

Author's note:  
The Truth Behind the Fiction

*“ . . . Jews are to be found everywhere. This fact is familiar to all, but it is not so well known that Jews in considerable numbers have existed in China from a very remote period.”*

**Edward Isaac Ezra, East of Asia magazine, Vol. 1, 1902.**

Western Jews are often as surprised as Lily was about the long and layered history of Jews in China. It is yet another example of the moniker “wandering Jews” and our global Diaspora. Throughout Jewish history two major factors have fueled our Diaspora: persecution and opportunity. The first Jews reliably reported in China arrived seeking opportunity. Persecution drove successive Jews there, but opportunity greeted the most fortunate.

Today, Kaifeng, in Henan Province, is just another Chinese city with a million residents that most tourists have never heard of and, therefore, don't visit. But for centuries it was a destination that may have been the most populous city in the world in the eleventh century, its zenith as a commercial, governmental, and cultural center. Indeed, the city was one of China's Seven Ancient Capitals during the Jin, Han, Zhou, and Song dynasties. Nestling by the Yellow River, however, made it vulnerable to continuous flooding—some wrought naturally but also deliberately triggered, either by invaders or its own government as military strategy.

The 1642 flood was a catastrophic example of a ruler opening the dikes to rid the area of rebel forces. Nearly the entire Kaifeng population was wiped out, between the destruction it wrought and the disease and famine that arose in its wake. The city had to be abandoned for almost twenty years. Unlike the aftermath of previous floods, when Kaifeng rebuilt and thrived, the Kaifeng that emerged from the dregs of the 1642 flood never regained its prominence.

Yet, for centuries Kaifeng's waterside location provided advantages that outweighed the periodic disasters. Chief among these was its connection to the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal, the longest artificial river in the world, more than 1100 miles long. The oldest parts of the canal date back to the Fifth Century BC. This put Kaifeng on the Silk Road, a wellspring of commercial prosperity and renown. Among the Silk Road traders were Jews hailing from the Middle East, Europe, and Central Asia. Their marriages to Chinese women launched generations of Chinese Jews. Despite their isolation from larger geographic clusters of their fellow Jews, some practiced their faith with relative rigor from the 11<sup>th</sup> century until the early 1800s.

If there had been a Golden Age for Kaifeng Jewry, it, too, washed away in the floodwaters of 1642. Although the synagogue was rebuilt and other communities donated replacement Torah scrolls, the Jewish population, thought to be 5,000 people before the devastation, diminished considerably.

Ironically, intermarriage was both how the Chinese Jewish community began and grew, but also how it declined, since successive generations of mixed marriages ultimately diluted orthodox tradition. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was no synagogue in Kaifeng, and the families who still considered themselves Jewish were no longer well enough acquainted with the rituals of their faith to practice them. After the last local rabbi died in 1810, no one knew any Hebrew. The Jews began to sell off their remaining Torah scrolls to Protestant missionaries. Yet, still they considered themselves distinct from other Chinese, whose Confucian rites they didn't observe either.

Although Miriam and her father are fictional relatives, Shanghai-born Edward Isaac Ezra was a real-life figure, depicted in my novel as Miriam's wretched "Cousin Edward," whose Shanghai career zoomed and ignominiously crashed in scandal by the time he died at age thirty-nine. A business and community *wunderkind* before his downfall, Ezra wrote in the 1902 premier issue of the *East of Asia Magazine*, a quarterly apparently published only for four years, about hosting a delegation of eight self-proclaimed Kaifeng

Jews. They had traveled to Shanghai to ask their co-religionists there for assistance in rebuilding their synagogue and reviving religious practice through education. In my book David Li and his father, Li Wei, portray themselves as descendants of the Kaifeng Jews.

Edward Ezra summed up the two-hour meeting between the Kaifeng and Shanghai Jews:

*“They affirmed with frankness that in coming to Shanghai they are not prompted by the hope of personal gain. They are quite satisfied with their lot from a material standpoint. Rather their chief desire is to be instructed in the religion of their forefathers. Their leader closed the interview by expressing a hope that the Synagogue in Kaifengfu may soon be rebuilt and the remnants of the ancient settlement once more rejuvenated. ‘And this,’ he continued, ‘can only be done with the assistance of our foreign brethren. We are desirous of being instructed—teach us and raise us from the dust!’*

*“From all appearances these men show great sincerity and their honesty was further proved when one of the their number proposed and then allowed his eldest son, aged fifteen years, to be circumcised, which ceremony was successfully performed on the 27th May last. The lad was named Israel and he is now receiving instruction since he remained in Shanghai after the rest of his delegation returned to Kaifeng.”*

Mr. Ezra's Shanghai-based Society for the Rescue of the Chinese Jews petered out without significantly helping the Kaifeng delegation beyond sending them home with a Chinese translation of the Torah and imploring them not to sell off more of their remaining Hebrew scrolls. The poor lad Israel seems to have sacrificed his foreskin in vain, a factor inspiring the lingering grudge that David and Li Wei harbor against the long-departed Sephardic Jews of Shanghai.

Today, although their bloodlines as Jews are dubious, there are still a few residents of Kaifeng struggling to maintain their Jewish identity through study with a resident scholar. Others have settled in Israel.

We usually think of Sephardim as Jews from Spain (Sephardi means Spanish in Hebrew) and quite different in ritual and tradition from Ashkenazim, who are from Eastern Europe. The Spanish Sephardim basked in their so-called Golden Age of art, music, philosophy, and science for several hundred years, only to be shattered when they were expelled during the Inquisition.

However, the Sephardic Golden Age was not a phenomenon exclusive to the Iberian Peninsula. It was also widespread among Jews of similar practice residing on the other side of the Mediterranean—from Morocco through Egypt to Mesopotamia (Babylon and Persia, now Iraq and Iran). They lived as *dhimmi*, non-Muslim subjects of Muslim states. At scattered times in history, many rose to prominence as government officials, judges, and generals. In Iraq they descended from the original Jewish captives that King Nebuchadnezzar dragged to exile in Babylon after his forces destroyed the First Temple in Jerusalem in 587 B.C. Under Persian King Cyrus, who conquered Babylon later, Jews could return home and rebuild the Temple, and many chose to follow the prophet Ezra on this journey. Those who remained were able to practice their faith through long periods of tolerance in Baghdad and other regional cities. Indeed, Jewish scholarship and culture flourished: the Babylonian Talmud is the defining treatise of Jewish law. But persecution certainly cropped up from time to time, and perverse changes in government led some Baghdadi Jews to decamp to India in the early nineteenth century. Our fictional Miriam's grandfather had made that move, bringing with him the Torah blessed by Chacham ("a wise man" and the Sephardic equivalent of Rabbi) Yosef Chaim, known as the "Ben Ish Chai," a noted scholar and spiritual leader in Baghdad in the nineteenth century.

Opportunity awaited these businessmen in India and, later, in China. By the mid-nineteenth century most were subjects of the British Empire, which positioned them to reap the benefits of England's defeat of China in the Opium Wars. Their Orthodox Judaism did not preclude engaging in the profitable trading business that addicted many Chinese to opium, derived from India's poppies, while simultaneously extracting tea, silk, and other resources out of their newly adopted country.

Some of the Baghdadi Jews stayed in India, founding Sephardic communities mainly in Calcutta and Bombay, while others moved on to China in short order. The real Ezra family had branches in both places.

To their credit, the Baghdadi Jews in Shanghai invested their talents and ill-gotten profits into real estate and other economic development that built the city. And they stayed, establishing a thriving, though insular, Jewish community, equipped with synagogues, schools, and hospitals.

Shanghai itself was more an international city than a Chinese one, divided as it was into districts known as the International Settlement (governed by British

and American officials) and the French Concession that surrounded squalid all-Chinese zones. Although a few prosperous natives occupied seats in municipal government, the majority were wealthy non-Chinese. British dominance gave their Sephardic Jewish subjects considerable political influence. China's brief stab at democracy, under Dr. Sun Yat-sen, benefitted from Jewish support, and one community leader, Silas Haroon, was a close associate of Dr. Sun.

The last quarter of the nineteenth century brought the first wave of Russian Jews to China—to Harbin and Shanghai, as well as to other northern Chinese cities. These Russian Jews fled czarist pogroms and then, after World War I, the Communist Revolution. Many prospered as merchants and professionals. They introduced to China the cultural flavor of Ashkenazic Judaism, including Yiddish theatre and publications, as well as more synagogues and schools and Zionist organizations similar to those operating in Europe and the United States. Miriam's mother-in-law, Malka, is Ashkenazic, and comes from this settlement stream. Miriam's mother was also Ashkenazic of Russian descent, making both Miriam and Reuben half-breeds of sorts, the offspring of a unique form of mixed-, yet-all-Jewish, marriage.

What happened later is probably the most widely known chapter of Jewish Diaspora history in China — the ultimate wave of Jews who came to Shanghai escaping the Nazis from 1937 to 1940. By the time they arrived, both the Baghdadi and Russian groups had laid the Jewish communal infrastructure that provided what we call today a “social safety net” for the new immigrants. Shanghai became a proverbial “port of last resort” for German and other central European Jews lucky enough to scrape up the fare for passage, especially in the face of closed doors in most other countries around the world. The Japanese had already occupied Shanghai by this time, contributing to a generally chaotic atmosphere that enhanced the city's normal access to stateless travelers lacking passports or visas.

While some of these refugees lived through the charity of the resident Shanghai Jews, others managed to arrive with a few concealed tangible assets. Some found work appropriate to their abilities and enjoyed at the outset a relatively comfortable existence living wherever in the city they could afford. The fictional Erich Heilbron, Lily's uncle and Ruth's father, was one such fortunate refugee from Vienna who not only worked in his legal profession, but also formed a close friendship with the Josephs.

Ultimately, however, as a concession to the pleas of its German allies, the Japanese confined all European Jews who had arrived after 1937 into a cramped ghetto life in a squalid district of Shanghai. Despite its privations, Hongkou was no death camp. Fictional Erich moved there. The Josephs, like real British citizens, went to a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp.

After World War II most Jews left China headed for the United States, Israel, Australia, or back to Europe. As the Chinese Communist takeover became inevitable, the urgency to leave intensified. A few "true believers" of idealized Marxism stayed, however. Like the fictional Miriam and Reuben, many real-life Shanghai Sephardim re-established themselves in Hong Kong, where some remain even since the 1997 hand-over of that former British colony to the Peoples Republic of China.

Today, the Jewish presence in China rests almost entirely with expatriates studying and working there.

Something that seems unrealistic in *The Lost Torah of Shanghai* I read about in Hannah Pakula's biography of Madame Chiang Kai-shek, *The Last Empress*. As a young woman, the former Soong Mei-ling, influenced by her American education, returned to Shanghai as a socially conscious crusader for improved conditions for female Chinese factory workers and their children. Her fervor for helping the less fortunate possibly waned during her marriage to the Generalissimo. She did live more than a century, and her greed and her husband's ties to powerful Shanghai criminals are well documented. But her complicity in a plot to acquire and resell a Torah is fiction.

At least, I assume so. Just when I thought I had made it all up, a November 2013 news report featured a Chinese family in possession of a cache of 2,000 books that had been stored in their Shanghai home since the

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1940s. A German-Jewish refugee had entrusted them to a grandfather now long dead. The family's house was slated for destruction to make way for new development in Hongkou, site of the Japanese-imposed refugee ghetto. The family sought to return the books to the owner or his heirs. I have not heard that the owner's family has been found, and the books have been transferred to a library in Shanghai.

Similarly, in the spring of 2014, I was contacted by a Jewish educational institution in Brooklyn. Its leaders were actually seeking a Torah that had been brought to Shanghai by the Mir Yeshiva, a group of scholars and students who escaped the Nazis aided by the visas issued by Japanese consul in Vilna, Lithuania, Chiune Sugihara. Its whereabouts after Shanghai are unknown.

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