How did I start my interest in Jewish subjects and eventually become a Jewish studies scholar in China? As you can imagine, I have been asked this question countless times. It always evokes a sense of hesitation—even an anxiety—in me. Part of the reason is that I try to piece together many of my fragmented experiences into a meaningful whole. Which episode should I choose? Is this experience more meaningful or more fitting to recount in the current situation than that? To select this or that, that is the question. Ultimately, I have accumulated many different answers over the years. This assertion seems to put my intellectual integrity into question, but that is more an apparition than reality. Cecil Roth once explained that he became a historian “frankly for the pleasure of the thing.” Yet Lucy Dawidowicz was not convinced—for her, “no historian works only for the fun of it, no matter how much fun he gets out of it.” For me the search for relevance, rather than for an immutable and essential truth, is more instinctive.

I was trained as a historian. Historians instinctively contextualize, which makes me more hesitant. In this respect, I am aware that there is a profound chasm stretching between my Jewish inquirer and me. That is, Jews are invisible in China. Of course, there are descendents of the Kaifeng Jews, but they physically are indistinguishable from other Chinese...
and are not halakhically sanctioned. True, there is organized Jewish life today in the big cities of Beijing and Shanghai, but it is accessible only to Jewish sojourners in China. For ordinary Chinese, the only way to learn about the Jewish people is by reading books.

Alas, there are numerous books on this topic. The shelves of Chinese bookstores have been lined with bestsellers on Jewish subjects, with such eye-catching titles as *Talmud: The Greatest Jewish Bible for Making Money, Unveiling the Secrets of Jewish Success in World Economy…* In my opinion, this voyeuristic interest in the Jewish success reflects the fact that most Chinese are not so much interested in real Jews as the Jew as tropes. The most prevalent trope of this kind in China is that the Jew is anyone who is smart, wealthy and successful. As a matter of fact, some non-Jewish celebrities are widely regarded as Jewish in China, like Rockefeller, for example.

In retrospect, I myself was not impervious to this trope either. In my college years, I was a student in the department of history, majoring in the history of the West in general and the Roman Empire in particular. It’s natural for Chinese to be attracted to the Roman Empire. The parallels are self-evident: the geographical expansion, the relations between a central government and numerous local communities, the tensions between individual political freedom and the totalizing momentum of an empire, the multi-ethnic society and the consequent negotiation of cultural and religious identities. My concern with these issues brought my attention to the works of Fergus Millar, then the Camden Professor of Ancient History of Oxford University and a towering figure in today’s Roman studies. I took notice that his *The Emperor in the Roman World*, the work that had earned him international reputation, was inspired by his reading of Josephus. This was a new name for me. I had read Tacitus, Suetonius, Appian and some Livy. But who was Josephus? A Jewish renegade—that fact impressed me most, because it completely subverted another “fact” I gathered from the popular Chinese fantasies about the Jewish success. It goes like this: “Why have Jewish people survived so many persecutions while those persecutors themselves disappeared in historical dustbin? The secret lies in the fact that you cannot find a single Jewish traitor throughout the whole of Jewish history.” To Chinese sensibilities, the overtone of this assertion is “Why has Modern China declined? Because there were so many Chinese renegades who sold our national interests to Western and Japanese colonial powers.”

I was struck not by Josephus’ magnum opus on Jewish ancient history and Jewish War against the Romans, but by his slim books: firstly *Against Apion*, in which he refuted with eloquence and great skill various anti-Jewish slanders by pagan authors; and secondly his *Vita*, in which several creative tensions—between Eretz Israel and the Diaspora, between Talmud Torah and secular learning, between “tradition” and “modernity”—can be sensed. I think I was attracted by a fundamental tension in Josephus: he was a traitor, yet he had a burning feeling for the tradition inherent in him. Anyway, Josephus was the first Jewish traitor I discovered, hence the commencement of my credentials as a Jewish studies scholar.

After I got my PhD I went to Tel Aviv University to do post-doctorial research on the Jewish Diaspora in the Roman Empire. When I finished my stay in Israel, my friend Professor Samuel Heilman asked of me, “What’s your gain from your experience in Israel?” I understand he was trying to inquire whether there had been a sort of real change within me. I did not know the answer, but the question lingered on my mind. Two years ago, I returned to Jerusalem to improve my Hebrew. After spending three additional months in Israel, after visiting many people and places old and new, and after some unexpected experiences—for example, I returned from my first trip downtown for an errand, and all the buses were suspended by a gay parade. King David Street was full of sound and fury. The haredim, blocked the outside of the street, shouted in English “Gay Pigs, Get Aids”; while the people on the street responded with waving billboards in Hebrew “G-d Hates Hate”. On my last trip downtown on the eve of Yom Kippur, I walked into a market and witnessed kaparot. Having waved the live roosters around their heads and recited verses, they cut the roosters’ throats and inverted them into special containers that are smaller in bottom and larger on top so that the roosters, while...
bleeding, cannot move but continue stretching their legs, as if dancing their last ballet. The protesting secular crowd screaming “Kaparot with Money not the Death of Chickens” was blocked outside this time—after all this, my answer to Sam’s question emerged clearer and clearer. I am more and more interested in living Judaism. Judaism is becoming more and more tangible and concrete, and I am increasingly curious, with my nose pressed to the glass looking in, at its colors, smells and breath.

In addition to the exposure of having lived the Jewish experience, this transformation is also materialized by my teaching experience. In China, I teach a course of Jewish civilization. Open to all university students, it usually attracts four hundred students each year. This course is challenging in at least two respects. Firstly, how to cram the long drama of the Jewish tradition from Abraham to Ben-Gurion into one semester? This is a universal challenge for anyone. Secondly, and uniquely, my students are neither Jewish—hence without any Jewish literacy—nor are they monotheistically minded—hence they seemed uninterested when I talk about the Bible’s different theological implications for Jews and Christians. They do however have an interest in getting to know why Jews were persecuted throughout history. This entails another basic question—how to impart the Jewish tradition in a meaningful way to a specific audience? I am progressively aware that there is a persistent tension looming behind these two questions, a tension, to put simply, between erudition and specialization, or as I would venture to suggest, between “Judaism as Culture” and “Judaism as Science.”

By “culture” and “science,” I am thinking of the Latin roots of the two words: colere, “to cultivate,” and scire, “to know.” To my superficial understanding, many Eastern historians’ ideal is to write an exhaustive and scientifically rigorous monograph that, to adapt the phrasing of Mark Twain, at least appears to know more and more about less and less, thereby increasing the amount of knowledge for the sake of knowledge. In contrast, the superlative model cherished by most Chinese historians is to write a general history whose ethos was set by Sima Qian about two thousand years ago, that is, “investigating the relations between the Heaven and human beings, perceiving the changes running through ancient to present, and forming one’s own insights.” Nourished by this tradition, and driven by my instinct to contextualize and to seek for relevance, I am inclined to objectively conceptualize Judaism more as culture. I am of the mindset that the knowledge of Judaism is important in cultivating a sophisticated perspective by seeking common ground while preserving differences between the two civilizations, Jewish and Chinese. In cultivating an open-minded approach to and respect for the dissimilarities between these, I can help my students fully understand themselves and their own position in the world.

My teaching experience has broadened my horizons and I have resolved to broaden further my specialized field. I am currently working on a monograph on Jewish identity in the Roman world, which tries to explore the self-perceptions of Josephus, Herod the Great, Bar-Kokhba, and the Jews as reflected in inscriptions and synagogue mosaics. After this project, I hope to write more on the Marranos. I also would like to further explore the exile of European Jewish intellectuals to the New World before the Second World War and how they rebuilt their lost world in a new land.

When in the United States, many Jewish friends ask my political views on Tibet. Our exchange of ideas usually makes me feel both frustrated and sympathetic. I am frustrated because it seems to me that under the spell of the beguiling smile of Dalai Lama they are not interested in Tibet in its historical existence but in Tibet as a trope: Tibet is the incarnation of those who are oppressed, persecuted, and marginalized. However, it is precisely the same trope that testifies to the bond of intellectual sympathy that I—a Chinese who translated Burkhardt’s The Age of Constantine the Great, in my eyes a nostalgic elegy to the lost world of the pagan individualism—may personally feel for Jews and Judaism. It is also in that same spirit that I am a professor of Humanities working in Jewish Studies in a Chinese university.

Finally, in antiquity, autobiographical works were entitled apologia or confessions, implying a sort of self-justification, self-documentation, or in the parlance of Ervin Goffman, self-presentations. According to Michael Stanislawski, the basic lesson he learnt from the study of Jewish autobiographies is, “If we were to sit down to tell the stories of our own lives, we would necessarily not tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, but a highly selective account that historians of later generations would be well advised to treat skeptically.” Ironically, there is some truth in his assertion, but to which I would hasten to add that what I just presented is the most sincere and candid one I have ever made. Ñ

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