

<https://doi.org/10.25050/JDTREA.2022.2.1.163>

**Irene Eber, *Jews in China: Cultural Conversations, Changing Perceptions*.  
 Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020, Pp. 276, ISBN: 978-0-  
 271-09214-0, \$32.95(pbk)**

**Josh DANIELS**

Institute for Curriculum Services, USA

In her over five decades of academic activity, Irene Eber established herself as one of the preeminent scholars of East Asian studies, and an unmatched expert in the relationship between Jewish and Chinese civilization. This excellent collection of many of Eber's articles and papers paints a picture of the history of Jews and Judaism in China. The essays span discussions of the historical presence of Jews in China, as well as different kinds of exchange which resulted from the encounter between their respective cultures.

Eber divides Jewish settlement in China into two general waves. The earliest Jews in China arrived in the late eighth or early ninth century, most likely as traders who came to take advantage of the mercantile opportunities in the Song Dynasty capital of Chang'an. The first permanent community, however, was established centuries later in the city of Kaifeng. Working from three stelae whose inscriptions record the histories of the Kaifeng community, Eber surmises that the claim that these Jews originally came as cotton traders from India seems likely, dating their arrival to the twelfth or thirteenth century. They had an extant presence in the city up until the past century, which was documented largely by Christian missionaries. We are unfortunately left with little textual evidence, she says, given that the Kaifeng community over the course of centuries lost their mastery of the Hebrew language as well as any Torah scrolls which may have accompanied the earliest traders.

The second wave of Jews began to arrive after the Opium Wars opened up several cities in China to Western trade. Jews, first largely from Baghdad, came to cities like Shanghai via India to engage in the lucrative cotton trade after the city had been opened up to British commerce. As the nineteenth century wore on and persecution of Jews increased in Eastern Europe and Russia, Jews from those nations also found themselves fleeing as refugees to Shanghai to augment the new community. Unlike their medieval predecessors, whose transformation of Jewish identity is deeply explored by Eber in several of the essays, these Jews established communal organizations and had a continuous presence which lasted about 150 years.

Eber describes the difference between these two waves of arrivals in terms of what she calls the difference between "Chinese Jews" and "Jews in China." One dimension of this

difference has to do with changes in ritual practice. For instance, while certain dietary laws were kept by the first wave - evidenced by their being referred to as *tianjin jao*, “the sect that extracts the sinews” - there is no mention of a kosher slaughterer in the stela inscriptions. It is also unlikely, despite records indicating festival observances including Rosh Chodesh, Purim, and the Ninth of Av, that the calendar was kept accurately, as periodic adjustments need to be made to account for variances in the lunar year.

These changes in practice accompanied a gradual change in the nature of the Chinese Jews’ means of expressing their Jewish identity. Sometime around the fifteenth century, the Jewish identity of the early wave came to be expressed mainly as familial affiliation, as opposed to participation in a worldwide community of coreligionists. Part of a process of what Eber calls “sinification,” Chinese Jews adopted Chinese surnames and family structure. As was the case for their non-Jewish Chinese counterparts, extended family networks provided Jews with a Jewish identity rooted in the identity of a paternal progenitor of their particular lineage. If the paternal ancestor was Jewish, so was the whole lineage. This runs contrary to the traditional view, in which Jewish identity is exclusively passed along matrilineally. They also fulfilled the role that communal organizations did for the later Jewish communities in China, and indeed Jewish communities elsewhere in the world – they provided financial aid, maintained their own individual cemeteries, and largely determined where members lived.

By morphing Jewish identity into a manner of identifying with the patrilineal line, the early community became “Chinese Jews” to the extent that they began to identify as Jews in a distinctly Chinese manner. The “Jews in China” – those who came to China from the nineteenth century onwards – instead continued to express their identities in the ways that were familiar to them back in Europe, that is, through communal ritual participation.

Eber’s collection is aptly placed in the series *Dmityonot: Jews and the Cultural Imagination*. She skillfully shows that much of the impetus for the decades of translation work she surveys which rendered the modern and traditional literatures of Jewish and Chinese culture accessible by readers from the other arises from the perception, sometimes distorted, of each culture by the other. Her first example draws on the translations of classical Chinese literature into modern Hebrew at the end of the twentieth century. Eber surmises that the increased demand for Chinese literature in general, and philosophical texts in particular, stemmed from the increased exposure to depictions of China in Israeli media. An interest in topics perceived as “mystical” or “spiritual” – concepts commonly associated with Eastern religions – of Jews worldwide and Israel in particular over the past 30 years or so is well-documented, helping explain the demand for translations of works like the *Daode Jing*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Liezi* found their way into modern Hebrew in the 1980’s and 1990’s. As Eber notes, however, some of these works only exist partially in translation and, with few exceptions, suffer from the drawback of being translated from intermediate languages.

One of the most striking examples of perception driving translation work which Eber discusses is the burgeoning interest in Yiddish literature by Chinese revolutionary thinkers in the early twentieth century. Eber notes that Chinese interest in Jewish literature began in earnest after 1917, when China's literary revolution took off and attempted a reevaluation of vernacular literature over the older, written literary language. The emergence of Yiddish literature was seen as a similar trend in the Jewish world by Chinese readers, and as such it was felt that this could be a guiding example for how the same could be achieved in Chinese. In addition to a change in the form of Chinese literature, the revolutionaries advocated for a change in the content. They attempted to create a literature which reflected universal human concerns, common across international borders, and thus they argued that the new Chinese literature should turn to themes which were being expressed in foreign writings. The revolutionaries focused on depictions and critique of social oppression, which was advanced in revolutionary literature magazines. Eber notes that an entire issue of one of the major such periodicals, *Short Story Magazine*, was devoted to showcasing "the literature of oppressed peoples," and included the work of figures from Poland and Hungary.

Even given the openness of Chinese literary revolutionaries to oppressed peoples generally, Yiddish literature was of particular interest to them. Unlike the Polish or Hungarian struggles for national identity and independence, Yiddish authors lamented a "society oppressed by its own tradition and a hostile environment," as well as one "faced with the necessity for change and modernization in order to survive." This, together with the perception of Yiddish as the new vernacular language ascendant over outdated and ossified Hebrew, led to the translation of myriad works of Yiddish social criticism, poetry, and drama. Figures as well-known as Sholem Aleichem were featured among Chinese translators' work. Eber points out however, that despite all this interest, that most if not all of the translations of these works were from an intermediate language, usually English or Esperanto. The most important detail about the Chinese revolutionary authors' attitudes towards Yiddish is that it is largely mistaken. While modern Yiddish literature did flourish from the middle of the nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth, it by no means replaced Hebrew as a literary language. This underscores the role that Jewish literature played in the cultural imagination of the Chinese authors and how it helped to drive their own goals of revolutionizing the Chinese language.

The rest of Eber's essays elaborate on this theme in different contexts of translation, ranging from the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Chinese by the Peking Translating Committee, Martin Buber's translation of the *Daode Jing* and the influence of Chinese thought on many of his major works, to the travelog of the Jewish poet Meylekh Ravitch as he traveled across China, to Chinese translations of Kafka's *The Castle*. In each of these contexts, Eber unpacks how the changing perceptions of Chinese and Jewish cultures by each other motivated the work of translation and produced translated works whose ideological and intellectual purposes brought out different aspects of the

original work, or even distorted them entirely. Despite the difficulty posed for readers who lack the Chinese knowledge to fully appreciate the brilliance (or lack thereof) of the many translation choices she highlights, Eber's collection of essays is an excellent addition to the *Dmityonot* series, contributing a trove of work detailing how changing representations of Judaism determined the relationship between Jewish and Chinese literature in translation.