



Is Judaism the Yang to China's Yin?

Exploring the meeting of two ancient cultures

I can barely walk nowadays in the streets of Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing or even Kaifeng without meeting another Jew or an Israeli. Jews have “invaded” the Middle Kingdom, followed by the Israelis who found that China is one of the few countries that still welcomes Jews, or at least, they do not perceive the Chinese to be anti-Semitic or prejudiced. Back home, when I open a Jewish paper, I increasingly find more articles of the adventure of an Israeli, another Jew or a story of a Chabadnik in the land of the Middle Kingdom. The common theme is that the Chinese think that the Jews are rich, smart and good at business. One blogger, however, pointed out that this attitude comes more from misinformation, lack of knowledge and ignorance, which historically has turned into an anti Jewish attitude and ultimately anti-Semitism.

There is some truth in the blogger's observation. While reading the Chinese language media, I can hardly say that they publish entirely positive articles about the Jews or Israel. While it is true that the English language media praises the Jews and writes what (foreign) readers want to hear, the coverage in the local media is a different story. The Chinese use the same phrases but with negative connotation.

The general Chinese press often portrays the Jews as agents of the corrupt Western system, and Israel as a puppet of the United States. More troubling to me personally is that articles published in the Chinese academic media often contain a paragraph or two inserted clearly by someone other than the original writer. These “additions” are not flattering to the Jews nor to Judaism,

they rather leave a bitter taste in the readers' mouth.

As a Jew, I can relate to these controversial writings. Jews, on the one hand, are used to airing sharply different opinions and having heated debates. Such arguments have defined Judaism since the time of the sages in early Talmudic period. On the other hand, as a scholar of China of over 35 years, I know that contradiction, especially between the old and the new, shapes the Chinese attitude towards the rest of the world. Traditionally, the Chinese believe that opposing forces of positive and negative work in tandem to create a balance, or as the Chinese say nothing happens without the interaction of yin and yang. Such interaction (between yin and yang) has also created a Chinese culture that practices Confucian ethics. Within

those ethical standards changes occur due to conflicts, contradictions, and opposites. Accordingly, Chinese culture is the yin part of the cultural equation, yet there must be another culture equal in endurance, sustainability and depth to complement the equation. Is Judaism the yang to China's yin?

Meeting in Biblical Times

One of the most basic and fascinating questions is, was there any connection between Judaism and China in biblical times?

Both Jews and Chinese scholars have tried to answer this question, with each side emphasizing their point of view. Jewish scholars relied on the Judaic sources, while the Chinese drew inspiration from Chinese sources. Evidently, these studies were too lopsided, either too partial to Judaism or China. What is lacking is a study that weights both sources equally. That would require a facilitator well versed in both languages and cultures, and equally important, to be able to elucidate the events in dual historical context. With my background in both Judaism (raised in the orthodox tradition), and a professor of Classical Chinese, I took it upon myself to try to answer this question. I must admit, that at times I had my own reservations. Thanks to one of my colleagues who encouraged me to embark on this study, and to my wife who was with me all these years that I spent on this research.

Knowledge of the Other

Secondly, did the Israelites know about China and vice versa China about the Israelites in biblical times? First, let's look at this question from a Jewish point of view. The most common and simple answer would be that the Prophet Isaiah (8th century BCE) was the first to mention China: "Behold, these shall come from far: and, lo, these from the

north and from the west; and these from the land of Sinim" (49:12). Since Biblical scholars could not find additional biblical reference to China, they placed the land of Sinim somewhere in central Turkey of today. Others translated Sinim as "from the East". Unsatisfactory as they were, these explanations were accepted. I must admit that I was uneasy about these interpretations (especially the latter one) but due to lack of a better alternative, I put the issue to rest.

What changed my mind was that I came across a Chinese text that located the place where the Chinese military brought the finest warhorses. So you could ask: What is the connection between horses and Judaism? The answer is simple, both the Chinese and King Solomon (10th century BCE) bought the finest warhorses in the small kingdom of Ferghana, (Northern Afghanistan today) at a place called Kucha. The people of Ferghana were the prime breeders of warhorses and they brought their horses to Kucha, the marketplace for "heavenly horses" in ancient times to sell them to traders from far away places.

Initially Kucha was a small post off the main Silk Road but due to the horse trade it gradually became a geographic crossroad of the Silk Route. The finest warhorses of Kucha were in great demand and when King Solomon received fine horses as gifts from visiting foreigners (I Kings 10:24; 2 Chr. 9:28) he was so fond of them (I Kings 4:26) that he dispatched traders to Kveh (Kua) where the horses came with a high price (I Kings 10:28).

Linguistics

Where was Kveh/Kua (Hebrew letters of Qof, Vav, Hey)? Was it in Central Anatolia (Turkey) as most Biblical scholars believed or was it the Hebrew name of Kucha? Incidentally, both biblical literature and Chinese literature refer to the same market place bearing

the same name. I attribute the different pronunciation to the difference between Chinese and Hebrew languages. Linguistically, Kucha and Kveh/Kua contain the same syllables peculiar to their own language.

Considering the myriad of traders, travelers, adventures, monks and others of different background, speaking different dialects, communicating in any way they could to make themselves understood, the Chinese word of Kucha could have been easily heard and transliterated as Kveh/Kua in Hebrew. Kucha or Kveh/Kua was the place where Chinese horse buyers and traders from the Israelite Kingdom of Solomon had probably come in the earliest contact. Gradually it became a very important trading post where people of every creed, traders, pilgrims, adventurers and monks met and exchanged goods and stories. By the second century CE, Kucha had a population of 150,000 people, and three centuries later its population doubled.

In essence Chinese annals had solved a biblical mystery! The Chinese records complemented the biblical information, and in addition, provided us a timeframe of when and where the Israelites could have come in contact with the Chinese. Based on this information, the Israelites could have heard about the land of China some two hundred years before the Prophet Isaiah mentioned "the land of Sinim". ✨

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This is the first in a series of articles he will write for Asian Jewish Life all drawn from his research for *The Covenant and the Mandate of Heaven*, which includes a much more comprehensive look at these topics. Next issue will feature an exploration of the biblical influence in the Chinese classics.