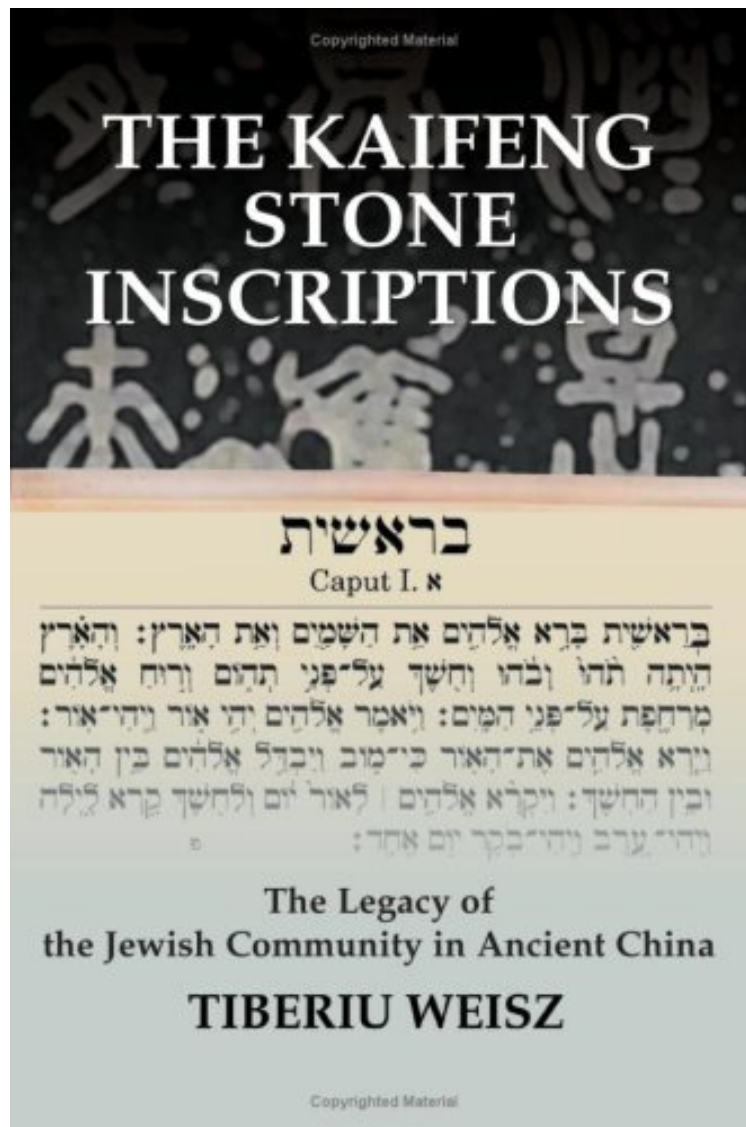


The Kaifeng Stone Inscriptions: The Legacy of the Jewish Community in Ancient China

Tiberiu Weisz

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Tiberiu Weisz : The Kaifeng Stone Inscriptions: The Legacy of the Jewish Community in Ancient China before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Kaifeng Stone Inscriptions: The Legacy of the Jewish Community in Ancient China:

8 of 9 people found the following review helpful. Not only for scholarsBy CustomerDisparities in the translation of

even one word can mark a profound difference. Both Anglican Bishop Charles White (author of "Chinese Jews," 1942, republished in 1966) and scholar Donald Leslie (author of "The Chinese Jewish Community, a Summary," 1971) translated one of the sentences in the 1489 carved stele of the Kaifeng Jews as a comment from the Emperor to the Jewish settlers, "You have come to our China." Tiberiu Weisz disagrees, stating that the Chinese character "gui" does not mean "come," but rather "to return." This would shift meaning considerably, moving from the historical possibility that the Jews had arrived in China at that particular historic time (in the Song Dynasty (960-1279), to the possibility that they had arrived long before and were now returning. (Page 11). This is just one of the many interesting annotations in a book intended for scholars that proves equally intriguing to laymen. The task of translating the 1489, 1512 and 1663 carved inscriptions on the stone steles in Kaifeng, China is daunting. The language is 15th century Chinese vernacular which means no punctuation and obscure references and annotations. The material is often irreconcilable with accounts of missionaries and travelers. Inconsistencies abound. Facts can not be substantiated. Most important, the inscriptions appear to lack any trace of Judaism. Weisz's background, his fluency in Chinese and Hebrew as well as his college teaching of Hebrew History and Chinese Religion, provides him with a new and unique approach to the subject. According to Weisz, when the Anglican Bishop originally transcribed and translated the steles into English (in the early 20th century) the results were limited by White's lack of a deeper knowledge of Judaism. This also limited the work of those who built their conclusions based on his work. Weisz notes: "Bishop White's translation highlighted Confucian and, to some extent, Christian concepts, whereas, my version identified biblical references" The slim, 119 page book, is divided into two sections, followed by a glossary and bibliography. The first 56 pages deal with the inscriptions themselves, a line by line annotated translation. The second historically fascinating half covers what the inscriptions tell us, with specific sections on Sacrifice and Prayers; Levites and Cohanim; the Temple; History --including Early Encounters, the Han Dynasty and the Song Court -- and ultimate Assimilation. For anyone interested in the Kaifeng Jews, this is a MUST.---

Beverly Friend, Executive Director, China Judaic Studies Assn. [...]

6 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Full of unsupported conclusions

By Jim R. McClanahan

The first full-scale attempt to translate the Kaifeng stone inscriptions was done in French by the Jesuit Father Jerme Tobar in his *Inscriptions juives de K'ai-fong-fou* (1900). The second was done in English by Canadian Anglican Bishop William Charles White in the second volume of his three part work *Chinese Jews: A Complication of Matters Relating to the Jews of K'ai-Feng Fu* (1942). It was based on a punctuated version of the original Classical Chinese script prepared by Chen Yuan in *A Study of the Kaifeng Israelites* (1923). The author of the present work, Tiberiu Weisz, a retired Chinese language teacher and business consultant, felt it was time for a new translation when he found that his own reading of the inscriptions differed greatly from that of White. When finished, he noticed: "The text left an unmistakable flavor of biblical Judaism. Historical events could be corroborated with biblical literature, and entire ancient Jewish prayers were reproduced in Chinese" (p. xiii). Then began the daunting task of writing a new history for the Jews based off of this reading. Weisz poured through historical and biblical sources trying "to cover huge gaps in [the Jews'] history" (p. xiv). He started with an important audience between the Jews and an unnamed Song Dynasty emperor mentioned in the 1489 inscription. According to White, the emperor is recorded as saying: "You have come to our China; reverence and preserve the customs of your ancestors, and hand them down at Pien-Liang (Kaifeng)" (White, *Chinese Jews*, Part II, p. 11). Weisz, however, read the emperor's words as: "You have returned..." (p. 11). He claims this discrepancy comes from a past misreading of the Chinese character 'gui' that all other scholars have since followed. In the course of his research, he could find no instance in the Chinese language where gui was used as "come." Considering the Jews were non-Chinese, Weisz supports his reading by citing a speech given by the future founder of the Ming Dynasty Zhu Yuanzhang (1328-1398) to non-Chinese tribes who formally lived under Chinese rule, but had fallen under the jurisdiction of Barbarian overlords. In the speech, Zhu states: "Those who return (gui) will find everlasting peace in China, and those who oppose us will find calamity beyond the borders" (Ibid). So if this usage of gui is to be believed, then the emperor had to have known about Jewish settlements prior to the Song Dynasty (960-1279). Working off of this assumption, Weisz worked his way back through history, noting possible allusions to Jews in ancient Chinese records along the way. Weisz's efforts have produced a small, but heavily annotated book. The work itself is split up into two parts. The first part (The Inscriptions) is comprised of general overviews of the inscriptions followed by a word-for word translation of each one. Whereas White presented his translation in paragraph form, Weisz mirrored the flow of the Classical Chinese text by placing the passages in stanza form. The second part (What Do the Inscriptions Tell Us?) is broken up into five sections: Sacrifice and Prayers, Levites and Cohanim, The Temple, History, and Assimilation. The history section itself is broken up into three parts: Early Encounters, The Han Dynasty, and At the Song Court. It is in the second half of the book where the author interprets the information in a Jewish context and puts forth his own theories regarding the origin, early history, and liturgy of the community. As for the origin and early history, he lays out the following story: After Jews returned from Babylonian exile in the 5th century, disenchanting Levites and Kohanim-priests parted with the biblical leader Ezra and settled in Northwestern India. Sometime prior to 108 BCE, these Jews had migrated to an area of Central Asia bordering China and were spotted by the Chinese General Li Guangli, who was sent to expand the Han Dynasty Empire. Centuries later, the Jews were expelled from China proper during the Great Anti-

Buddhist Persecution (845-46), where they lived in the region of Ningxia. Weisz believes they later returned to China during the Song Dynasty when its second emperor, Taizong (r. 976-997), sent out a decree seeking the wisdom of foreign scholars. A scholar wishing to write a history based on the inscriptions alone has to account for several problems. The first deals primarily with scribal mistakes. For instance, the 1489 inscription states the first Jewish settlers consisted of 70 clans. The inscription only lists 14 surnames with 3 duplicates, so 70 (qi shi) is taken to be a mistake for 17 (shi qi) (Leslie, *Survival of the Chinese Jews*, p. 23 n. 1). This has led to past miscalculations in the community's original size (Pollack, *Mandarins, Jews, and Missionaries*, pp. 317-18). The second problem concerns anachronisms that stem from what a former professor of mine described as "telescopic history," meaning stuff that happened in the past was compressed and mixed with things that happened in the future. The aforementioned 70 families are cast as being fully sinicized with Chinese surnames upon their arrival. Prior researchers have noted it is far more likely that the community took on Chinese surnames during the Yuan or early Ming period after having begun the assimilation process into Chinese society (Leslie, p. 27). A third problem involves inconsistencies between the inscriptions themselves. For example, the three main inscriptions give different times for the Jews' entry into China. The 1489 stone cites the Song (960-1279 CE), the 1512 stone cites the Han (206 BCE-220 CE), and the 1663A stone cites the Zhou Dynasty (1045-256 BCE) (White, Part II, p. 11). It is evident that the Jews pushed their arrival further and further back into history with each successive stone to cast an aura of antiquity in a land obsessed with ancient lineages (Pollack, p. 259). As pointed out by Irwin Berg in a review for the *Kulanu Newsletter* (2008), the biggest obstacle that faces Weisz's translation is the fact that he did not figure the Jewish community's many religious documents--Torah, Haggadah, prayer books, etc.--in his research. This is a major stumble in this reviewer's humble opinion because these documents hold clues to from when and where the Jews possibly originated. The language of the documents, Judaeo-Persian (Persian written in Hebrew script), is an offshoot of New Persian. As Donald Leslie explains, "New Persian was the lingua franca of most of the foreign traders in India and the Chinese coast for several hundred years. Similar scraps of Judaeo-Persian in Hebrew script are found in Southern India, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and around the Red Sea and Persian Gulf" (Leslie, p. 18). Judeo-Persian itself first developed on Central Asian trade routes during the 8th century (Csato, *Linguistic Convergence and Areal Diffusion: Case Studies From Iranian, Semitic, and Turkic*, p. 72). So how is it that the Jews came to speak a language which developed outside of China almost 600 years after their proposed initial settlement? And if they had truly arrived during the Han, why would they later adopt the language and then continue to use it in their liturgy up through the 19th century? Although he makes a few references to some Persian words from the inscriptions, (pp. 12 n. 44, 42 n. 164, and 59) Weisz doesn't attempt to answer these questions. Needless to say, this glaring omission in research greatly affects the accuracy of his thesis. Keeping all of this in mind, it is possible to refute many of the claims that the author makes. I will only discuss one of these for lack of space. His theory that the Jews migrated to Central Asia during the 2nd century BCE rests on a mention of Semitic-looking people in ancient Chinese records. Weisz quotes from Jian Bozan's modern work *History of Qin and Han Dynasties* (1988): "It [the western regions] reached the outskirts of the remote Ferghana, beyond the Pamir Plateau. Originally that was the last undisturbed place from the upheavals in...Northwest Central Asia and inhabited by people with 'deep eyes, big noses and (distinguished) headdress.' Their principal livelihood was growing grapes, grazing and raising horses..." (p. 70). He believes the people's description of "deep eyes, big noses and (distinguished) headdress" proves a "small community" of Jews was discovered by the Han Dynasty General Li Guangli during his invasion of Central Asia in 108 BCE. Weisz notes that the Chinese character used to designate the headdress can mean either 'turban' or 'coiffure' (Ibid, p. 69). When viewed from a Jewish context, he reasons the turban could be the miter-diadem combo worn by the Jewish Kohen-Priests (Exodus 28:36-38), or the coiffure could be the ear-locks worn by ancient Jews (Lev. 19:27). The biggest problem I have with this claim is that he automatically assumes that the people were Jews. If he had at least tried to do a comparative study between Jews and the various tribes of Central Asia from this time and found more evidence to support his claim, his theory would be stronger. But as it stands, his only evidence is their appearance. The quoted passage is rather vague, and there is nothing particular about it that signals the people were Jewish. Given the time and place, the people could have easily been Persians, Sogdians, or even Indians for all we know. The *Records of the Grand Historian* (c. 100 BCE), a history of the Han Dynasty, reveals who these people actually were: "Da Yuan (Ferghana) lies southwest of the territory of the Xiongnu, some 10,000 li directly west of China. The people are settled on the land, plowing the fields and growing rice and wheat. They also make wine out of grapes. The region has many fine horses ... The men all have deep-set eyes and profuse beards and whiskers ... [After a Han envoy was killed there, the Han emperor] dispatched general Li Guangli with a force of 6,000 horsemen recruited from the dependent states, as well as 20,000 or 30,000 young men of bad reputation rounded up from the provinces and kingdoms, to launch an attack on Da Yuan This was in the first year of the [Taichu] era (104 BCE)" (Sima, *Records of the Grand Historian: Han Dynasty II*, pp. 233 and 246). Da Yuan is considered by scholars to refer to the Ferghana Valley, which crosses Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Alexander the Great is known to have founded the city of Alexandria Eschate (Alexandria the furthest) in Ferghana where the modern city of Khojend stands during the 4th century BCE. It boasted a Greek population (Hill, *Through the Jade Gate to Rome*, pp. 167-169). William Woodthorpe Tarn believed Da Yuan's 70 walled cities were built by

the Greeks since Alexander filled Bactria with such structures, and his enemies, the Achaemenids, only showed themselves capable of building low mudbrick ramparts in that area (Tarn, *The Greeks in Bactria and India*, pp. 475-476). Edwin G. Pulleyblank, on the other hand, believed they were Tuharans who had supplanted the Greeks (Hill, p. 170). If this information is considered, three things become clear. First, Li Guangli's push into Ferghana happened in 104 BCE, not 108 BCE. Second, the "small community" that Weisz speaks of was actually a large territory of 70 walled cities comprised of hundreds of thousands of individuals. Third, these people were in fact not Jewish, but some other ethnic extraction. By far, the most serious problem is Weisz was fully aware that his source was referring to non-Jewish people. Jian's book actually reads: "Da Yuan was located beyond the Pamir Plateau, [it] originally was the last reserve in Northwest Central Asia for those Greeks with `deep-set eyes, big noses and profuse beards'...." (Jian, p. 198). As can be seen, Weisz actually based his theory about the Jewish settlement in Central Asia on a mistranslation. The text mentions nothing about a "headdress," only "profuse beards." It would seem he confused the character of xu (beard) with something else, possibly jiu (coiffure). Normally, mistranslating a character would be forgivable because even experts are entitled to make a mistake every once in a while. But the fact remains that Weisz underhandedly misquoted a source just so it would support his thesis. For more, see the paper "Kaifeng Jews: Why their ancestors came to China - Part I" by Jim R. McClanahan. 5 of 6 people found the following review helpful. The Sloppiness Sinks this study. By Eric Maroney. Tiberiu Weisz has written an interesting book about the stone inscriptions of the Kaifeng Jews that is not without some problems, both at the level of terminology, and his wider theories of the Jewish dispersion. There is no doubt that a fresh English translation of the inscriptions is necessary. Weisz provides one, and shows us some of the problems with White's translation of some forty years ago. Weisz's main contention is that the Kaifeng Jews were not recent arrivals in China, but returning. He rests this theory on one particular word in one of the stone inscriptions. This is fine in and of itself, but it has two problems. First, one must trust that the stone inscriptions are pure history, and not the pious fictions of the Kaifeng Jewish community. Second, you must posit a much earlier date for the entry of Jews into China, and there is simply no evidence of this at all. To this end, Weisz uses the term "Israelite" a great deal, a specific term denoting the tribal era of the history of Israel as a people. Here, he implies that Jews entered China when they were Israelites, a conclusion with no compelling evidence. He even confuses terms a great deal, using the word "Jew" and "Israelite" in the same sentence. In religious Judaism this is often the same thing, but in scholarly studies, the two terms connote two very different sets of peoples at different times. Unfortunately, there just isn't enough rigor in this study to be convincing. The good points that Weisz makes get overshadowed by his baseless theories and sloppy use of terminology.

In 1489, 1512 and then again in 1663, the Jews community in China pooled their resources to inscribe the story of the Kaifeng Temple in stone. Their purpose was to remind future generations about the Israelite religion, about their prayers, what and when to pray, and to perpetuate the history and significance of the Temple. At the time of the engraving, the Israelites had lived intermittently under Chinese administration for over 1500 years, adhering to the biblical rituals and customs. Part I contains the new annotated translation and traces the original Chinese text to biblical sources. Part II examines the origin of the community, their first encounter with the Chinese, their dedication to the Temple and their life as Jews in the sea of Chinese culture. Incorporated are many Hebrew sources and original Chinese works that are translated here for the first time which highlight the cross-cultural currents that challenged the Israelites in China. It takes the reader into uncharted territory of the Jews in ancient China.

About the Author. Tiberiu Weisz has over 30 years of business and academic experience in Chinese Studies and in China. He is fluent in Chinese and Hebrew, taught Hebrew History and Chinese Religion at local colleges. He has published articles and translated a book into Chinese. Currently he is teaching advanced Chinese. He lives with his wife and family in Minnesota.