

An Imaginary Illustration of the Kaifeng Jewish Synagogue

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Many of the early Jesuit missionaries, who came to China between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, belonged to a highly educated class of Europeans. The western world owes much of its knowledge of China to their reports and letters. Their correspondence was partly published and circulated in various French editions during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a collection under the title of *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses*. Selections of these were translated into several other European languages.

Before venturing into our topic, it is necessary to clarify the tangle of the numerous French and Italian editions of this important historical source¹.

The first collection of Jesuit letters appeared under the title of *Lettres de quelques missionnaires de la Compagnie de Jésus, écrites de la Chine & des Indes orientales*, issued by Father LE GOBIEN in 1702².

This original version was reissued four times (in 1702, 1703, 1707, and 1717). Since 1703 it appeared under the definitive title of *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses des missions étrangères par quelques missionnaires de la Compagnie de Jésus*. In the course of the eighteenth century (1702—76) the series increased to a total of 34 volumes under different editors:

volumes I—XXVIII (1702—58), by P. Le Gobien;

volumes XXIX—XXXII (1773—74), by P. Nicolas Maréchal;

volumes XXXIII—XXXIV (1776).

A new French edition, issued by the ex-Jesuit, Yves Mathurin de Querboeuf, was published by J. G. Merigot le jeune, Libraire, Paris in 16 volumes (1780—83). The fourth edition of this collection appeared in 1829³.

The first two Italian translations were published in Venice under the title of *Lettere edificanti e curiose* in 1751 and 1755. Starting in 1825, two separate editions of *Scelta di lettere edificanti* (Selections from the *Lettres édifiantes*) began to appear in Milan, one series in six volumes, the other in eighteen volumes⁴. The six-volume edition is a translation of the French series, *Choix des lettres édifiantes*, Paris (second edition, 1824)⁵. Volume IV

¹ The present writer gratefully acknowledges his indebtedness to Father Joseph DEBERGNE, S. J., formerly Editor of the *Bulletin de l'Université l'Aurore* (Shanghai), now Archivist of the Jesuit archives at Chantilly, a Paris suburb. Father DEBERGNE generously traced the various French and Italian editions of the *Lettres édifiantes*; he kindly verified the biographical data pertaining to the Jesuit missionaries mentioned in this article and facts about the drawings of Father DOMENGE. The originals of those drawings are preserved at Chantilly (see note 9). Father DEBERGNE kindly furnished this information in two letters dated 2 and 10 September 1971.

² Carlos SOMMERVOGEL, *Bibliothèque de la Compagnie de Jésus*, vol. 3 (Bruxelles-Paris, 1892), col. 1514, entry: GOBIEN (LE). — Robert STREIT, *Bibliotheca missionum*, vol. 1 (Münster i. W., 1916), no. 750, p. 336.

³ STREIT, op. cit., p. 533—541.

⁴ The present writer was informed that the 18-volume series does not contain the illustration of the Kaifeng synagogue.

⁵ The first edition was published in 1808, the third edition in 1835.

of the six-volume Italian translation contains a hand-colored illustration (facing page 107) entitled "Sinagoga degli Ebrei cinesi" (Synagogue of the Chinese Jews). The illustration pertains to the Kaifeng synagogue. The Jesuits had learned of its existence first in 1605 through the Italian Father Matteo Ricci, S. J., after he received the visit of a Kaifeng Jew by the name of Ai T'ien¹¹.

In 1941, at Yenching University (Peking), the friend and colleague of the present writer, Professor George R. Loehr (Florence), kindly loaned his personal copy of the six-volume edition of the *Scelta di lettere edificanti*⁸ to have the above-mentioned illustration photographed. The illustration in this article was reproduced from a plate of that photograph.

We have a clear idea what the Kaifeng synagogue looked like from the drawings prepared by Father Jean Domenge, S. J., during his visit in 1721⁷, Father Joseph Brucker, S. J.⁸, made tracings of the originals and forwarded them from Paris⁹ to Father Jérôme Tobar, S. J.¹⁰, in Shanghai. Tobar reproduced them in his thorough study: *Inscriptions juives de K'ai-long-fou*¹¹, together with a detailed description of the synagogue and its furnishings.

Tobar also utilized an account prepared by the Anglican Bishop George Smith of Victoria (Hongkong) and the British medical missionary Dr. W. H. Medhurst, who sent two Chinese to Kaifeng in 1850—51 to investigate the status of the local Jewish community¹². The names of the two Chinese emissaries were Ch'iu T'ien-sheng¹² and Chiang Jung-chi¹³ 13.

The Chinese-style buildings extended from east to west through three courtyards with service buildings on both sides of the courts. The synagogue

⁸ Unfortunately, this rare work was lost in the course of World War II.

⁷ Born in France in 1666, died in 1735.

⁸ Born in 1845, spent many years in France, and died in Enghien (Belgium) in 1926.

⁹ The drawings of DOMENGE and other materials pertaining to the Kaifeng synagogue where then in the Bibliothèque du collège Ste. Geneviève in Paris. They are now preserved in the Archives of the Society of Jesus, Province of Paris, at Chantilly, a Paris suburb, in the Fonds Brotier, volume 123.

Actually, Abbé Gabriel BROTIER wrote a "Mémoire sur les Juifs établis en Chine" in 1770 based on the materials of DOMENGE and other Jesuit missionaries. It was first published in 1771. The present writer used the *Panthéon littéraire* edition of the *Lettres édifiantes*, vol. IV (Paris, 1843), p. 140—150.

Through the courtesy of Father DEHERGNE (see note 1), the archivist at Chantilly, the present writer received xerox copies of the original Jesuit materials pertaining to the Kaifeng Jews, contained in the Fonds Brotier. Those are somewhat more detailed than the description of Tobar.

¹⁰ Born in Spain in 1855, entered the Society of Jesus in 1878, reached China in 1880, and died in Shanghai in 1917.

¹¹ *Variétés sinologiques*, no. 17. Shanghai, 1st ed., 1900; 2nd unaltered edition, 1912, p. II and drawings I and II.

¹² *A narrative of a mission of inquiry to the Jewish Synagogue of K'ai-tung fu, on behalf of the London Society for promoting Christianity among Jews*. Shanghai, 1851. — Summarized in *The Chinese Repository*, Victoria, Hongkong, 20:7 (July 1851), p. 433—466.

At the time of the visit the synagogue had deteriorated and was partly in ruins.

¹³ Ch'iu had been educated by the Protestant Mission at Batavia, and was familiar with the English language. — Chiang was a Chinese teacher to the Protestant Mission at Shanghai, and a literary graduate of the fourth or lowest degree.

Quoted from: William Charles WHITE, *Chinese Jews*. 2nd ed., with an introd. by Cecil Roth, Toronto—New York, 1966 (1st ed., 1942), part I, p. 91.

[1] 艾田 [2] 邱天生 [3] 蔣榮基

proper was located in the central building at the end of the third courtyard. A terrace, 50 feet wide and 40 feet deep, enclosed by a marble balustrade, led to it. Four round wooden columns on stone bases carried the overhanging roof in front of the building, leaving an open front porch.

The architecture of the synagogue and most of the interior furnishings were Chinese in character and arrangement. Ch'iu and Chiang described it as follows¹⁴:

"The interior consists of three apartments before, and three behind, thrown into one large hall . . . The front series of apartments is provided on three sides with long varnished windows, having stone railings underneath; the back is surrounded with walls on three sides; the two together constitute a hall 80 feet deep and fifty feet wide¹⁵."

There is no similarity between the descriptions of Domenge (drawings I and II) and of the Chinese emissaries (Ch'iu and Chiang) on the one side, and, on the other side, of the unknown artist, who depicted the synagogue in the *Lettere edificanti*. The main differences are as follows:

Domenge drawings I and II

1. latticed and papered windows extending over the upper two-thirds of the whole front wall and half of the side walls
2. four rows of an undetermined number of round wooden columns on square stone bases through the length of the temple
3. Chinese table with incense burner and other Chinese ritual vessels
4. Chair of Moses on stone platform under double Chinese roof, with two side railings, open in the middle, between columns; cupola in the roof above the chair
5. triple Chinese arcade with Chinese inscription on Chinese table
6. platform with Holy Ark under double Chinese roof; two side tables under single roof each for ordinary scriptures
7. no seating facilities
8. two candles on Chinese table among ritual vessels (see no. 3); otherwise no lighting fixtures
9. many rectangular (horizontal and vertical) wooden tablets with Chinese inscriptions

Illustration by anonymous artist

1. square apertures near the ceiling on both sides in the middle of the temple building; presumably glassed
2. narrow and square pillars with triangular buttresses
3. missing
4. square platform with round table (on it two unidentified objects), surrounded by latticed balustrade; two steps lead to openings in the front and back
5. missing
6. Holy Ark built into the rear wall of the synagogue
7. two benches occupied by women on both sides of front center
8. two circular European-style chandeliers with flaming oil lamps attached to them
9. one hexagonal tablet with simulated Chinese inscription

The male apparel and headgear in the anonymous illustration are apparently based upon nineteenth-century clerical garb. Chinese conical peasant

¹⁴ *A narrative*, op. cit. (see note 12), p. 451—452.

¹⁵ TOBAR, *Var. Sinol.* no. 17, op. cit. (see note 11): in drawing I the size of the entire synagogue is given as circa 150 feet in width and 400 feet in depth; in drawing II the size of the synagogue building by itself is estimated at circa 40 feet in width and 60 feet in depth.

(straw?) hats of the three male figures in the left foreground are out of place. The men would probably have worn Chinese skull caps.

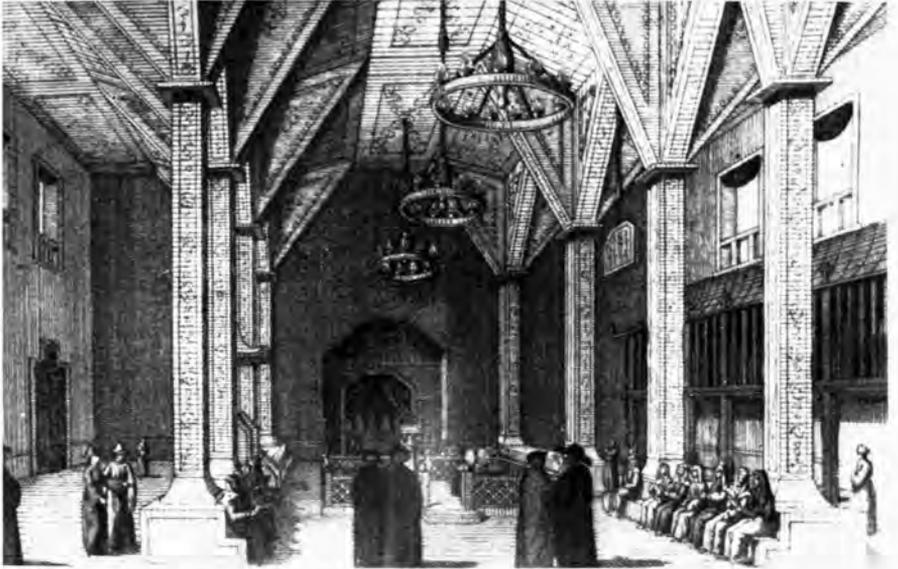
The women in the picture are attired in gowns of Middle Eastern type, with long scarves worn over their heads. The women are depicted seated on two opposite benches in the center of the synagogue; but it is even doubtful whether or not women had access to the main temple building.

We know from reports of the early Jesuits, as well as from later interviews of Kaifeng Jews and twentieth-century photographs taken of them, that they had lost most of their ethnic, religious, and cultural identity, partly through intermarriage with the local population. Descendants of the former Jewish families were still known prior to World War II. When T. Mikami, a Japanese investigator, interviewed them in 1940, they gave their religious affiliations as Buddhist, Taoist, or Confucian.¹⁸ Of course, they may have been motivated by fear of political persecution if the Japanese suspected them of links with the West.

On the basis of the above facts the present writer has come to the conclusion that the anonymous artist, who portrayed the synagogue, had no knowledge of China and was equally unfamiliar with Jewish tradition. There is no indication whether he was a Jesuit, or a layman. Doubtless, his illustration of the Kaifeng synagogue is entirely imaginary.

¹⁸ MIKAMI, Teichō "Kaifu Yudaikyō no genjō hōkoku" [4] (Report on the actual conditions of the Kaifeng Jewish community). *Shina Bukkyō-shigakku* (Chinese-Buddhist Historical Studies), Tokyo, 5:1 (25 June 1941), p. 76—77.

The author visited the Kaifeng Jewish community on 3 October 1940, presumably in some official capacity. He found about one-hundred descendants of the families: Ai, Chao, Chin, Li (two branches), and Shih. The Chang family had left some years earlier after a feud with the other clans, presumably for Shanghai.



Synagogue of the Chinese Jews in Kaifeng, Honan Province,
as depicted in 1827 by an anonymous artist in Italy