

JEWISH COMMUNITY OF KAIFENG: FROM THE ORIGINS TO DECLINE

Meng Tianxiang

*Belarusian State University, Independence av., 4, Minsk, Belarus,
mengtianxiang99@gmail.com*

This article examines the history of the Kaifeng Jewish community from its settlement during the Northern Song Dynasty to its eventual dissolution in the 19th century. The study analyzes the factors contributing to the community's decline. The author argues that their assimilation was driven by a combination of state policies – such as mandatory intermarriage and the assignment of Han surnames during the Ming Dynasty – and catastrophic events, specifically the Yellow River floods. Furthermore, the author highlights how economic isolation resulting from the "Sea Ban" policy severed ties with other Jewish communities, leading to the cessation of religious practice after the death of the last rabbi. The paper concludes that the community did not merely fade, but underwent an irreversible process of sinicization and loss of institutional identity.

Keywords: Kaifeng; Jewish community; China; sinicization; ethnic integration; assimilation.

ЕВРЕЙСКАЯ ОБЩИНА КАЙФЭНА: ОТ СОЗДАНИЯ ДО УПАДКА

Мэн Тяньсян

*Белорусский государственный университет, пр. Независимости, 4, г. Минск,
Беларусь, mengtianxiang99@gmail.com*

В статье рассматривается история еврейской общины Кайфэна с момента ее поселения во времена династии Северная Сун до окончательного распада в XIX в. В работе анализируются факторы, способствовавшие упадку общины. Утверждается, что их ассимиляция была обусловлена сочетанием государственной политики, включая обязательные межэтнические браки и присвоение китайских фамилий в эпоху Мин, а также катастрофическими событиями, в частности наводнениями на реке Хуанхэ. Кроме того, автор подчеркивает, как экономическая изоляция, вызванная политикой «морского запрета», привела к разрыву внешних связей с другими еврейскими общинами и прекращению религиозной практики после смерти последнего раввина. Делается вывод, что исчезновение общины стало результатом необратимого процесса китаизации (синизации) и утраты институциональной идентичности.

Ключевые слова: Кайфэн, еврейская община; Китай; китаизация (синизация); этническая интеграция; ассимиляция.

In the 8th century, Arabs expanded eastward and occupied the Bukhara region of Uzbekistan, which had been settled by Jews in the 6th century. With

the development of China's commercial economy and the opening-up policy of the Tang Dynasty (618–907) at this time, many Jews moved east to settle in China, but they were mistaken for Muslims and called the “Blue Hat Huihui” [1]. The most famous of these, the Kaifeng Jews, were an entire Jewish community that moved from Bukhara in the late 10th century. Kaifeng was the capital of China's Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127) and an important commercial city in the world. At this time, the Chinese government generally adopted a tolerant policy towards the Jews, allowing them to maintain their religious beliefs and living customs [2, p.57]. In 1163, the first synagogue was built in Kaifeng. At that time, Kaifeng had already been occupied by the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234), but the Kaifeng Jewish community still used the Song's calendar system in the inscriptions on the synagogues [3, p.110-111]. Emperor of the Song Dynasty used the phrase “return to my China, abide by the customs of your ancestors, and stay in Kaifeng” to characterize the Jews who had settled in Kaifeng, expressing the acceptance of the Jews by the highest rulers of China at that time [4, p.176]. Later some Jews left Kaifeng for other Chinese regions because of war. There are more than ten cities with recorded footprints of Jewish activities [4, p.177–179].

During the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), the famous Italian traveler Marco Polo and the Moroccan envoy Ibn Battuta came to China and both mentioned Jews in China in their travelogues. Ibn Battuta wrote, “Hangzhou is a very beautiful city, and the second neighborhood of Hangzhou is inhabited by Jews... The number of people is great” [5]. This can be assumed that after the occupation of Kaifeng, the capital of the Northern Song Dynasty, by the Jin armies of the Jurchen people in 1127, some of the loyal Jews had fled southward with the Northern Song regime and lived in Hangzhou, the new capital of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279), and that some of the Jews continued to reside in Hangzhou during the Yuan Dynasty, following the fall of the Southern Song Dynasty by the Mongol Empire.

In 1279, the Kaifeng Synagogue was rebuilt [3, p.110-111]. However, the Yuan dynasty prohibited Jews from practicing kosher and circumcision and forced them to eat Mongolian food. In terms of ethnic policy, the Jews, along with other ethnic groups from West and Central Asia, were united as the Semu people. The official name “Hui Hui” (now known as the Hui in China) was adopted as the name for the Semu people [6, p.24].

During the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), the Kaifeng Jewish community reached its peak, comprising over 500 families with a population of approximately 5,000 people. This figure does not include Kaifeng Jews and their descendants who migrated to other regions of China [7, p.29]. But this is more a result of the policies at the time. Jews were granted seven Han surnames by the Ming emperors. In the early Ming dynasty, laws were enacted regarding

inter-ethnic marriages, forcing Jews and other minorities to marry Han Chinese. Many Kaifeng Jews also participated in the imperial examinations and entered China's administrative departments. According to the "Record of the Temple of Reverence for Daoist Scriptures" stele left by the Kaifeng Jews (made in 1512), their work was strictly in accordance with the traditional Chinese social order of "scholars, farmers, artisans, and merchants" [8, p.211]. This proves that they accepted the traditional Chinese understanding of professions. Furthermore, each time the Kaifeng synagogue was repaired, its architectural style gains more sinicization [3, p.112]. Therefore, although historically the Kaifeng Jewish community was the most numerous during the Ming dynasty, the Kaifeng Jews accelerated their sinicization by blood and culture [9, p.125].

The late Ming Dynasty was plagued by constant warfare. During the Qing dynasty (1636–1912), the Kaifeng Jewish community and synagogue, the predominantly Chinese Jewish community, were deeply affected by the two Yellow River floods of 1642 and 1841. Especially the Yellow River flood in 1642, coupled with the continuous warfare at the end of the Ming Dynasty, caused the population of the Kaifeng Jewish community to plummet to around 2,000. The Kaifeng synagogue collapsed, and many religious texts were lost. Although the Kaifeng synagogue was rebuilt in 1663 and some religious texts were recovered, only seven Jewish families remained in Kaifeng at that time [7, p.29]. The Kaifeng Jewish community never regained its former glory.

In 1850, with the death of the last Rabbi of the Kaifeng Jewish community, there was no longer anyone in the congregation who could recognize Hebrew, and there was an end to Jewish religious life and to the Jewish people's identity in their own right [10, p.114]. In 1850, when the London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews sent people to Kaifeng to investigate, they discovered that the Kaifeng Synagogue, located in the southwest corner of the Fire God Temple, resembled a Chinese temple and was in a state of disrepair. Many Jews living nearby, in order to survive, had begun dismantling the synagogue's wood and bricks to sell.

When American missionary W.A.P. Martin visited Kaifeng in 1866, the Kaifeng Synagogue was already in ruins [3, p. 113–114]. The abandonment of the Kaifeng synagogue also marks the end of the existence of the Kaifeng Jewish community. Around this time, Jews in Shanghai, the United Kingdom and the United State of America attempted to help the Jewish community in Kaifeng revive its religious traditions, but all efforts came to nothing [8, p. 202–205].

In addition, Jewish community of Kaifeng throughout its existence was also closely related to Kaifeng's economic development. Kaifeng was once an important city in China, especially during the Northern Song Dynasty when it

served as the capital and attracted Jewish immigrants. It was also a prosperous city during the Jin, Yuan, and Ming Dynasties. However, by the late Ming Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty, Kaifeng had lost its former glory because of wars and policies. By the late Qing Dynasty, its population making it merely a medium-sized city. The decline of the city naturally constrained the development of its residents, including many young people of the Kaifeng Jewish community who left to seek other opportunities. Slow economic development in Kaifeng led to increasing poverty and decline among the Kaifeng Jewish community, leaving them unable to rebuild their churches and maintain community development.

Another important reason of Kaifeng Jewish community declining was that the Sea ban policy since the Ming and Qing Dynasties severely limited Kaifeng's interaction with other countries, thus restricting religious exchanges between the Kaifeng Jewish community and other Jewish groups. This led to the death of the last rabbi in the Kaifeng Jewish community in 1850, leaving no successor. Religious ceremonies ceased, and the religious beliefs of the Kaifeng Jews gradually faded until they eventually disappeared.

As the environment changed and the years passed, these Jews gradually sinicized their religious beliefs and continued to intermarry, so that today there is almost no difference between their appearance and cultural traditions and those of the Han or Hui people in China. Nowadays, the People's Republic of China does not recognize them as an independent minority, and they had no properly functioning community institutions. Some descendants of Kaifeng Jews only have memories of Judaism within their families and in terms of self-identity, but lack institutional, religious, and cultural structures.

In conclusion, the Kaifeng Jewish community, established in the 10th century, ultimately dissolved through a combination of coercive integration policies, natural disasters, and economic isolation. Despite reaching its zenith during the Ming Dynasty with over 500 families, the community faced sinicization through state-mandated intermarriage, assignment of Han surnames, and participation in the imperial examination system. The Yellow River floods of 1642 and 1841 catastrophically reduced the population from 5,000 to merely seven families, destroying the synagogue and erasing religious knowledge. Compounding this, Kaifeng's economic decline and Ming-Qing's Sea Bans severed contact with global Jewish networks, preventing rabbinical succession. When the last rabbi died in 1850, religious practice ceased entirely. By the late 19th century, the synagogue lay in ruins, and communal identity had evaporated. Today, descendants possess only fragmented familial memories, unrecognized as a distinct minority – an epitaph for a community that vanished through passive, irreversible assimilation.

References

1. 蓝帽回回. 世纪中国 (Blue Hat Huihui. Century China) // 汉译《圣经》之考察 (Исследование китайских переводов Библии). URL: <http://www.godoor.net/text/shengjing/sjjj13.htm> (date of access: 12.11.2025).
2. 李湖. 中以关系: 历史与现状 (Lihu. Chian-Israeli Relations: History and Present Situation) // 国际政治研究 (International Politics Studies). 1993. № 4. P. 57–62.
3. 張倩紅. 歷史上的開封一賜樂業教清真寺 (Zhang Qianhong. The Jewish Synagogue in Ancient Kaifeng) // 二十一世紀 (Twenty-first Century). 1990. № 49. P. 110–114.
4. 潘光旦. 关于中国境内犹太人的若干历史问题 (Pan Guangdan. Some Historical Issues Concerning the Jews in China). 北京: 北京大学出版社 (Beijing: Peking University Press), 1983.
5. While A. Chinese Researches // Internet Archive [Electronic resource]. URL: <https://archive.org/details/chineseresearche00wyliuoft> (date of access: 28.11.2025).
6. Dillon M. China's Muslim Hui Community: Migration, Settlement and Sects. Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999.
7. 高亢. 来华犹太移民的历史记忆: 两种文明的交往 (Gao Kang. Historical Memories of Jewish Immigrants to China: Interactions Between Two Civilizations) // 安阳工学院学报 (Journal of Anyang Institute of Technology). 2023. Vol. 22. № 3. P. 28 – 32.
8. 江文汉. 中国古代基督教及开封犹太人 (Jiang Wenhan. Ancient Chinese Christianity and the Jews of Kaifeng). – 北京: 知识出版社 (Beijing: Knowledge Press), 1982.
9. Jiang Yonglin. The Mandate of Heaven and The Great Ming Code. – Washington: University of Washington Press, 2011.
10. 张倩红. 历史上的开封犹太社团 (Zhang Qianhong. The Kaifeng Jewish Community in History) // 企业观察家 (Business Observer). 2016. № 3. P. 113–115.