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Subject: Fwd: Tablet 27.03.2014 The Chinese Believe That the Jews Control America. Is That a Good Thing?

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Subject: Tablet 27.03.2014 The Chinese Believe That the Jews Control America. Is That a Good Thing?

The Chinese Believe That the Jews Control America. Is That a Good Thing?

Prof. Xu Xin's Institute of Jewish and Israel Studies at Nanjing University seeks to establish Chinese scholarship on Jews
By [Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore](#) | March 27, 2014 12:00 AM



“Do the Jews Really Control America?” asked one Chinese newsweekly headline in 2009. The factoids doled out in such articles and in books about Jews in China—for example: “The world’s wealth is in Americans’ pockets; Americans are in Jews’ pockets”—would rightly be seen to be alarming in other contexts. But in China, where Jews are widely perceived as clever and accomplished, they are meant as compliments. Scan the shelves in any bookstore in China and you are likely to find best-selling self-help books based on Jewish knowledge. Most focus on how to make cash. Titles range from *101 Money Earning Secrets From Jews’ Notebooks* to *Learn To Make Money With the Jews*.

The Chinese recognize, and embrace, common characteristics between their culture and Jewish culture. Both races have a large diaspora spread across the globe. Both place emphasis on family, tradition, and education. Both boast civilizations that date back thousands of years. In Shanghai, I am often told with nods of approval that I must be intelligent, savvy, and quick-witted, simply because of my ethnicity. While it is true that the Chinese I’ve met are fascinated by—rather than fear—the Jews, these assertions make me deeply uncomfortable.

So, it was with a degree of apprehension that I recently traveled to the former imperial capital of Nanjing to spend the day with Prof. Xu Xin, director of the Diane and Guilford Glazer Institute of Jewish and Israel Studies at Nanjing University. The first thing Xu did was suggest lunch. As we sat down to a steaming tofu hot pot, he woefully conceded that many Chinese believe the Jews to be “smart, rich, and very cunning.” Just before my visit to Nanjing, the Chinese tycoon Chen Guangbiao made international headlines by publicly announcing his ambitions to buy the *New York Times* and later the *Wall Street Journal*. In a TV interview he [explained](#) ^[1] that he would be an ideal newspaper magnate because “I am very good at working with Jews”—who, he said, controlled the media.

Yet Chen presumably, like the majority of Chinese, has few concrete ideas about the reality of Jewish history or practices. Xu, the 65-year-old pioneer of Jewish studies in China, is campaigning to change that—and, by doing so, challenging entrenched stereotypes. The diminutive professor has made it his life’s pursuit to present a more nuanced view of the Jewish race and religion to his countrymen: one based on scholarship rather than rumor. To this end he launched the Institute of Jewish Studies in 1992, the first of its kind in Chinese higher education.

Today there are more than half a dozen similar programs across the country, many started by Xu’s former students. In Nanjing, Judaica courses—from Ancient Jewish History to Rabbinic Literature to Holocaust Studies—have proved popular. According to Xu one of the best-attended courses in the institute is Jewish Culture and World Civilization, in which 18 topics are covered in a 20-week semester. It attracts roughly 200 undergraduate students per term. Survey of Judaism and Study of Monotheism, both graduate courses, have enrollments of around 30 to 40.

Strung up around the unheated classrooms of the institute are dated photographs of Jerusalem and fuzzy black-and-white images of the death camps. Bookshelves boast Chinese translations of the Haggadah and Xu’s own books, including his best-selling *A History of Jewish Culture*. In a glass cabinet sit various teaching tools: embroidered kippas, bronze menorahs, and polished shofars. Thankfully, there is not a “get rich quick” manual in sight.

The institute is funded largely by foreign Jewish donors, who have their own interest in seeing portrayals of Judaism propagated in a more balanced way. “Hatred and intolerance are bred in ignorance,” the executive director of the China Judaic Studies Association, Beverly Friend, a patron of the institute, wrote to me in an email. “The institute provides knowledge.”

Xu was first introduced to Beverly Friend and her husband Jim in the mid-1980s, when the latter was teaching English at Nanjing University; Jim was the first Jew Xu had ever met. In 1986 Xu traveled to America for the first time, where he stayed with the Friends in Chicago. The trip was revelatory: Not only did he learn how to use a fork but he started attending Shabbat dinners and other Jewish celebrations. It convinced him that China might be able to learn something from the West—and in particular, from Jews.

This conviction was rooted in his own country’s recent resurfacing from a traumatic past. Like many teenagers at the time, Xu was a Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution, one of the zealous youths

who helped destroy much of China's own heritage. "I participated in the Cultural Revolution. We all went through the Great Leap Forward," Xu said, referring to Mao's push for industrialization that helped lead to a famine in which more than 30 million perished. "We started to feel from the bottom heart there is something wrong with society. China needed new ideas."

As China began to open up again to the West, Xu read Western literature, which had been banned under Mao. He'd soon realized that his favorite writers—J.D. Salinger, Saul Bellow, Philip Roth—were Jewish (today, many of their works are translated into Chinese and studied by college and graduate students in China). As psychology became popular, Xu delved into Freud; he also held immense respect for Henry Kissinger, who orchestrated the start of American relations with China. Like Salinger, Bellow, Freud, and the godfather of Communism Karl Marx, Kissinger was a Jew. "He was a refugee and an immigrant to the U.S., but within 20 years he had made his way to become secretary of State. How come?" Xu wondered.

The search for an answer to that question became Xu's mission. He returned from two years in the United States, and a formative official trip to Israel in 1988, convinced that Judaism could provide lessons for a young and hungry new China. "Once we learned, we wanted to teach," he said. Xu set up university classes, attended international seminars, and translated the *Encyclopedia Judaica* into Chinese. Eventually, once diplomatic relations between Israel and China were established in 1992, he founded the Institute of Jewish Studies.

If Xu had the sense of discovering something new, the Jews were not exactly strangers to China. Jews likely first arrived in China via the Silk Road almost 1,000 years ago. In the mid-19th century, following the Opium Wars, Iraqi Jews settled alongside British traders in Shanghai, where many made their fortunes. China later accepted Jews taking flight from Russia, who made their homes in the bleak snowy landscapes of northern Harbin. In World War II, tens of thousands of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany flooded Shanghai: Most left for Australia, America, or Israel when the Communists gained power in 1949.

Chinese state media has long championed positive portrayals of the Jews, in part because Judaism, with its ethnically based and non-evangelical nature, has proved less of a threat to the Communist Party than other foreign monotheistic religions, like Christianity or Islam. (China's own Jewish population, the [Kaifeng Jews](#) ^[2], have being almost completely assimilated.) High-profile Jewish figures in the Chinese Communist Party's own history include [Sidney Rittenberg](#) ^[3], the first American citizen to join the party, and the journalist Israel Epstein, whose funeral was attended by former Chinese President Hu Jintao and former Premier Wen Jiabao.

[Continue reading: 'I wanted to know why'](#) ^[4]

China's relationship to the Jewish state is more complicated. In 1990, Xu was invited to participate in a closed meeting of Chinese intellectuals, military personnel, and party officials, which posed the question: Should China initiate formal diplomatic relations with Israel? The answer was no—but times have changed. Today China's authoritarian government is invested heavily in the oil states, including Iran and Iraq. But it is also increasingly [forming ties with Israel](#) ^[5]. In 2013, Benjamin Netanyahu traveled to China, the first official visit by an Israeli prime minister in six years. Many believe the trip signals growing Chinese interest in Israeli technologies, as China attempts to transform itself from a manufacturing to an innovation-and-knowledge-based economy.

"China is learning more technology from Israel, trading more," said Xu, who was in the process of creating a specific course on Israel to reflect this change. "China finally decided to establish former diplomatic relations with Israel [in 1992] because they believed that being friendly with Jews is good for China's development and to change China's image internationally." If China's global clout does not yet match its status as one of the world's fastest-growing economies, developing closer ties with Israel and the Jewish Diaspora may be a relatively easy way to widen China's influence, or so some Chinese leaders seem to believe.

Support of Israel also underpins American patronage of the institute. “Bringing China and the Jewish people and specifically the Jewish state, Israel, closer together has merit,” said John Fishel, a consultant for the Glazer Foundation. “There are increasing exchanges between Israel and China on a number of levels including academic, cultural, and economic. The growth of both Jewish Studies and Israel Studies in Chinese universities seems to be creating opportunities for the knowledge base to grow.”

Yet on a human level, at least, the geopolitical rationale for greater Chinese-Jewish understanding may pale next to the role that the Jews play in China’s own search to rediscover itself. When Liu Nanyang first studied history of the Middle East at Nanjing University he became interested in how Israel had managed to survive. “There were many Middle East wars, but Israel was still there,” he said. “So, I wanted to know why.”

Now Liu, 28, is a doctoral student conducting research into the Jewish roots of Christianity (he spent one year in Jerusalem as part of his studies). As we sat in the university, clutching paper cups of hot green tea to keep us warm, Liu earnestly rattled off similarities between Jewish and Chinese culture. “Even if some people believe in Buddhism or Daoism or Christianity, they live their everyday life according to Confucianism,” he expounded. “The Jewish people believe in [different] denominations like reform or liberal or even nonreligious. But usually their lives follow traditional ideas.”

Then he paused. “Maybe I should add a difference,” he said cautiously. “Chinese culture is not so tolerant.”

Liu comes from a family of farmers. They are also Christians. In China, where religion is perceived as a threat to the ruling Communist Party, Christians are routinely persecuted and worship is allowed only in officially sanctioned churches. “Any ideas or philosophy or cultures are controlled. In the past it was controlled by the imperial emperors and now by the party,” said Liu. “But Jewish people don’t have such a strong political power. So, [Judaism] has more pluralism.”

It is this space and allowance—even encouragement—for debate that has helped Jews make cultural and scientific strides in the world, Liu said he believed: “In the Talmud, for one question they have different answers. But in China we have [either] correct or incorrect. If someone has different opinions, it is difficult to live.”

“Do you know how many Chinese Nobel Prize winners there are?” asked Liu, not waiting for an answer. He didn’t have to. The Chinese have long articulated ambitions to win more Nobel prizes. (No Chinese-born scientist, for example, has ever been awarded a Nobel Prize for work in the mainland.) “The Jewish population is very small but the Chinese is big,” Liu said. “Compare that, if you will. When we know that the Jewish people are so successful in both science and human studies, we feel that maybe we can learn from them.”

As the afternoon drew to a close, I mentioned Chen Guangbiao, the billionaire who declared he is good at working with Jews. Liu was exasperated by such reductions.

“In their minds, Jewish people control the banks in America. It means for them that Jewish people control the world, controls the governments,” he railed, shaking his hands in disbelief. “I feel it’s a joke.”

Prof. Xu was more understanding. “Stereotypes are overemphasized. But in China this is positive,” he said calmly. After all, he added: “Had the Jews achieved nothing, no Chinese would be interested in them.”

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