

Short report on the international symposium with exhibition

Youtai – Presence and Perception of Jews and Judaism in China

within the framework of the same-named research project
in the School of Applied Linguistics and Cultural Studies (FASK)
of the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz at Germersheim

September 19th to 23rd, 2003

The research project established by Prof. Dr. Peter Kupfer (FASK, University of Mainz) and Prof. Dr. Roman Malek (Monumenta Serica Institute, Philosophical Theological Faculty, Sankt Augustin) in the years 2002-2003 in Germersheim is mainly focused on the Jewish community in China. This community had a synagogue, typical tradition and religious practice in the old Chinese imperial city of Kaifeng, Henan Province, which can be historically authenticated for the period spanning the 12th (Northern Song Dynasty) to the 19th centuries. Due to a centuries-old assimilation and acculturation process it gradually died out. In recent years, however, in China and abroad more and more research is being done about the history and culture of the Jews in China and in the future too we can expect an increasing academic interest in all questions connected with it. The project concentrates on the questions of the social status and assimilation of Kaifeng Jews in Chinese society.

An international symposium based on more up to date sources and research findings was held at the FASK at Germersheim, Germany, from 19th to 23rd September, 2003. It focused on questions concerning the perception of Judaism in Chinese society as well as among Chinese academics, the self image of older and younger descendants in Kaifeng and their present status in China and how China deals with the foreigner as part of its own history and identity. The theme was systematically developed and discussed from various historical, sociological, religious, ethnic, ethno-political and intercultural points of view. Following the last conferences on this – in 1997 in Sankt Augustin (“From Kaifeng ... to Shanghai. Jews in China,” with exhibition) and in 2002 in Nanjing (“History of Jewish Diaspora in China”) – emphasis was laid on the continuity of the research results and a broad spectrum of various, new approaches with up to date references. Among the 14 speakers from Australia, China, Hongkong, Israel, Great Britain, France and Germany who met for five days in Germersheim there were prominent sino-judaists as well as younger hands in the field who presented their latest findings in some excellent and informative papers.

The main auditorium of the FASK offered an ideal ambience both for the symposium itself and the exhibition on Judaism in China at the back of the hall. The exhibition was to continue until October 10th. Both were open for interested parties at the University, Sinological and Judaistic institutes, Jewish groups and the general public. Amongst other things the official opening of the symposium included written words of welcome by the President of Germany, Johannes Rau (who just a few days before had visited the former

Jewish ghetto in Shanghai), the chairman of the Central Jewish Committee, Paul Spiegel, and of the Center for Jewish Studies of the Academy of Social Sciences in Shanghai. The programme of events began on September 19th with a greeting from the dean of FASK, Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Pöckl, and some introductory remarks by Prof. Kupfer who introduced the participants. He concluded by thanking the promoters of the symposium and exhibition: the Center for Intercultural Studies at the Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz (ZIS), the German Research Foundation (DFG), The Rhineland Palatine Ministry of Science, Further Education, Research and Culture, as well as numerous sponsors and helpers.

Prof. Dr. Roman MALEK (Monumenta Serica, Sankt Augustin) began the symposium by delivering an introductory paper on the theme: “*‘Marginal Religions’ in Chinese History of Religion: The Case Study of Judaism.*” He discussed the definition of Judaism as a “marginal religion,” illustrating this by examining its historical background in comparison to other religions and their adoption of Confucian orthodoxy. The following day in his presentation entitled “*Chinese Jews: Prospects for Research*” with an overview of the history and present stage of research on Judaism in China Prof. Dr. Donald D. LESLIE (Canberra) succeeded in pointing out research deficiencies and ongoing questions, partly correcting them. With the help of some informative illustrations Prof. Dr. PAN Guang (Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences) in his paper “*Jews in China: Legends, History and New Perspectives*”, described the various Jewish migrations and their settlements in China from the earliest times to the present. In her presentation “*From Judaism to Confucianism: Studies on the Internal Causes for Assimilation of the Kaifeng Jewish Community*”, Prof. Dr. ZHANG Qianhong (Henan University, Kaifeng) examined the heretofore-unrecognized internal reasons for assimilation based on complex ideological processes of change. A member of the new generation of academics, ZHANG Ligang (Henan University, Kaifeng), in his paper on “*The Understanding and Attitude of Chinese Society towards the Kaifeng Jews*” focused on the perception and relationship of the Chinese authorities and society towards the Kaifeng Jews during the various epochs from the Song Dynasty up to the present day. Ms. WEI Naxin (graduate in translation studies, Mainz University) presented a report entitled “*Contemporary Perception of Jews and Judaism among the Jewish Descendants in Kaifeng*”, revealing the results of a survey by means of questionnaires carried out in the spring of 2003 and interviews of the descendants of Kaifeng Jews recorded in 2000 and 2003. In his paper “*Between Disintegration and Expansion – A Comparative Retrospection of the Kaifeng Jewish and Muslim Community*” Prof. YIN Gang (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing) presented a historically comparative overview and heretofore lesser known facts about the Moslem and Jewish communities in Kaifeng during the Song, Jin, Yuan, and Ming Dynasties and examined the background of the gradual weakening of the Jewish community on the one hand and the expansion and strengthening of the Islamic community on the other. In his paper “*What’s Holding back the Reconstruction of the Kaifeng Synagogue? Between Revival and Obliteration of Kaifeng Jewry*” the young Israeli sinologist Noam URBACH (Hebrew University, Jerusalem) sketched the results of his field work in Kaifeng and for the first time explained the political background which after the beginning of China’s policy of openness first led to a flurry of activity on the part of the city government and several personalities in Kaifeng for the revival of Jewish culture

in 1993 but then in 1996 to a sudden ending of all these initiatives. In a paper entitled “*Baghdadis, ‘Chinese Jews’ and Chinese*” Dr. Maisie MEYER (London) described the life and circumstances of the Bombay Sephardic business people who settled as British citizens in the then opened trading port of Shanghai after the passing of the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842. The efforts of these Sephardic Jews in the periods 1898-1904 and 1924-1932 to revive the Jewish culture in Kaifeng were in vain but testified to their strong identity with the Jewish culture present in Shanghai until 1949. In his paper “*A Comparison between Hillel and Confucius: The Proscriptive versus the Prescriptive Formulation of the Central Ethical Principle in the Jewish and Chinese Ethical Traditions*” Prof. Robert E. ALLINSON (Chinese University of Hongkong) asserted that in both the Jewish and Chinese ethical tradition prescriptive as well as proscriptive formulation are of importance, as this is expressed in the “Golden Rule.” He arrived at the conclusion that in both traditions a similar semantic framework is supposed and common ethical values are defined. In his scholarly contribution entitled “*Chinese Jews in European Thought*” Dr. Salomon WALD (The Jewish People Policy Planning Institute, Jerusalem/Paris) analyzed the reactions of European thinkers such as Menasseh Ben Israel, Leibniz, Voltaire, Basnage, Marquis d’Argens, Kant and Abbé Grégoire to the discovery of the Jewish community in Kaifeng. In a contribution “*The ‘Jews’ in the May Fourth Period*” Dr. ZHOU Xun (SOAS, University of London) lectured on the modern Chinese “image of the Jew” during the May Fourth Movement or New Cultural Movement between 1915 and the 1930’s. Having glanced retrospectively at the 1000-year history of “Chinese Judaism” in his paper on “*Chinese Policy towards Judaism*” Prof. Dr. XU Xin (Nanjing University) revealed many heretofore-unknown details concerning Chinese policy since 1950 concerning the treatment of descendants of the Kaifeng Jews. In the concluding paper of the symposium “*The Situation of Jewish Culture in China in the Past, Present and Future*” Prof. Dr. Peter KUPFER (University of Mainz, Gernersheim) examined the situation of the Kaifeng Jews and their descendants with respect to the conservation of the Jewish heritage. The symposium ended in the late afternoon of September 22nd with a lively discussion. The general conclusion was that the symposium constituted a new milestone in Sino-Judaistic research.

Last but not least has to be mentioned the interesting and lavishly prepared supporting programme for the symposium which included a conducted tour through the fortress town of Gernersheim and through the FASK itself which incorporates the biggest and most modern interpreter's training institution in the world. Other items on the programme included an evening concert of medieval music entitled “In the Steps of Abraham” in Speyer cathedral, a reception in the FASK main auditorium on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition on Judaism in China (with about 60 invited guests) and a German-Hebrew concert performed by the Israeli accordianist, Revital Herzog. Other items included excursions to Speyer (conducted tour of the cathedral by Bishop Dr. Anton Schlembach, visit to the Jewish Bath), Worms (synagogue, Raschi House, and Jewish cemetery), and to the Osthofen concentration camp memorial. The programme concluded with a trip through the scenic German Wine Route.