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Learning the Other: Chinese Studies in Israel and Jewish Studies in China

by

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In recent decades, the study of each other's culture and the like has been a rapidly developing field in both Israel and China. A number of universities have established departments and/or centres, and student bodies for the B.A. degree or advanced degrees are increasing every year. Although the initial attraction to learn more about each other may be due to the popular notions about the 'exotic Orient' in Israel and Jewish 'wealth and power' in China, this soon gives way to more serious considerations. There are the demanding studies of each other's languages, and of ancient and more recent histories. The scholars active in the field are not only engaged in writing works on topics of their expertise, but are also translating philosophical and literary works in an effort to bring treasures of the past and the present to a wider public. Student exchange programmes between the two countries are important in supporting scholarly endeavours. Finally, library acquisitions in a number of languages are an important part of the development of Chinese and Jewish studies in both countries.

Chinese Studies in Israel

In 1969, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem was the first university to initiate a three-year programme in Chinese and Japanese studies leading to the B.A. degree.¹ Some years later, M.A. and Ph.D. degrees were added. Until 1985, student enrolment in the department was fairly low. The rigorous language programme together with circumscribed employment opportunities discouraged many young people from joining. It must be also remembered that Israeli students begin studies after army service and are, therefore, more career oriented than their average counterparts elsewhere.

The situation changed drastically after 1985 when enrolments increased and fewer students dropped out of the programme. By 1992, after the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, enrolments rose rapidly. Employment became possible and today several graduates are teaching in the department, others are active in the Foreign Service or in China-related business enterprises as well as similarly specialized careers. Currently five Ph.D. candidates are writing dissertations on such diverse topics as urban development in China, Chinese philosophy and the exile press in Shanghai.

The Frieberg Center of East Asian Studies, established in 2006, has an important function together with the department. Louis Frieberg's² generous support has made it possible to support research on China, the granting of post-doctoral fellowships, and especially the expansion of the Chinese language library. It is the last that has benefited dissertation writers by providing local access to major Chinese research works.

An important goal of the faculty has been to provide instructional materials in Hebrew. Among those that should be mentioned here are the excellent grammar by Dr. Lihi Yariv-Laor for language courses and the early history of China edited by Professor Yitzhak Shichor for introductory history courses. Of singular importance is the publication of the *Four Books* of Confucianism, comprising *The Analects* by Confucius, *The Great Learning*, *The Mean*, and *The Mencius*. Translated by several hands, these basic philosophical works are the backbone of Chinese thought and no student of Chinese history and culture can manage without them. Mention must also be made of the important translations from Chinese literature by Amira Katz-Goehr, used as supplementary readings in courses on Chinese history. All these works are, of course, also available to the public at large in attractive editions, and include short stories by

¹ The earlier history of Hebrew University's East Asia department is discussed in I. Eber, 'Sinology in Israel,' *Revue Bibliographique de Sinologie*, (1969), pp. 29-35.

² Born and raised in Mielec, Poland, he has been a benefactor of the department since 1991. He envisioned already then a potentially close relationship between China and Israel with the university as a link.

Feng Menglong (1574-1646) and Lu Xun (1881-1936). Besides such materials in Hebrew, the faculty of the department also engages in research on topics of their specialization, publishing these mainly in English. There is the impressive work by Professor Gideon Shelach on Chinese archaeology and by Yuri Pines on pre-Confucian thought.³ Retired faculty of the centre continue their research and writing, while a documentary history of Jewish refugees in Shanghai is currently under way.

The department of East Asian Studies was established at Tel Aviv University in 1985. Like in Jerusalem, the major thrust is language, culture and history; despite its name, the department also includes Indian studies. However, its fairly large faculty offer a wider range of courses than is the case in Jerusalem and there is a great emphasis on philosophical traditions. Strong institutional support and generous budgets made possible considerable library development. Another significant development was the establishment of the Confucius Institute in 2007. Under the directorship of Professor Meir Shahaar, the institute hosts lectures and conferences in addition to offering courses on various aspects of Chinese studies. Professor Shahaar has written widely on Chinese religion both in Hebrew and English. In distinction to Jerusalem, the department's strength is philosophy and, as a result, several significant works on Chinese philosophy were published by professors Yoav Ariel and Galia Patt-Shamir.⁴

In 2002, Haifa University established its department of Asian Studies, granting at first only the B.A. degree. In recent years, the curriculum has been expanded to include the M.A. degree. Unlike Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, Haifa University's department concentrates more on modern developments in Asia without, however, neglecting language instruction in both Chinese and Japanese. Its faculty is still small, but considering the fairly recent establishment of the department, its library acquisitions are impressive. Under the able leadership of Professor Rotem Kowner, a Japan specialist who has published widely on the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), we can look forward to Haifa University's department as an important centre of modern Asian studies.

Besides the three universities discussed above, courses on China, including language, are also taught at two other universities in Israel – the Technion in Haifa and Bar-Ilan in Ramat Gan; however, whether these will eventually develop into departments remains to be seen. Altogether

³ Shelach, Gideon, *Prehistoric Societies on the Northern Frontier of China: Archaeological Perspectives on Identity Formation and Economic Change During the First Millennium B.C.E.*, (Oakville: Equinox, 2009), and Pines, Yuri, *Foundations of Confucian Thought: Intellectual Life in the Chunqiu Period (722-463 B.C.E.)*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002.)

⁴ Ariel, Yoav, K'ung-Ts'ung-Tzu, *The K'ung Family Master's Anthology, A Study and Translation of Chapters 1-10, 12-14*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), and Patt-Shamir, Galia, *To Broaden the Way, A Confucian-Jewish Dialogue*, (Lanham-Oxford: Roman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2006).

there are at present more than 1,000 students enrolled in courses dealing with Asia, and of these, around three quarter, if not more, are studying Chinese. This number may significantly increase as a new department is being planned for 2011 at a northern teachers' college.

Jewish Studies in China

Unlike Israeli universities, which have departments of area studies, Chinese institutions offer courses on Jewish studies in the various departments of their discipline. Thus, students take courses on Jewish history, philosophy, Hebrew, and related subjects in several departments. Ten Chinese institutions currently grant degrees in Jewish subjects.⁵ In addition, there are six centres or institutes of Jewish studies – at Beijing University, Nanjing University, the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, Shandong University, Henan University and most recently Sichuan University.⁶ At several of these centres, instruction in aspects of Jewish studies is offered, and major research and translation projects are initiated and carried out. The development of Jewish studies at Chinese universities is, indeed, remarkable if it is remembered that for the most part this phenomenal growth has taken place after 1992 and the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Impressive accomplishments can be chalked up for Beijing University. Hebrew language teaching began there in 1985, when a Hebrew language and literature programme was established in the Department of Oriental Studies.⁷ At the present time, three faculty members are teaching language courses at the B.A. and M.A. levels and students can take Hebrew studies as their major. Many graduates of the programme have successful careers in government posts, the Xin Hua News Agency, and the like, while others are pursuing graduate degrees abroad. Although doctoral students are as yet not enrolled, Professor Chen Yiyi, the director of the Institute of Hebrew and Jewish Studies – a research institute – has guided several M.A. theses. Many departments, such as political science or philosophy, are offering related courses and

⁵ Lihong Song, 'Some Observations on Chinese Jewish Studies,' *Contemporary Jewry*, Vol. 29, no. 3 (2009), pp. 195-214. My information is based on the online version without the pagination.

⁶ There is apparently also a Center of Jewish Studies at the Heilongjiang Academy of Social Sciences, but not much is known about it and its work. This is regrettable because the Harbin Municipal Archives contain valuable materials from the Russian Jewish community, one of the major Jewish communities in China in the first decades of the 20th century.

⁷ For information at Beijing University I am indebted to Professor Chen Yiyi to whom I want to express my gratitude.

students have the opportunity to understand Jewish studies in a larger context. An expert on the Bible, Professor Chen's course on the scriptures is taught as a core course.

Under the able guidance of Professor Xu Xin, the Institute of Jewish Studies at Nanjing University has emerged as one of the major centres of Jewish studies in China. Founded in 1992, it offers both B.A. and graduate degrees. The institute was renamed the Diane and Guilford Glazer Institute of Jewish Studies after a generous donation made possible the construction of a new building, dedicated in 2006. Many projects are under way, both as M.A. theses and Ph.D. dissertations. They include a variety of important historical and religious topics, attesting to the stimulating leadership of the faculty, among them the function of synagogues, the German Reform movement, or Christianity's separation from Judaism.

The Center for Jewish Studies in Shanghai was established in 1988, before diplomatic relations took effect. Its dean is Professor Pan Guang and it is part of the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences. Like Nanjing, this is an active centre, engaged in research and publishing. Its research, dealing with a variety of topics, includes also extensive work on the Jewish refugees in Shanghai who were sheltered there during World War II. The centre sees its mission, in the words of Professor Pan Guang, as '...constructing a Chinese framework for... Jewish-Israel studies in China.'⁸

The Center for Judaic and Inter-Religious Studies at Shandong University was established in 2003 and is also a very active centre. Its director, Professor Fu Youde, has been guiding the excellent research and teaching programmes with impressive results. Its graduates have been accepted abroad at major universities and visiting scholars from abroad have found receptive audiences among the students.

The Institute of Jewish Studies at Henan University in Kaifeng was established one year earlier, in 2002. That such an institute should exist precisely in the city where the historic Jewish community once flourished for several hundred years since the 12th century, is certainly appropriate. The guiding light has been its director, Professor Zhang Qianhong, who is a prolific scholar. Aimed from the start at teaching and research, scholars abroad have been frequent lecturers and the institute's faculty lecture frequently at other Chinese universities. Although Ph.D. degrees are not granted, students can enrol in M.A. degrees. There is also an annual essay competition on a Jewish topic open to all university students. Much effort has been devoted in recent years to expanding the still modest library resources on Judaism.

The most recent centre, the Center of Judaic and Chinese Studies, was established in 2006 at Sichuan University. Its director is Professor Fu Xiaowei. The centre aims to clarify the

⁸ For more information on the Shanghai centre, consult its very informative website www.cjcs.oreg.cn

misreading and misrepresentation of Jews and Judaism that all too often occurs in popular books, which is pervasive among the public at large as well as university students. Its ambitious translating programme promises to make a major contribution to the availability of works in the Chinese language.⁹

A significant innovation in the past five years has been the annual workshop on the Holocaust. The workshops have attracted many graduate students from history departments. It is significant that by such means a wider student body can be reached beyond those majoring in Jewish studies.

Scholars active in the institutes and centres maintain a vigorous writing, translating, and publication schedule.¹⁰ Only a few works can be mentioned here. The journal *Jewish Studies* had been published annually since 2002, while *World History* also contains essays on Jewish issues. In addition to the journals are the important publications by Professor Chen Yiyi on the Bible and Old Testament.¹¹ Professor Fu Youde has a number of outstanding works on Jewish philosophy, including a translation of Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*.¹² Then there is Professor Xu Xin's path-breaking contribution, his *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, published in 1998 by the Shanghai People's Press. This work especially, translated from the English *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, is a major resource in Chinese.¹³ For obvious reasons Chinese readers are particularly interested in the historic Jewish community of Kaifeng and the modern Jews of Shanghai. Professor Pan Guang at the Shanghai institute has devoted attention to the latter in several publications in English as well as in Chinese.¹⁴ The institute at Sichuan University is planning an

⁹ Fu Xiaowei, 'Chinese View of Jews and Judaism and the Mission of the CJCS,' *Points East*, Vol. 25, no. 1 (March 2010), pp. 12-14.

¹⁰ A useful as well as critical bibliographic survey about the topics that have engaged Chinese scholars is Izabella Goikhman, *Juden in China, Diskurse und ihre Kontextualisierung*, (in German) (Berlin: Lit Verlag Dr. W. Hopf, 2007).

¹¹ For example, Chen Yiyi, *The Hebrew Bible: An Introduction Based on Textual and Archaeological Data (Till 586 B.C.E)*, (in Chinese) (Beijing: Kunlun Press, 2006).

¹² Among these are Fu Youde, *A History of Jewish Philosophy*, (Beijing: Renmin University Press, 2008), and *Essays on Jewish Philosophy and Religion*, (Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2007. (Both in Chinese)

¹³ This is not to neglect his important, Xu Xin, *A History of Jewish Culture*, (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2006). (Chinese)

¹⁴ Pan Guang and Jian Wang, *Jews in Shanghai Since the 1840s: An Oriental Page in the Annals of the Jewish Diaspora*, (in Chinese) (Beijing: Social Sciences Academy Press, 2002).

ambitious literature translating programme of Jewish fiction pioneered by Professor Fu Xiaowei's earlier translations from Isaac Bashevis Singer's (1904-1991) works, who was a Polish-born novelist writing in Yiddish.

The accomplishments in both countries as described in this brief survey are remarkable. If one believes, as I do, that one of our most important tasks is to foster understanding between peoples, no matter how remote, then this is exactly what is taking place. How fortunate are we that we can read some cherished literary works in the original or in translation; that we can learn one another's languages; that we can find out more about heroes and villains in our respective histories. If, as teachers, we can bequeath the sense of curiosity and wonder to our students, the curiosity that we ourselves felt when we first studied another culture, then we shall have accomplished our task. In Professor Lihong Song's apt words, 'Judaism is becoming more and more tangible and concrete, and I am increasingly curious, with my nose pressed to the glass looking in, to its colours, smells and breath.'¹⁵

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¹⁵ Lihong Song, 'Intellectual Autobiography,' lecture at Berkeley, *AAJR 2009 Workshop for Early Career Faculty in Jewish Studies*, 4 pp. Quoted by permission of author.