

# “Bright Moon Rises Over Heavenly Mountain:” Love and Torah Scrolls in Kaifeng

*Irene Eber*

HARRY AND I MEET ONCE A WEEK IN JERUSALEM'S

little corner café on Ben Yehuda and King George streets. He drinks Coca Cola and I drink coffee. Harry is an overseas student from Kaifeng; his Chinese name is Haoli. His family name is Zhao. Already at our first meeting he was quick to point out the importance of the Zhao lineage in Kaifeng Jewish life. Actually, I knew something about the Zhaos, but did not let on, not wanting to embarrass Harry by telling him something that he ought to know. I am an English teacher at the university, but after meeting Harry I became interested in the Jewish community in China and began reading about it. It was not long before I came across the Zhao family. And what a family it was. But from Harry I learned even more about the amazing Zhaos.

The name Haoli, of course, would be mispronounced in Jerusalem, so Haoli became Harry with its faint resemblance to the Chinese name and its suggested meaning of “good reason,” as he explained to me. He is studying Jewish history and literature, but decided he also wanted to improve his English. He has no problems speaking and reading, but writing is a different matter. And that is how our friendship began; Harry writes a brief composition each week or so, I read it and correct it, and we then meet and discuss specific problems.

It is a beautiful spring day, neither too hot nor too cold. From where we sit we can see young and old people hurrying up and down Ben Yehuda Street, paying no attention to the spring magic. Still, every so often a couple strolls by hand in hand, drinking in the spring air and smiling at the beautiful

day. I am struck, as I often am, by how solitary most people seem when instead they should be responding to one another. I smile at them, yet they never seem to return my smile.

Harry is a good-looking fellow, always well dressed. Today he is wearing a light green shirt that contrasts nicely with his dark skin. People eye him surreptitiously while we wait for our Coke and coffee. He is about twenty-three or twenty-four years old, with a degree from Henan University, a provincial university, which, astonishingly, has an institute of Judaic Studies. Attending some of the courses at the institute not only awakened his curiosity about his own past, it also made him decide to spend some time at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in order to study Jewish history more systematically.

“I want to tell you a story,” says Harry slowly, “that has come down in our family for generations even if it is not about our family, the Zhaos. It is about another Kaifeng family with whom we were somehow closely associated. It is a long story because I must also give you some background and it will probably take several meetings. The story was well known in the community then and later. It was told to me by my grandfather who probably heard it from his grandfather and so back for many centuries and generations. The story might not have happened the way I tell it, having been altered in different ways over the centuries. Also, I no longer know exactly which parts I am adding to make it clearer and which parts come from Grandfather.”

“Oh, don't worry about that,” I interrupt Harry, “I can always ask you questions. But please remember, we have to go on with our English compositions. We must not neglect them.”

“Of course not. I will continue to write compositions, if I may, about Kaifeng and my family. In this way we can talk about both English and the story.”

## Harry's Story

“It all began a long time ago, maybe 900 years or more when Jews came to China and did not leave. Oh, traders had come already earlier, but they apparently did not remain. Their traces can no longer be found except in necrology figures, you know, the figurines we Chinese were fond of burying with the dead. But those Jews who arrived in the 12th century in

Kaifeng and perhaps also elsewhere remained in China. Why did they remain? Because of war. They were merchants, who most likely were reluctant to take their livelihood into a war zone. Kaifeng was then a lovely and well kept city. After all, it was the imperial capital where the emperor had his court until 1126. Why not remain there until times become calmer and marauding soldiers no longer endanger roads? Meanwhile a house could be rented and the goods which they had brought along to sell stored in the house.

“How many merchants came, you ask, and how did they arrive? No one really knows. There could have been a dozen or more and most came overland from Persia and by sea from India. But not all would have come at the same time. Small groups of men came until outright war made travel to North China precarious if not impossible. For the last stretch of their journey, down the Bian River to Kaifeng, they would have taken passage on a boat, their cargo safely stowed aboard. And as the boat sailed downriver toward Kaifeng, their wonder, without question, grew out of bounds.

“Hah, you don't know what ancient Kaifeng and its countryside was like! Green fields on all sides, busy roadways along the majestic river; people bringing goods on wagons to the city to sell, on shoulder poles, on donkeys. And then the tall city gates with camel caravans pouring through the entrance. Now splendid houses could be seen along both river banks; inns with people seated at tables, eating and drinking. And here, as we approach the city, the roads are even more crowded: high officials on horseback, lowly coolies in short jackets are carrying heavy loads on shoulder poles and look! there is a beautiful girl in a secluded garden on a swing. A different world glides by the boat on which the Jews stood, transfixed by wonder at this opulent city.”

Harry's voice had grown distant and his face dreamy as he conjured up for me a forgotten time and faraway place. He seemed to actually see the mighty river with its many boats and the oarsmen rowing them downstream while the weary travelers looked unbelievably at the rich panorama. He smiles as if reading my thoughts. “You wonder how I know all this? Well, some years ago I saw a famous scroll about Kaifeng in the Beijing museum. It was painted hundreds of years ago. Just imagine, my city...The scenes captured by the painter have remained as if imprinted on my mind.”

Harry continues, “Here's the iron pagoda, so called not because it was made of iron, but because its glazed bricks were and still are the color of iron. Some pagodas were more than one hundred meters in height and the travelers wonder how people knew to build these without the tall towers collapsing. Many of the numerous inns lining the river front also had several stories and were a wonder to behold. Kaifeng was a large city with a teeming population. How many people, you ask. I really don't know. Half a million, probably more. And then, as our forefathers discovered later, there was the National University. Just imagine, more than nine hundred years ago there existed in Kaifeng a university where thousands of students studied. Did my family, the Zhaos, come already then, or later? I really don't know and neither did Grandfather. All he could tell me was that apparently small groups of Jews continued to arrive in the city; some remained in Kaifeng, others returned to Persia or India, wherever they had come from. I suppose it depended on how business went — whether they could buy and sell, and make a living. Some stayed for longer periods of time, some left after a few months.

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There would never be enough Jewish women...  
this explains why today we Jews are Chinese.

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“You must remember, though Grandfather mentioned this only in passing, that none of the men brought wives or mothers. No women. Life was lonely without women. These men were used to having their women-folk around. Some women came much later, either men returned to fetch women they were perhaps engaged to, or had a relative bring a woman. But, and this is important, these men were Sephardim, meaning that they could marry several wives and were used to having more than one wife, just like well-to-do Chinese. There would never be enough Jewish women. Therefore, those who remained in Kaifeng before long took Chinese secondary wives as well as concubines. In accordance with Chinese customs, the offspring of the secondary wives had the same privileges as the children of primary wives. By the way, this explains why today we Jews are Chinese.”

Harry takes the last swallow of his Coke. He summons the waiter and orders a cup of tea and I realize that my coffee has grown quite cold while I became absorbed in Harry's story. Then he continues, "The great catastrophe occurred when tribes from Central Asia invaded North China. They destroyed large parts of Kaifeng, and the imperial court and its high officials fled to Hangzhou in the South. Amazingly, though, these tribes halted their destruction and adopted Chinese ways, especially the drinking of tea as a social custom, as an intellectual pastime, and also as medicine."

Harry takes his backpack from his chair back and rummages through it. "Hah, here it is," he says, pulling out a sheaf of papers. "The history of tea drinking in China brings our story around to the Jews!"

## Kaifeng's Jews and the Tea Trade

Submitted by Harry

*Tea drinking began among upper-class elites many centuries ago. But by the eighth century it had spread to the lower classes and even the peasants had begun to drink tea. In time, a literary gathering would not be complete unless it included tea drinking. People developed expertise, not only in the tea used, but also in the water used in preparing it, and the cups from which it was drunk. Then the experts discovered that tea also flourished in the wet climate of south China. In this way tea trade began; southern wholesalers would buy up tea at village markets in the south and ship it to northern wholesalers who moved the tea on to other markets in the north.*

*The conquering tribes from Central Asia were not initially tea drinkers themselves, but when they saw how the Chinese cherished this drink, they took to it in no time. Thousands of new tea drinkers were added to the initial group and the Central Asian tea market developed rapidly.*

*New traders were in demand and this is how the Kaifeng Jews became participants in a lucrative and rapidly growing mercantile activity. Just how connections between southern and northern tradesmen were established is not known. But there is no question that Jews, who already by the 12th century lived in Ningbo, in the south, dealt in tea. After 1126, when the court moved to Hangzhou, Kaifeng Jews might have come there as well and, having heard of Jews in Ningbo, made connections with them.*

*Trade relations between families were no doubt quickly established, for, in the final analysis, it was easier to do business with people who spoke the same or similar language.*

*But the tea trade did not remain merely a private enterprise; it became official as well when the Chinese government created the Tea-Horse Office to supervise trading horses for tea. The reason for such an office was simple. The Chinese army needed horses for dealing with the nomads on the northwestern border. But Chinese peasants did not raise horses, not wanting to use arable land for pasture. Horses, therefore, had to be obtained in trade, and tea was a desirable commodity. Jewish participation in this vital aspect of economic life cannot be overlooked.*

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At our next meeting, I compliment Harry on his knowledge of Chinese and Kaifeng history despite the scarcity of books at times of political upheavals and repressions.

Harry looks pleased. “Still, what is hard to explain is the spectacular rise in status of several Jewish families. Certainly, once some Jewish families became highly successful and prosperous merchants, their growing prosperity allowed them to educate their sons, who, after several generations, began to participate in the examination system. By means of degrees thus obtained, some families gradually moved out of the merchant status, their sons became officials, and some married women from prestigious families. My personal theory is that the Jews of Kaifeng became wealthy from the tea trade, which made great use of transportation by boat along the river. Our family, the Zhaos, rose to prominence not only in the Jewish community, but also in the Chinese. But how was it done?”

“Yes, how?” I interrupt him. “Whenever I read something about the Kaifeng Jewish community, I wonder why the Chinese ruling powers would want to bestow high honors on one Jewish family or another.”

“I cannot tell you much about other families aside from the Zhaos and what I heard from my grandfather. He, in turn, heard it all from his grandfather. The Zhao history, you must remember, was perpetuated not from father to son, but from grandfather to grandson.”

“But why? Isn't that strange?” I wonder. “Why skip the sons? And what about the daughters?”

“Forget about daughters,” says Harry regretfully. “They marry into the husband’s side and become part of their new families. They are lost to their original families. And this business of skipping sons, the traditional belief was that ancestral memory is perpetuated by skipping a generation. Sons forget, grandchildren want to remember.”

Without my elaborating, Harry must have realized how much I admired his historical memory and he went on, with considerable pride. “Some of us made it a point not to forget. We did not talk about it, but often secretly kept old letters hidden. Sometimes we wrote in diaries and then hid

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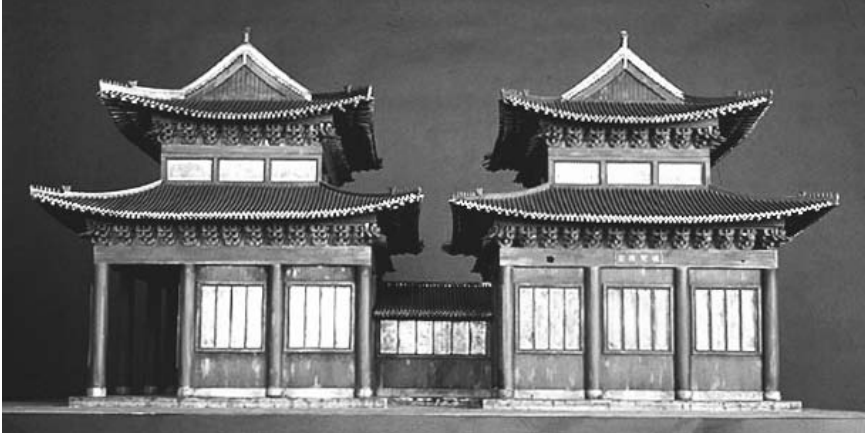
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the diaries, digging them out again many years later. Unfortunately, grave-stones and cemeteries cannot be hidden and most have disappeared. A few badly ruined gravestones from ancient times are still here and there. But let us not dwell on what is no longer and can never be again. Let me tell you the story of the Zhao family.”

## Harry’s Story

“If members of my family came already in the 12th century and if they participated in the construction of the first synagogue, no mention of their name remains anywhere. But that would have been impossible anyway because they did not as yet have a Chinese name. The surname Zhao was bestowed on a man only early in the 15th century and indicates that this family must have been already some time in China. The man thus honored served in the army as did foreigners and especially Muslims who had served in the army in the previous, Muslim, dynasty.

“But why honor a foreigner not only with a Chinese surname but with a first name as well, Cheng, meaning honest, or Honest Zhao? The reason was that he had rendered a singular service of some sort — there is no record of the specifics and we cannot know what it was — to the prince who resided in Kaifeng. It would seem to me that he and his



A model of the Kaifeng synagogue at the Diaspora Museum, Tel Aviv.

family had already become sufficiently respectable and wealthy to be singled out for this honor.

“This, however, is only the beginning and would not be all that remarkable, for in the course of time other Jewish families received Chinese surnames. Where the Zhaos are different is because of the prominent positions a number of Zhaos achieved in Chinese society. I cannot mention all of them, of course, but several will suffice to show you the importance of two elements: wealth and education. By this I mean that in order to rise in Chinese society a man had to pass the imperial examinations and achieve the third degree, the *jinshi*, perhaps comparable to a doctorate. To educate sons required wealth, proper clothing, and the like. A *jinshi*'s life style had to reflect his station. How was wealth for this acquired? I believe that it began with the tea trade and was developed further in marriage connections and land acquisitions, lifting the family out of the merchant class.

“Take the case of Zhao Yingcheng, who lived in the 1630s, had a *jinshi* degree and served as an official in Fujian province. He was well known for his successful work in suppressing bandits. He was also famous for his educational efforts, building a lecture hall and supporting teachers to instruct students. After the death of a parent he had to return to Kaifeng for the three-year mourning period, a Chinese tradition that high-placed Kaifeng Jews adopted and that earned them great respect from the Chinese population. Thereafter he received another important appointment



in Hubei province. A younger brother, Zhao Yingdou, was also a successful official. He served as a district magistrate in Kunming, Yunnan province. Like his brother he established educational institutions, and both brothers wrote books on interpreting scriptures, although the books have been lost to history.

“I am proud of these 17th-century forebears,” Harry said thoughtfully. “I feel that they have bequeathed to me a legacy and a responsibility. As yet I am not entirely sure what this responsibility is, but here in Jerusalem I hope to find some clarity.”

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Harry's earnestness deeply impresses me. I am moved by his sense of belonging, indeed pride, as part of a family, a sense that we often lack. I am sure the Zhao family saga does not end in the Middle Ages. There must have been other important people in the 18th and 19th centuries, but I decide not to ask him just now. We are both silent, reflecting on bygone days and their meaning for the present. In some way, I vaguely feel, I too have become involved in the Kaifeng story and must assume a responsibility. But what exactly should that be?

When Harry and I next meet, he hands me another essay. “As promised,” he says smiling, “one more essay about Kaifeng, if you can bear it.” I glance at the title, “The Kaifeng Synagogues.” “There were several?” I ask.

“No, just one,” he says. “But there were floods and other problems and it had to be rebuilt several times. Actually, though a catastrophe each time, it was also fortunate. Because whenever the synagogue was destroyed and rebuilt, an inscription on stone recorded the event. These stones have been preserved.

“And even today, Chinese Jews still remember that they are Jews, and even if the rest of the world's Jews don't think that their Judaism is really genuine, it is very meaningful to them. This tells us that there was some kind of communal life and some kind of leadership. Otherwise these people would have assumed new identities. And just look at me today, ten centuries later, Zhao Haoli in Jerusalem and a Jew.” Harry took a swallow from his cola and smiled at me. “Isn't it amazing? One thousand years later, there are still Jews in China. But now I must run,” and he was gone.

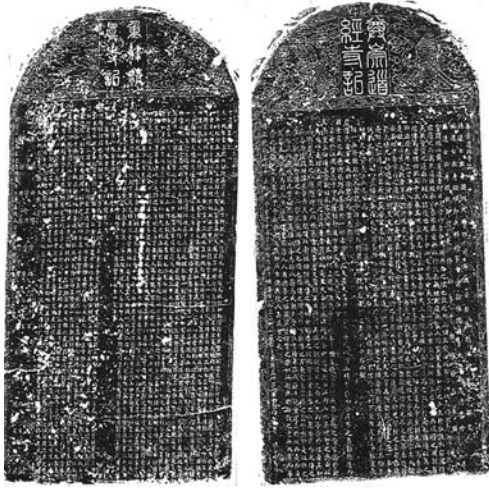
Yes, I think, we must really understand better why these Jews did not disappear. Referring always to the European Jewish experience, as scholars tend to do, is no help. Other processes of accommodation are at work here.

How is it that they look Chinese, speak Chinese, feel perfectly at home in China, yet have not forgotten that they are also Jewish? Now that I think of it, I wonder whether we have been looking at the wrong places for answers for Jewish persistence in China. Could the answer be not in Judaism, but in the Chinese environment, in Chinese society?

When we next meet, I have gone over Harry's essay and found that with each composition his English has gotten better. He made fewer spelling mistakes, his sentence structure was much improved, and his vocabulary was richer. Of course, in part this may also be due to the subject matter, I think. No question, he liked writing about Kaifeng.

## The Kaifeng Synagogues

Submitted by Harry



Ink rubbings of the 1489 stele (left) and 1512 stele (right)

*Although Jews came as traders to China probably as early as the 7th or 8th century, there is no evidence that they built a synagogue then, or that they remained in China. It was different with those who arrived later, during the Northern Song dynasty which ruled China from the 10th to the 12th century, with its capital at Kaifeng. We can make an intelligent guess at the date, probably around 1120, based on two facts: first, the roads were*

*still safe from northern pillaging warriors, and second, the Jews would have had to remember how to build a synagogue, so not much more than 40 years could have passed.*

*Inscriptions on several preserved steles tell us something about the construction and reconstruction of the synagogue over a number of centuries. There were several reasons for erecting a stone with an inscription:*

(1) to explain to anyone reading the inscription the background of the Jewish religion and how it has been transmitted to the present day, (2) to describe how the synagogue was reconstructed after the disastrous flood of 1461 which destroyed all but the foundation, and (3) to record the names of the Kaifeng Jews who contributed funds and were active in the rebuilding of the synagogue.

The earliest stele has an inscription on two sides, one from 1489 and one from 1512. According to the 1489 inscription, the first synagogue was built in 1163. The 1489 inscription is of special interest. It reads: "Abraham founded the religion according to the inscription and he was of the 19th generation from Adam Pan Gu." But who was this Pan Gu combined here with Adam? Chinese tradition tells us that the world was created from parts of his body. Therefore, like with Adam the world began with Pan Gu. Isn't it wonderful the way Chinese and Jewish history are here intertwined?

The name Zhao appears here for the first time, specifically, Zhao Ying of Ningbo, who brought a copy of the scriptures, called "Scriptures of the Way" from Ningbo. Precisely who this Zhao was and what his relationship to the Kaifeng Zhaos was, are unknown. Also, one cannot be certain that this "Scriptures of the Way" was a scroll of the Torah. Therefore, the inscription presents a number of tantalizing questions. The reverse inscription on the same stele from 1512 repeats and amplifies some aspects of the background of the Jewish religion and mentions some additional names.

Another stele from 1663 is no longer extant. However, the texts have been preserved on rubbings and the obverse inscription is of special interest. According to it, the synagogue suffered grievously in the 1642 flood. The synagogue was severely damaged and many of the precious scrolls of the Torah as well as prayer books floated down the Bian River.

It is at this point that the Zhao family emerges to prominence. Zhao Chengji, a major in the imperial army and a Kaifeng native, came to the rescue. With the help of his younger brother, Zhao Yingdou, the synagogue was rebuilt and some of the Torah scrolls were rescued and repaired.

The last stele was erected in 1679 to commemorate the building of the Zhao family archway on the synagogue precincts, probably next to the Zhao ancestral hall. The inscription is obliterated in many places, but still allows the reader to learn something about the important contribution

*made by the Zhaos to the preservation of the synagogue. The three steles were erected on synagogue grounds and passersby when entering the forecourt could read about the religion that had come from far away, yet was so much like other beliefs in the Middle Kingdom.*

*It is to the credit of the Jewish community leaders that, though far from the mainstream of other Jewish communities, they considered it important to preserve their history in stone. More than that, they gave to posterity snatches of how in the course of time they understood their Jewish belief.*

*While calamities like the floods destroyed the synagogue, it is because of the vicissitudes that befell the sanctuary that we can know today a little about the history of the Jewish community. And they told us a little, even if not enough, about several of the important Kaifeng Jewish families, especially the Zhaos in the 17th century. Not to be forgotten is the fact that as recently as the 1920s the recognized leader of the Kaifeng remnant was Zhao Yunzhong, my grandfather, the one whose story I still want to tell.*

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“And how are you today? Meeting your friend?” the waitress Aliza greets me like an old acquaintance. Harry has not yet arrived and there being no other customers we chat a little. “My friend's name is Harry and he is a most remarkable young man, a Chinese Jew, from a long line of important families. There is so much we don't know about Jews in faraway places,” I tell Aliza.

“You are so right, the other day I waited on a Jew from India, Cochin, I think he said, and he told me that Jews have been there for more than a thousand years. Now that they have come home — he actually said “home,” meaning *Eretz Yisrael* — they live on a kibbutz in the south. I would very much like to visit India. My nephew went there after army service, you should hear the stories he tells.”

Just then Harry walks through the door. I am again taken by how handsome he is. Quite tall and slim, his eyes sparkling and intelligent, he cuts an elegant figure in his light blue shirt and tan trousers. “Ah, Harry,” I greet him, “good to see you. The usual?”

We settle at one of the tables and I hand him his corrected essay.

“This is excellent work. You must have done much research to collect the information.”

“The inscriptions on the two steles I copied while still at home. The others were no longer available in Kaifeng.”

I sigh. “There are so many questions with no answers. We really don't know what happened between the 18th and 19th centuries. What was the community like during those years? What ultimately happened to the Torah scrolls after the floods?”

“You are quite right to raise these questions,” says Harry. “But no calamities, no records. The first we hear again of the community is when the Western missionaries come to visit. It is from them that we know that the synagogue fell into disrepair and finally disappeared by 1866. And it is to these missionaries that the Jews sold the Torah scrolls, or perhaps gave them away, thinking that the missionaries were Jews.

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“Some years ago, when I was in New York,” continues Harry, “I went to the American Bible Society Library because I knew they had a Kaifeng Torah. When the librarian brought it out to me, tears came to my eyes. This was the first time in my life that I saw a remnant of my heritage. It was very emotional and the librarian, who was not even Jewish, understood.

“But now I must finally tell you the beautiful love story my grandfather told me. I call it “Bright Moon Rises Over Heavenly Mountain” because that is what my grandfather called it. The title is the first line of a poem by Li Bai, an 8th century romantic poet, whose poetry Grandfather often quoted. I guess he was rather a romantic too. No one seems to remember the story and today I am its custodian. Someday I will tell it to my grandson. But meanwhile I give it to you for safekeeping.”

## Harry's Story

“During one of the floods, the great catastrophes that happened in Kaifeng, the Bian River destroyed large parts of the city including the synagogue. The holy books and the scrolls of the Torah were swept away

by the flood and many of the people fled to the north side of the raging river. There they wandered about, looking at the waters that covered houses, gardens, and fields and worried what will become of them.

“Fortunately, not many people lost their lives,’ Grandfather told me, ‘but the loss of the Torah scrolls was too grim for words. After the waters receded and the people returned to their homes to assess the damage, their grief over the loss of the scrolls knew no bounds. Did they send messengers to other Jewish communities in Ningxia or Ningbo with news of the disaster? Did Jewish communities elsewhere receive the news from merchants who came their way? We no longer know such details. What is significant is that Ningbo’s Jews apparently decided to send a scroll of the Torah to Kaifeng.’

“Here Grandfather always paused and looked at me meaningfully. ‘A delegation of several important men was assembled and a son of one of these was chosen to carry the scroll down the street to the synagogue once they reached Kaifeng. But why is the sending of the scroll significant?’ asked Grandfather. The first time he told me this story I did not know the answer, of course, and he had to answer his own question. ‘It is significant,’ said Grandfather, ‘because it tells us that Ningbo at one time had a number of Torah scrolls and the people could spare one.’ More than likely, they had a synagogue where the scrolls were kept, and they must have also had close connections, perhaps business, perhaps familial, with the Kaifeng Jews.

“After several weeks of travel on foot and by boat the delegation reached Kaifeng,’ Grandfather continued. ‘When their boat docked, word quickly reached the elders of the Jewish community that guests from afar had arrived. A small group of people rushed down to the river to greet the visitors. How great was their pleasure when they saw that their kinsmen from Ningbo had arrived. Indescribable their surprise and joy when they realized that their kinsmen had come to bring them a scroll of the Torah. An orderly column soon formed of local people and visitors and in the first row walked the handsome youth from Ningbo with the precious scroll in the metal case. There was a sweet smile on his round face with its even features. He held his head high, proud to be part of this important mission.’

“Men and even women poured out of their houses to watch the slowly moving procession. Young girls shyly peeked through curtained win-

dows and half opened doors. It was a sight never seen before and the procession halted every few steps, indeed so often that by the time they came to Earth Market Street, which led to the synagogue, they seemed to have walked for a very long time. Somewhere along the road, for only a minute, the eyes of one girl of the Jin family met those of the youth carrying the scroll. But that minute was enough to seal their fate, though they didn't know it at the time.' Grandfather liked to embellish his stories," said Harry, looking at me.

"Both at first were simply curious, and these are the thoughts that might have crossed their minds,' my grandfather used to muse. I wonder what his name is and who his family might be, thought the girl, Jin Aihua. He must come from an important Ningbo family, otherwise the community elders would not have entrusted him to carry the Torah. And then, he looks just like the man I dreamt of marrying, tall, proud, and handsome like King David. Gao Xian, the young man, thought, she cannot be more than fifteen years old, not yet married, for sure, and so beautiful. How can I find out her name? I remember the street, we'll be here a few weeks, if only I could see her one more time.

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"A few days passed and somehow Gao Xian managed to sneak into the Jin family garden. It was a wonderful garden with rare vegetation, flowers, and large trees. There were hills and ponds and even a rock grotto. One would not have expected such a large garden in the middle of the city even then. A little stream among the flowers drew his attention and Gao Xian wondered where it came from, where the source of the water was. Not far, under a weeping willow by the stream, he saw the lonely figure of a girl. It was she.

"How can I describe this first meeting?' asked Grandfather. 'It was like magic. Seeing each other close by they wanted to touch each other's hands, face, but held back, lest someone spot them. Now that Gao Xian saw her so near, she was even more beautiful with a graceful body barely indicated under her loose summer gown.' What would they have talked

about? Here Grandfather smiled wistfully. 'It has been a long time since I was a young man and courted your grandmother,' he said. 'Besides, times have changed. What is important, being practical Chinese, they agreed that as soon as Gao Xian got home, he would ask his father to send a go-between to Kaifeng, to the Jin family, and offer a bride price. If all went well they might be married in a few months' time. How hard it was to part. They might not see one another again before he had to leave.' Here, Grandfather, who loved poetry and knew many poems by heart, quoted one by the famous Du Fu about the impossibility of the morning star meeting the evening star:

*For friends to meet in life*

*Is like the meeting of morning and evening stars.*

"Perhaps that evening or the next, Aihua decided to confide her secret to her mother and enlist her help. A good time would be at night before they went to sleep. Aihua slept at her mother's feet as was customary for the eldest daughter so she would be able to help the older woman if she wanted to relieve herself or had trouble falling asleep. That night she begged her mother to intercede on her behalf with her father to treat the envoy courteously when he came and to accept the bride price without haggling. Her mother readily agreed to put in a good word for her and Aihua was relieved to have her support. When she heard her mother's even breathing, she got up quietly and went to the window to watch the full moon. If only she could catch a cloud and join her beloved,' Grandfather said, this time embellishing his story with a line from one of Li Bai's famous poem, "A Song of Lu Mountain":

*Far away I watch the angels riding colored clouds,*

*Toward heaven's Jade City.*

"Some days went by until Aihua's mother found an opportunity to timidly inform her husband. Suddenly the sky fell in, the earth opened up, and all Aihua's dreams were shattered, blown away by evil winds. Aihua was standing outside the door, but she clearly heard her father's every angry word. He shouted at her mother that he would never receive the Ningbo envoy because Aihua was already betrothed. He had received the bride price for her and the groom was his business partner's eldest son, whose second wife Aihua would become.

"Poor Aihua. What to do now? She did not want to be a second wife.



She did not care about her father's business partner. No, she wanted Gao Xian. No one else. There was only one way out: she would drown herself in the well as countless maidens had done before her who had not wanted to marry the man chosen by their parents. Yes, she would rather die than marry someone she did not love.

“I don't really know,” said Grandfather, ‘how word of the rejection of his suit reached Gao Xian, but Aihua's father must have gotten in touch with him before he left Kaifeng. In any event, he was gone and Aihua no longer smiled or even joked with her girlfriends. But then a strange thing happened.

“After some weeks, a new bean curd vender made his appearance in Kaifeng streets, loudly praising his wares and inviting customers to buy his bean curd. It was early autumn and still warm enough to keep windows open. When Aihua heard the vender's sing-song she stopped in her daily chores: this was her beloved's voice. She could not be mistaken. Looking down into the street, she saw a ragged man with a shoulder pole and a large straw hat. And then he lifted up his face and her heart stopped. Yes, it was Gao Xian, but what was he doing here disguised as a bean curd vender?

“To make a long story short, somehow the two managed to meet and Gao Xian told Aihua of his plan. She must disguise herself as a boy and he would pretend to be a rich merchant. They would run away and travel north together where no one knew them and there live as man and wife. They would leave in three days' time, before daybreak, but when people were already about. And so it was done. The two disappeared and were never heard of again.

“Loud weeping was heard in the Jin house in the morning when Aihua was nowhere seen. Old Jin shouted at his wife that it was all her fault that her daughter was gone, that she was too permissive. In town it was rumored that Aihua was kidnapped and that Old Jin refused to pay the ransom. Many weeks passed and when no trace of the girl was found, people gradually forgot the whole matter.’ Here Grandfather always sighed audibly as if he were telling of events that happened only a short time ago.

“Then,’ he continued, ‘some years passed and new rumors were brought by traveling tradesmen, even from faraway market towns. A new Chinese tea merchant had appeared, they said. He was not only extraor-

dinarly successful, he was also very rich. Traded at the various markets along the Liao and lived in a huge mansion in Shengyang. Some thought that he was Jewish and had received permission to build a sanctuary. Others had heard that he contributed untold strings of cash toward the building of a sanctuary in faraway Samarkand.

“Had anyone ever seen him? Of course, they said, a handsome man with a beautiful wife and four sons. And what was his name, some asked. The merchants usually scratched their head and muttered something about not remembering. They all agreed, however, that he was rich and that he owned nearly all the tea shops in several market towns.’

“Grandfather usually finished telling his story here,” said Harry, “but once he turned to me and said something I have never forgotten. ‘Harry,’ he said, ‘I would like to think that Gao Xian's father, after hearing about Jin Aihua, quite possibly said to him, “You have met your true love. This happens maybe but once in a lifetime and is a great gift. Most people marry for convenience or for money. Rarely do they marry for love. Do not neglect this love and live with regret until the end of your days. Find Jin Aihua, marry her, and go to a place where nobody knows you. You have my blessing.” And that is the reason,’ Grandfather continued, ‘I think the rich tea merchant was really Gao Xian, though no one may have remembered his name.’”

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I look at Harry's dreamy face and see the young teenager sitting across from the distinguished looking gentleman, his grandfather, learning the lesson of life. And then I realize that Harry, by telling me this story about Kaifeng's Jews, Torah scrolls, and love, had now handed to me the obligation to pass the story on to others.

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