese had previously referred to the Jews as 蓝帽回回 *lanmao huihui* (blue-capped Muslims), 挑筋教 *tiaojinjiao* (the sect that pulls out the sinews,

²⁸ 146. Roland, Joan G. “Baghdadi Jews in India and China in the Nineteenth Century: A Comparison of Economic Roles,” in *The Jews of China*. Edited by Jonathan Goldstein. Vol. 1. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999. 141-156.

²⁹ 217. Betta, Chiara. “Silas Hardoon and Cross-Cultural Adaptation in Shanghai,” in *The Jews of China*. Edited by Jonathan Goldstein. Vol. 1. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999. 216-229.

³⁰ 226. Betta, Chiara. “Silas Hardoon and Cross-Cultural Adaptation in Shanghai,” in *The Jews of China*. Edited by Jonathan Goldstein. Vol. 1. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999. 216-229.

referring to the Kosher practice), and 一賜乐业 *Yicileye* (Israelites), but it is hypothesized that *youtai* was used because it sounded more like Yehudi. However, the Chinese character *you* 犹 contains a radical symbolizing animals and is often used to describe a doubtful or suspicious person or an alien group. As Zhou Xun writes, the missionaries “had already attempted, consciously, or unconsciously, to inject their image of ‘Jews’ into their Chinese ‘subjects.’”³¹ The translation of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* into Chinese is also cited as heavily influential in bringing Jewish stereotypes to China. Christian proselytizing, however, also led to China’s greatest tragedy of the 19th century: the Taiping rebellion. Lasting over a decade, the Taiping rebellion ended in the deaths of tens of millions of Chinese and was sparked by Hong Xiuquan, a man who believed himself to be the younger brother of Jesus Christ. This event is immortalized in the minds of Chinese as a great humiliation of China at the hands of Western imperialism. In turn, victimhood of the west became a major part of the Chinese identity and influenced current religious policy as well as China’s image of the Jewish people, as the missionaries’ stereotypes of Jews backfired and Chinese viewed Jews instead with great curiosity and envy. Chinese intellectuals began to see a shared image with the Jews, and a great opportunity to use this image in their favor.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, Jews were viewed as common victims of western imperialism and the “white man.” Today, Chinese tend to compare their own suffering under Japanese occupation during World War II to that of the Jews in Europe during the Holocaust. However, earlier in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Chinese reformers and intellectuals saw similarities in their own suffering and victimhood at the hands of Western missionaries (Taiping

³¹ 15. Zhou, Xun. *Chinese Perceptions of the Jews and Judaism*. Routledge, 2013.

rebellion) and general aggression (Opium Wars; first Sino-Japanese War) as comparable to that of Jews' historical religious persecution in Europe. At the same time, news about Russian pogroms in the early 20th century, in which anti-Jewish rioting led to the deaths of an estimated 2,000 Jews, poured into China and was of great interest to intellectuals and revolutionaries at the time. Scholar Zhou Xun argues that in this time period, the Chinese saw the Jews as a racialized group or ethnicity, 民族 *minzu* in Chinese, which made it easier for the Chinese to associate with the Jews. The Chinese began to see the Jews as distinctively different from white westerners: not only did some Chinese see physical and racial features that distinguished Jews from other westerners "such as oval faces, big eyes and convex noses,"³² but their religion and culture originally come from the East, what Chinese viewed as the Jews "Eastern root."³³ This allowed the Chinese to draw greater similarities between themselves and what the Jews represented to them: oppressed victims of the "white man" of the west.

The aforementioned and widely read Chinese translation of *The Merchant of Venice* by Lin Shu in 1904, despite its heavy anti-Semitic depiction of Shylock, the money lender, also played a major role in shaping Chinese impressions of Jews. Writes Zhou:

[Shylock] was portrayed by Lin not merely as the 'Jew' (*youtai*) who embodied all of the negative qualities of the materialistic west, he was also the 'Jew' who was suppressed and victimized by Christianity, or the 'white' west...for Lin, both Shylock the 'Jew' and the 'blacks' in Uncle Tom's cabin...were clearly the reflection of the humiliation which Chinese people faced under the 'whites.'³⁴

³² 47. Zhou, Xun. *Chinese Perceptions of the Jews and Judaism*. Routledge, 2013.

³³ 27. Zhou, Xun. *Chinese Perceptions of the Jews and Judaism*. Routledge, 2013.

³⁴ 54. Zhou, Xun. *Chinese Perceptions of the Jews and Judaism*. Routledge, 2013.

At the time, according to Zhou, many of the Chinese diplomats sent abroad were there for the purpose of both spreading Confucian ideology as well as studying western culture in order to condemn it. Diplomats saw that all western culture derived from Judaism, which in itself had that “Eastern root.” One of those diplomats, Xue Fucheng, noted that all major religious figures like Moses, Buddha, Jesus “were all born...in Asia. Europe and America never produced a holy man.”³⁵ In other words, Eastern culture, in this case, Chinese culture was superior to the culture of the West, which was becoming known for persecuting wise, Eastern religious groups like the Jews. While the goal of these diplomatic missions and writings were to condemn western culture as a whole – and during this time period, Judaism can indeed be seen as western – what resonated with many was the idea that Judaism and Jewish culture was superior because all other Western cultures and religions derived from it. As Zhou explains, “The ‘suffering Jews of Europe’ played a positive role of the Chinese condemnation of Western Christianity.”³⁵

A second major image of the Jews developed at this time was that of the wandering or stateless Jew. This image is an important one to the Chinese in particular because the ideas of the nation state and ethnic identity are essentially the same in Chinese eyes. Erlich notes that “Chinese still view themselves in national, not individual terms,” therefore, they are “prone to view others, at least at first, in terms of their national characteristics instead of their individual ones...it may be one reason why they also view wealth as a national characteristic.”³⁶ He goes on to explain that the Chinese have genuine interest and sympathy for the fact that a people do not have the homeland like the Chinese. They are “so completely oriented toward the Middle Kingdom that a nation that does not have a homeland astounds them.”³⁷ This view explains why

³⁵ 45. Zhou, Xun. *Chinese Perceptions of the Jews and Judaism*. Routledge, 2013.

³⁶ 11. Ehrlich, Avrum M. *Jews and Judaism in Modern China*. London: Routledge, 2009.

³⁷ 13. Ehrlich, Avrum M. *Jews and Judaism in Modern China*. London: Routledge, 2009.

so many Chinese do not separate the Jewish people from Israel, and why I was asked if I felt more Israeli or American. According to the anti-defamation league, 44 percent of Chinese believe that Jews are more loyal to Israel than to the country in which they live.³⁸

Chinese pity for Jewish statelessness as a result of Jewish oppression at the hand of the “white man” is apparent in the writings of many revolutionary scholars and intellectuals of the 19th and 20th centuries. Some Chinese intellectuals went so far as to use the Jew as the “embodiment of all the ‘stateless’ and ‘oppressed people’”³⁹ whether or not they were actually Jewish. As mentioned above, news of the Russian pogroms and anti-Jewish oppression in Russian and Europe, which led many Russian Jews to flee and “wander” to other countries (including China), was of great interest to revolutionary thinkers. Perhaps the most notable of these is Sun Yatsen, known as the father of modern China and the first president of the Republic of China. Sun’s Republican government wrote a letter to the Shanghai Zionist Association endorsing Judaism:

I have read your letter and copy of Israel’s Messenger with much interest and wish to assure you of my sympathy for this movement which is one of the greatest movements of the present time. All lovers of democracy cannot help but support the movement to restore your wonderful and historic nation which has contributed so much to the civilization of the world and which rightly deserves an honorable place in the family of nations.⁴⁰

³⁸ “China.” The ADL Global 100: A Database of Anti-Semitism. Anti-Defamation League, 2014. <https://global100.adl.org/country/china/2014>.

³⁹ 107. Zhou, Xun. *Chinese Perceptions of the Jews and Judaism*. Routledge, 2013.

⁴⁰ 11. Xu, Xin. “Tracing Judaism in China.” *Social Sciences in China* 31, no. 1 (2010). <https://doi.org/10.1080/02529200903565145>.

We can see through Sun's letter that he not only supports the Zionist movement because he feels that the "wonderful historic nation" of the Jews should be "restored," but also that the Jewish people have "contributed much to the civilization of the world." This is the next major point and common identifier that Chinese see between themselves and the Jews. When Chinese today talk of the great intelligence and ability of the Jews in various fields, they often cite the number of Jews who have won Nobel prizes, great influential Jews like Marx and Einstein, as well as Judaism being among the oldest civilizations in the world that has survived. Chinese often compare the great ancient Jewish civilization to their own 5,000 years of history, a fact which China today promotes with great pride. This comparison can again be traced back to the turn of the century, when one Christian periodical traced western and biblical history in comparison with Chinese history. In this way, Chinese saw that Judaism was the antiquity of Western culture and therefore superior, just as Chinese history was the antiquity of the Eastern world.⁴¹ Chinese intellectuals also read the Old Testament and other Jewish texts and "praised its literary value or drew parallels between the destruction of the Jewish and Chinese nations," as well as comparing these Jewish texts and teachings to Confucian ones, as the Kaifeng Jews had already done in the past.⁴² Clearly, the Chinese saw much of themselves in Jewish history and accomplishments.

Chinese diplomats who travelled abroad and came in contact with the Jews took Western anti-Semitic stereotypes and flipped them on their heads, seeing Jewish power as something to be envied. Liang Qichao, a major reformer and writer of the early 20th century, wrote during his tour of America that "he saw the 'powerful Jews' in America as an anti-image of backwardness

⁴¹ 17. Zhou, Xun. *Chinese Perceptions of the Jews and Judaism*. Routledge, 2013.

⁴² 50. Wald, Shalom Salomon. "China and the Jewish People: Old Civilizations in a New Era." Jerusalem, Israel: The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, 2004.

of the Chinese,” and that “Jews are the most powerful and influential group among the immigrants in America. I heard that four tenths of the American banks are Jewish, and more than half the bankers in America are Jewish...In this respect, no other races can compare with the Jews.”⁴³ Liang goes on to compare American media coverage of the Russian pogroms to media coverage of Russian aggression against China, concluding that because the Jews of America are such a powerful minority race that has produced great and famous leaders and thinkers, the majority must respect them.

Conclusions like these are what made reformers like Liang use the image of the Jews - a minority that has endure great suffering and, even without their own nation state, become powerful and respected around the world - as a rallying cry to the Chinese for a *xinmin*, or a new people, as the Chinese were clearly suffering under the aggression of the west due to decisions made by the Qing regime. As the west was constantly at war at this point in history, as well as constantly asserting dominance over the east, reformists also tried to find ways to show that China was superior to the west and encourage its people to live up to that superiority. Wang Tao, (1828-97) who studied the ancient Jewish calendar, used Jewish history to show that “Chinese culture was once as advanced as the culture of the ancient Israelites, or the ancient culture of the West; therefore, in the constantly changing world, China would one day be powerful again.”⁴⁴ Images of Jewish tragedy, like the Russian pogroms, were also used to encourage Chinese to take pity on the plight of the Jews because the Jewish fate would serve as a warning to the Chinese, that similar tragedies of persecution and statelessness under the white man of the West could be coming to the East. Put plainly by the writer of “Alas, the Jew!”: “I do not pity of the Jew of the past, I pity the Jew of the future...Tiny reflection of the prospect of our own

⁴³ 48. Zhou, Xun. *Chinese Perceptions of the Jews and Judaism*. Routledge, 2013.

⁴⁴ 43. Zhou, Xun. *Chinese Perceptions of the Jews and Judaism*. Routledge, 2013.

country...the past of Jews is China's today, the present of Jews will be the future of China."⁴⁵ As writer Wu Qingyou put it, "the tears, blood and death of the Jewish people have awakened the oppressed Chinese."⁴⁶

iv. Conflicting evidence

Some evidence suggests that anti-Semitism is present in China and has been for quite some time. According to the Anti-Defamation league, 20 percent of Chinese harbor anti-Semitic attitudes based on the way they answered questions in a survey, a percentage on par with numbers in the Americas and Europe. However, when more closely examining the questions being asked, research suggests that the respondents may not hold anti-Semitic or hateful attitudes simply because a certain stereotype of Jews exists in China. For example, the first question on the survey asks if Jews are "more loyal to Israel than to [this country/to the countries they live in]" to which 41% of respondents agreed.⁴⁷ As explained in the findings section, Chinese people generally associate a race or ethnicity with a nation or homeland, so associating Jews with the state of Israel is not necessarily an anti-Semitic view.

M. Avrum Erlich writes that "the near-complete absence of open anti-Semitic material is so abnormal it suggests interference and censorship in the free expression of thought."⁴⁸ While of course some hateful rhetoric toward Jews must exist in China, Erlich's point actually further proves China's affinity for Jews, especially that of the government. The CCP's choice to censor anti-Semitic material and allow the free flow of pro-Jewish material like books and blogs while

⁴⁵ 51. Zhou, Xun. *Chinese Perceptions of the Jews and Judaism*. Routledge, 2013.

⁴⁶ 12. Zhou, Xun. "Perceiving Jews in Modern China," in *The Image of Jews in Contemporary China: An Identity Without a People*. Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2016, 5-23.

⁴⁷ "China." The ADL Global 100: A Database of Anti-Semitism. Anti-Defamation League, 2014. <https://global100.adl.org/country/china/2014>.

⁴⁸ 24. Ehrlich, Avrum M. *Jews and Judaism in Modern China*. London: Routledge, 2009.

anti-Islam and anti-cult rhetoric is shared by the government shows its preference for Judaism and pro-Jewish attitudes as opposed to that of other foreign religions.

Zhou Xun also explains in *Chinese Perceptions of Jews and Judaism* that anti-Semitic campaigns were brought into China through Japanese occupation. For example, an anti-Jewish campaign was launched by the Xinmin Hui, a Chinese organization that cooperated with the Japanese, in 1939 which portrayed Jews as the biggest hinderance to Asia, since British imperialist forces were controlled by “Jewish power.” However, this campaign was not successful, and Chinese were unimpressed by it because the Chinese were victims of only Japanese imperialism at this time and saw no evidence of dangerous “Jewish demons.”⁴⁹ As explained in the findings section, while the image of the Jews was promoted as political motivation for a new people, discussion of Judaism was largely kept within political and intellectual circles rather than among the general public. To the Chinese, Japan was the immediate enemy, and since many Jews were living in China during the occupation, especially Shanghai, the Chinese suffered from Japanese oppression alongside the Jews and referred to them as “suffering comrades.”⁵⁰ As Erlich explains, “the cultural and theological underpinnings of European anti-Semitism are not understood, have no appeal, and do not resonate within Chinese culture.”⁵¹

V. Conclusion

Stereotypes formed during the turn of the 20th century continue to resonate with Chinese today and have resulted in a philo-Semitic viewpoint from many Chinese, a level of admiration not found among Chinese for other non-approved foreign religions. The way Chinese view the

⁴⁹ 144. Zhou, Xun. *Chinese Perceptions of the Jews and Judaism*. Routledge, 2013.

⁵⁰ 153. Zhou, Xun. *Chinese Perceptions of the Jews and Judaism*. Routledge, 2013.

⁵¹ 6. Ehrlich, Avrum M. *Jews and Judaism in Modern China*. London: Routledge, 2009.

Jews and Judaism in modern China can reveal much about China's aspirations and goals. As conversations around race and admiration from the foreign fell out of style after China began closing itself off from the world in 1949, these stereotypical images of Jews became popular again as China opened up in the 1980s and shifted to a more market-style economy. "Since the economic liberalization of the country and in the wake of rapid economic growth, many Chinese have become obsessed with the question of how to get rich, how to find a good job, and how to succeed in work, love, and any other endeavor," Shalom Salomon Wald writes, "both Chinese and Jews celebrate riches, success, and well-being in this world, not poverty."⁵² Subsequently, China picked up where it left off before Mao took over, at least in terms of the way it views the Jews, and produced media based on these existing stereotypes to resonate with a new era of audiences who wanted to climb the economic ladder and achieve success like the wealthy Jews of the west.

Zhou Xun suggests that this image of the Jew who has emerged from oppression and persecution and become one of the most wealthy and powerful "races" in the world continues to play a major role as Xi Jinping promotes his idea of the "China Dream," or China's effort to achieve dominance on the international stage. It is difficult to prove if the Chinese Communist Party is pushing a certain stereotypical image of Jews, but its current policy towards Jews, probable policing of anti-Semitic materials, and the great power it has to change the narrative around an identity as it has with Xinjiang Muslims, may speak to the way it prefers its country to view the Jews. Erlich points out the differences between the Chinese and Western education systems, the former leaning more toward teaching subjects that will somehow be useful to the greater good. "Therefore, respondents believe that studying the way of the Jews: why they are so

⁵² 63. Wald, Shalom Salomon. "China and the Jewish People: Old Civilizations in a New Era." Jerusalem, Israel: The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, 2004.

smart, clever, and good at business, will not only improve Israeli-Chinese relations but also benefit China economically and is worthy of study by the Chinese for these reasons.”⁵³

However, we should continue to watch China’s relationship with Jews as China continues to change and develop, pursuing its place as the world’s largest economy. Wald notes the closeness between Chinese stereotypes of Jews and Western ones and warns that the stereotypes could creep closer towards anti-Semitic over time, especially given the relatively new level of openness to the west and its ideas. This idea could especially be something to watch due to the recent clashes in the relationships between China and western countries, notably the US, as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Foreigners have been reporting bias and racism as fears of foreigners bringing additional waves of the virus grows within China. This paper pointed out that Jews are viewed as an ethnicity or race rather than a religion, but Jews throughout China’s history have also been heavily associated with dominating power and economics in western countries like the US. Recent crisis may alter the way China views the Jews for the first time in over a hundred years.

⁵³ 14. 6. Ehrlich, Avrum M. *Jews and Judaism in Modern China*. London: Routledge, 2009.

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