



Community Treasure Hunt by Stephen Li Plano Dallas Ft Worth Richardson Frisco

The Kaifeng Scroll



Bridwell Library, Dallas: an old scroll of unknown origin

Southern Methodist University campus' 170 tree-lined acres boast historic Collegiate Georgian buildings and beautiful lawns. Located on campus are a number of libraries. Among them, the Bridwell Library houses theological research collections serving Perkins School of Theology and the University. The library contains over 500,000 books, periodical volumes, and other resources, as well as archival material. In addition, the Library houses a number of special collections. Among the library's special collections is the Thomas J. Harrison Bible Collection. This collection includes a rarity: an old Torah scroll.

Thomas J. Harrison, a collector of bibles from Oklahoma, purchased a Hebrew scroll for the sum of \$250 in 1955. It was identified as a Torah of the seventeenth century and presumably of Middle Eastern origin. The scroll's general appearance and calligraphic styles are strikingly different from those typical found in western synagogues.

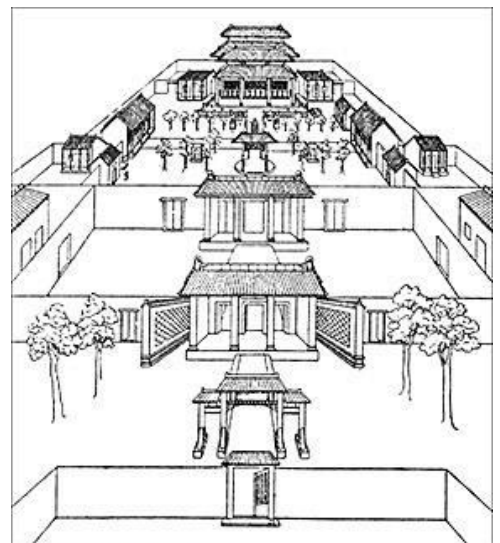
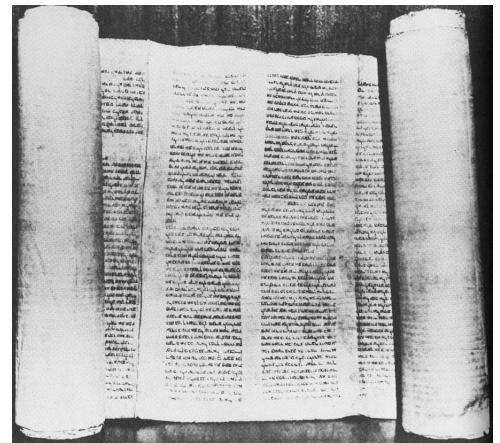
Following the death of Mr. Harrison in 1963, the Thomas J. Harrison Trust assigned the collection of biblical materials, including the unidentified Torah scroll, to the custody of Bridwell Library. For the next nine years, the Bridwell staff made repeated efforts to determine the scroll's origin. In 1972, the scroll was positively identified as one of six purchased from the Jews of Kaifeng in 1851. The scroll was a Torah that was placed by a congregation in the ark of a synagogue deep in the heart of China in 1663.

Kaifeng, China: legends of the Chinese Jews

According to historical records, a Jewish community existed at Kaifeng from at least the Southern Song Dynasty until the late 19th century. Some accounts suggest they in fact had lived there since the mid Han Dynasty. The synagogue was built in 1163.

The ancestors of the Kaifeng Jews came from Central Asia. The uninterrupted existence of this religious and ethnic group lasted more than 700 years. This community was unique because, in thousands of years of Jewish civilization, no other group of people have lasted so long in the midst of totally different socio-cultural surroundings strongly dominated by Confucian moral and ethical principles.

Three stone monuments with inscriptions were found at Kaifeng. The oldest dates from 1489 and commemorates the construction of the synagogue in 1163. The inscription states that the Jews entered China from India in the mid Han Dynasty period (200 BC to 200 AD). It lists the Jews' 70 Chinese surnames, their audience with a Song Dynasty Emperor, and finally discusses the history of their religion from Abraham to the prophet Ezra. The second monument, dated 1512, details the Jews' religious practices. The third monument was dated 1663 and commemorated the re-building of the synagogue and summarized the information from the other two monuments. According to the 1663 stone tablet, thirteen Torah scrolls were placed in the Ark inside the re-built synagogue. The scrolls each represented one of the twelve tribes of Israel and the 13th scroll was dedicated for Moses. The Bridwell Scroll, one of these thirteen, was



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dedicated to the Tribe of Benjamin. At least some of the scrolls probably date from the 15th century.

Besides its long history, the Kaifeng Jewish community had another conspicuous feature. Although isolated from the Jewish Diaspora outside China, it still managed to keep alive Jewish traditions and customs for centuries. However, since the Kaifeng Jews experienced neither discrimination nor persecution from the Chinese authorities and their neighbors, a process of gradual assimilation occurred.

Towards the second half of the 17th century, the assimilation of the Kaifeng Jews intensified. It resulted in changes in Jewish religious and ritual customs. Furthermore, social and linguistic traditions changed as well. Inter-marriage between Jews and other ethnic groups increased.

The community was unable to find a replacement after its last Rabbi died in 1841. In 1860, the Jewish synagogue in Kaifeng collapsed since it had long been in disrepair. As a consequence, Jewish religious life and Jewish identity in the community effectively came to an end.

Today, an estimated 500 to 1,000 people of Kaifeng continue to claim Jewish ancestry.

Fusion of Cultures

The Kaifeng Jewish community prospered by building synagogues, training rabbis, and adhering faithfully to Judaic tradition for almost 800 years. The synagogue, center of the community's religious and communal life, had been rebuilt at least 10 times. However, during their long stay, a number of Chinese customs were adopted. Confucianism posed little problem for the Jews since it demanded no belief in any other supreme being.

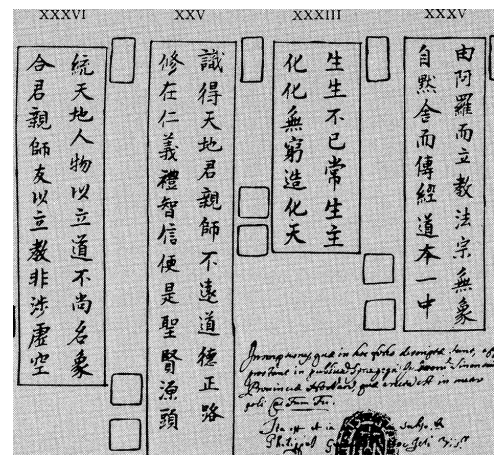
In Jewish tradition only a person born of a Jewish mother was automatically considered Jewish. The Kaifeng Jews switched to the patrilineal descent system.

Reverence for ancestors was a principal form of religious expression of the Kaifeng Jewish community. In the synagogue's Hall of Ancestors (祠堂), members of the community venerated their ancestors starting from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. However, images were prohibited.

The Jewish community, estimated to be no more than four to five thousand at its peak, produced a disproportionately large number of Confucius scholars who passed the Imperial Civic Examination and became appointed government officials. An example of their reverence for Confucius teachings can be found from passages in the 1663 stone inscription claiming compatibility between Judaism and Confucianism. It expressed Jewish beliefs in Confucian literary terms:

Although there are minor discrepancies between Confucianism and our own teaching, in their main focus of ideas and established practices both are exclusively concerned with honoring the Tao of Heaven, venerating ancestors, valuing the relations of rulers and subjects, being filial to parents, harmony within the family, respecting the order of social hierarchies, and fellowship among friends: nothing more than the 'five cardinal relations' of mankind.

- 960-1126 Jews of Persian origin settled in Kaifeng.
- 1163 The Kaifeng Jews constructed a synagogue
- 1489 The synagogue was rebuilt. The first stone monument erected by the community provides a history of the Kaifeng Jewry.
- 1512 The synagogue was repaired. The 1512 stone monument erected.
- 1605 Ai Tien, a Kaifeng Jew, met Fr. Matteo Ricci in Peking. The outside world knew about the Kaifeng Jewry for the first time.
- 1642 A Yellow River flood destroyed Kaifeng. The synagogue was destroyed, but about 200 Jewish families survived.
- 1653 Rebuilding of the synagogue commenced.
- 1663 Dedication of the eighth rebuilding of the synagogue. 1663 stone monument erected.
- 1688 Tenth and final rebuilding of the synagogue.
- 1723 Foreign missionaries were expelled from China. The Kaifeng Jews were once again cut off contacts with the outside world.
- 1810 A major Yellow River flood struck Kaifeng.
- 1841 The last Rabbi died.
- 1850 Eight Hebrew manuscripts were sold.
- 1851 Six Torah scrolls and many other Hebrew manuscripts were sold, the Bridwell Scroll among them.
- 1850-64 The Taiping rebellion. Many Jews fled Kaifeng.
- 1860 Another Yellow River flood struck Kaifeng. Synagogue dismantled.
- 1900 Last attempt to re-build the synagogue
- 1914 The synagogue site was sold.



Although Judaism differs from Confucian text in its writing form, upon close inspection, one will find that its basic principles are identical, as it contains the Tao of common practices.

其儒教與本教雖大同小異，然其立心制行亦不過敬天道，尊祖宗，重君臣，孝父母，和妻子，序尊卑，交朋友，而不外於五倫矣

雖儒書字異，而睽厥其理，亦有常行之道，以其同也。

Expressions from a pair of inscriptions in the synagogue make anyone with rudimentary knowledge of Confucius teachings feel at home:

Acknowledging Heaven, Earth, King, Parent, and Teacher, you are not far from the correct road of Reason and Virtue. Cultivating the virtues of Benevolence, Righteousness, Propriety, Wisdom, and Faith, you reach the source of sages and philosophers.

識得天地君親師 不遠道德正路
修在仁義禮智信 便是聖賢源頭

Attempts were made to reconcile and bridge the differences between the Jewish and Chinese belief systems and to connect biblical legends with Chinese ones. For example, various combinations of Tao(道) and Heaven(天) were used to represent God, and A-dan-pan-gu (阿耽盤古), a conflation of Adam and Pangu (creator of the universe in Chinese legends) was revered as head of the human family chain.

The human experience of immigration and assimilation was universal. As citizens in a nation of immigrants, perhaps we recognize familiar elements of our own experience in the story of the Kaifeng Jews.

References

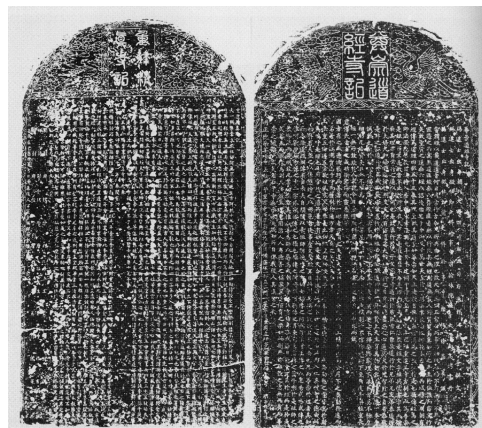
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Notes

To probe further, the Bridwell library has a good collection of books related to the topic. The above references are available from the library. The author also maintains a resource page at <http://www.Stephen-Li.com/KaifengJewry>

Illustrations (from top to bottom):

- Bridwell Library, Southern Methodist University, Dallas
- The Bridwell scroll
- The Kaifeng synagogue drawn by the Jesuit missionary Jean Domenge in 1772



- Chronology of the Kaifeng Jewish community
- Copy (partial) of dedicatory inscriptions from the synagogue by Philippus Grimaldi, a Jesuit priest, in 1705
- Model of the Kaifeng synagogue, Nahum Goldmann Museum of the Jewish Diaspora, Tel Aviv
- Ink-press copy of the inscriptions from the 1489(重建清真寺记碑) and the 1512(尊崇道经寺记碑) stone monuments. The monuments are currently on display in the Kaifeng Municipal Museum, Kaifeng
- Jews of Kaifeng, late 19th or early 20th century.
- Reading Torah, an illustration
- Kaifeng Municipal Museum, Kaifeng, China
- Reyna Li, twelve years old and lives in old China's Jewish community of Kaifeng in the year 1175, from the Gali Girls Jewish History Series is a creation of the [Gali Girls Inc.](#)

