

Where Is the Home: Kaifeng Jews Descendants on the Road of Return

Jinyao Wu¹

¹ Independent Researcher

Correspondence: Jinyao Wu, Independent Researcher.

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Abstract

In order to better answer these questions, this thesis will be divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 “Theorising the Kaifeng Jewish descendants” reviews three bodies of literature: (a) Jews and China—a historical encounter, (b) conceptualising emerging Jewish communities, and (c) disputed Jewishness in Israel’s immigration policy, so that to situate the Kaifeng Jewry issue in a broader societal and academic discourse. Chapter 2 “Kaifeng Jewry in the PRC” traces the development of the community from the 1950s to the 1990s, revolving around the ethnic classification campaign that erased Kaifeng Jewry from China’s *minzu* picture and the modification campaign in 1996 that erased Jewish *minzu* on paper officially. Chapter 3 “To “return” or to stay, that is the question” invokes accounts of four Kaifeng Jewish descendants who made different choices regarding *aliyah* and concludes with their motivation either to “return” or to stay. Chapter 4 “Being Chinese in the promised land” investigates the Kaifeng immigrants’ mixed identity as being Chinese and Jewish simultaneously, proposing an examination of “Israeliness” as a competing, alternative socio-cultural awareness to “Chineseness;” it also looks into the racialisation logic and racism confronted by the Kaifeng immigrants that contain their integration into Israeli society.

Keywords: Kaifeng Jews, Jewish identity, immigrants, ethnic

1. Introduction

On 30th Nov 2017, I, together with my friend Yam, stepped on the bus that drives from Jerusalem to Ein Gedi, a kibbutz by the Dead Sea well-known for its thermal springs. We planned to stop by and enjoy the springs and then head to our ultimate destination—Masada. Lured by our friend Yaara’s comics picturing a wonderful carnival, we hoped to spend one night at Masada’s campsite and appreciate the sunrise from the fortress the next morning.

Yes, it sounds like a perfect plan, except that we failed to consider the two ignorant newbie adventurers who had zero experience in camping in the wilderness. The nightmare began from the minute we exited the kibbutz. The bus did not come; Moovit (Note 2) was on strike; we waited under a shabby shed for hours in desperation. Our first attempt of hitch-hiking was quite a successful one—we managed to get lifts on two different cars. These two lifts posed to be the start of our fortuitous adventure, followed by many more trials and tribulations we confronted and overcame later that night.

Upon arriving, we found out that Masada had closed an hour ago. However, we were lucky enough to get tickets and to land on a cable car, which exempted us from labourious mountain-climbing. By the time we reached the campsite on the other side of the hill, the sun had started to sink. Hungry and thirsty, I began looking for caf  s, and even just one kiosk.

“You’re expecting an Aroma (Note 3) in the middle of a desert?” The camp-keeper seemed ridiculed by me. Yet, after hearing my response in Hebrew, he looked even more amazed.

“I will give you guys water, but can you let me film a video?”

We agreed. He passed us two cups of water, and held up his phone: “Just say, “Thank God for the water. Amen.”

We repeated exactly what he said. He left with satisfaction, scrolling on the phone. Soon, a video of two young East Asian girls sipping water and praying to the God in Hebrew would be circulated within his friend circle or even get uploaded on his social media.

Never had I got so upfront perception of what it means to be a Hebrew speaker with an East Asian face in the land of Israel. Whilst I do appreciate the privilege that showered us that afternoon and night, I have to admit that

the tickets sold to us after Masada closed, the ride on the cable car, and the free food and water, were presented to us at a price of turning us into a spectacle under an inquisitive gaze.

This adventure reminds me of another personal anecdote. The summer before my arrival in Israel, the 2017 Temple Mount crisis broke out. I expressed my worries about the situation as well as about my personal security being in the eye of the hurricane—Jerusalem. My friend, Z, who had spent one year at the Hebrew University, chuckled and said:

“Take it easy! Even if Jews and Arabs are throwing tear gas at each other, they will still turn around, smile, and say “Welcome” to you. It is the privilege of having an East Asian face.”

Privilege. Sounds good. But hidden under the cover of seemingly warranted personal security is the fact that one, with physical appearance that is often attributed to “East Asian,” can only be deemed an outsider and foreigner. Given the diverse complexion of Israeli citizens, this truly is a bitter fact to realize. Not just me, but also these new immigrants from East Asia. Amongst them, my interlocutors from Kaifeng, who are subjugated to such process of racialisation and alienation, despite their self-identification as Jews and their Israeli passports. What is their mentality being on the borderland of being Chinese and Jewish simultaneously? Whilst I was harbouring these inquiries, my research unfolded.

In this thesis, I hope to address one key question: from being referred to as “Jewish descendants” by the Chinese government and considered as non-Jews by the Israeli institution, to being recognised as “authentic Jews” and granted Israeli citizenship, what psychological and socio-cultural struggles have the Kaifeng Jewish immigrants undergone learning to be Israelis? Furthermore, what are the political, social, and theological implications of such a transformation?

2. Methodology

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has spoiled my original fieldwork plan of conducting participant observation amongst the Kaifeng Jewish immigrants in Israel. Both the China and Israel underwent an extended period of national lockdown. My interlocutors stayed alert for human contact and are especially reluctant to be approached by a researcher from a “foreign” land during the pandemic. Given these restrictions, I decided to situate this thesis as an interdisciplinary research project: I have employed a combination of archives, interviews, and discourse analysis of digital formats data such as YouTube videos and news coverage.

There are two major sources of the archives I have consulted. One is Dartmouth Digital collections, which include not only original texts of the steles in the historic synagogue in Kaifeng, but also first-hand papers on the Jewish colony *per se*, dated between 1907 and 1925. The other is the digital archival collection for *People's Daily*, an official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (hereon CCP), in reference to the Chinese government's attitude toward Kaifeng Jewry as well as China's stance toward Israel in the 1950s.

I have also launched in-depth, semi-structured interviews with those who identify as Kaifeng Jewish descendants/Kaifeng Jews. Although I tried to access several of them, many expressed hesitance toward interviews due to fear of “misrepresentation.” One who is based in Kaifeng remained cautious about her wording and mentioned vaguely about phone monitoring because her son, an Israeli citizen, is “at home.” In the end, I managed to recruit four interlocutors, three of whom currently reside in Kaifeng, of different generations (from the 20s to 60s) and one living in Jerusalem. All of the interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese. Depending on the interlocutors' preference, the interviews take a variety of forms from video calls, voice calls, and direct messages. The duration of the video and phone calls ranged roughly between 30 to 90 minutes. Initial questions principally concern their transformation from Chinese to Israeli nationals, and their perception toward the State of Israel, etc. Interview contents were also supplemented by my interlocutors' personal logs and their interviews with other media platforms. As *Shavei Israel* stands out to be the most significant body assisting their *aliyah*, I will refer to the videos and articles on YouTube and their official website that pertain to the Kaifeng Jewish immigrants. I will also analyse comments and news articles about this community on Israeli media as well as Chinese ones.

There is one thing I want to highlight in the methodology: the data used in this thesis are primarily collected from my interlocutors' individual experience and thus are mediated by personal discourse. I do not intend to depict their experience as a heroic epic with strong emotional propensities, but it is my wish that their agency and subjectivities can be represented appropriately in this work.

3. Theorising the Kaifeng Jewish Descendants

This literature review will touch upon three bodies of literature, regarding the history of Jewish communities in

China, emerging Jewish communities in and outside Israel, and the interpretation of “Jewishness” in Israeli immigration policy. In doing so, I aim to situate this study on Kaifeng Jewish immigrants in a broader societal and academic discourse.

In the “Jews and China—a historical encounter” section, by reviewing two historical Jewish communities in different Chinese cities, I aim to establish the scope of our discussion on a specific group of people—the Jewish community situated in Kaifeng, Henan Province. Then, I will trace the history of this Jewish community, including its origin, rise and decline, as well as academic debates pertaining to these topics, in order to provide a generic idea of the subject and the background. The emphasis of this section will be on the core debate in the studies of Kaifeng Jewish community—what resulted in their acculturation with mainstream Han society? The situation of the community in contemporary China will also be touched upon, however not in detail, as more analysis will be addressed in the main body of this thesis.

By drawing upon literature on “emerging Jewish communities,” I want to place the Kaifeng Jewish community against the backdrop of Judaizing movements on a more global scale. By examining different emerging communities, I hope to highlight several commonalities of them—devotion to Judaism, resorting to biblical mythology for a “genetic” backing, and shared experience of colonial encounters. This section will also address the main academic discussion pertaining to the immigrants’ life after their immigration to Israel, i.e., the issue of social integration.

Finally, the “Disputed Jewishness in Israel’s immigration policy” section will focus on the debates concerning Israel’s policy towards non-halakhic Jews who want to make *aliyah*. First, I want to revisit the term Jewishness as a point of departure—what makes a Jew and who mandates one’s Jewish status? Then I will turn to the reverse side—non-halakhic-Jews, represented by the emerging Jewish communities that are touched upon in the previous section. I will draw on three “non-halakhic” groups, i.e., immigrants from the FSU, emerging communities in Latin America, and Black Hebrew. Each group possesses a different form of “Jewishness” in one way or another, all struggling to attain official recognition from the Israeli side.

3.1 Jews and China—A Historical Encounter

“Jews of China” can be considered the core of Sino-Judaic studies. However, it is quite an ambiguous and contested term as there were numerous streams of Jewish people, whose ancestors arrived and settled in China during different time periods. In Imperial China, synagogues could be found in a number of cities including Hangzhou and Ningbo (Yisha Wang, 1991). Yet those communities ceased to exist by the 17th century and the community in Kaifeng was the only one to survive until today. Whilst modern China (1840-1949 AD) witnessed the emergence of Jewish cultural enclaves mainly in two cities—Harbin and Shanghai. Therefore, as the term “Jews of China” bears multiple layers of significance, it is necessary to clarify relevant concepts before diving into the subject of this study, so as to establish the scope of our discussion.

In the early 20th century, there were mass Jews entering and forming communities in Northeast and East China. Harbin, the capital city of Heilongjiang Province, and Shanghai emerged as two hubs for Jewish cultural practices in the Far East in the 20th century. The emergence and development of Jewish community in Harbin resulted from the construction of a railway that connects northeast China and eastern Russia, a project that was made possible by *Li-Lobanov Treaty* (1896) in the wake of the First Sino-Japanese War. Accordingly, a Russia gauge railway was built which travelled through Heilongjiang and Jilin to Vladivostok, a city on the east coast of the Pacific Ocean (Nish, 1985). Such a railway brought a throng of Russian nationals, Jews included, to migrate to and settle in Northeast Chinese cities, with Harbin being a primary example. These Russian Jewish migrants came to Harbin not just to flee the pogroms but also in quest of vast opportunities and fortune in China. The scale of the Jewish community in Harbin reached 20,000 at its peak in the 1920s (L. Gao, 2012). Not only did they build synagogues and hold prayer services, but also established Jewish schools and newspapers. Harbin, therefore, saw a flourishing Jewish community that did not perish until 1963 (Kaufman, 2006).

Shanghai also witnessed the emergence of a sizable Jewish community in the 18th and the 19th century. Defeat in the First Opium War (1839-41) marked the bankruptcy of the Qing government’s self-seclusion policies (*Haijin*, 海禁). Following the signing of *Treaty of Nanking* (1841), Shanghai, along with other four large ports, was fully open to expat merchants, and with them came Jews of Sassoon, Kadourie, Hardon, Shamon and Baruch families who were predominantly from Baghdad, Cairo and Bombay (Epstein, 1999). In the late 1930s and early 1940s, as the result of raging anti-Semitism, a considerable number of Jews were expelled from Nazi Germany, many of whom took refuge in Shanghai, a city which required no visa for Jews. The Japanese occupation then relocated Jews within the Japanese territory to Shanghai (Kranzler, 1976). It is estimated that Shanghai received a population of 17,000 Jews who fled the Nazi regime between 1938 and 1945 (Goldstein,

2016). A substantial body of literature, drawing on archives and memoirs, has charted the life of Jewish refugees in Shanghai (for example, Krasno, 1992; Eber, 2008; 2012; Hochstadt, 2012). However, as the expansion of such a Jewish community was a by-product of World War II, the community members subsequently left Shanghai at the end of War and most ended up in either Israel or the United States ('The Jewish Community of Shanghai', n.d.).

Both communities share one common ground—their emergence was somewhat a product of colonial encounters and constitutes a chapter in the modern imperial history of first Britain and then Russia and Japan. In both scenarios, for Jews, China was not the ultimate destination or “home,” rather a temporary sojourn, an interim shelter in the diaspora. Nor did the community members take roots in China but left successively to pursue a more promising future outside of China.

Now that we have reviewed the two other important Jewish communities in historical China, let us move on to the one in Kaifeng. Essentially, the Kaifeng Jewish community poses to be an outlier in regard to the conditions of its formation and development. The literature on the Kaifeng Jewish community revolves around the following three topics: (a) historical transformation, (b) acculturation with mainstream Chinese society, and (c) their situation in contemporary China.

It is believed by some scholars that the ancestors of Kaifeng Jewry originated in Persia, an argument substantiated by fragmentary documents written in Judeo-Persian and Hebrew (Leventhal 1985). Drawing on the stele “*Zunchong Daojingsi Ji*” [尊崇道经寺记] that was erected in 1512, Pan Guangdan (1983) notes that the products they brought were originally from India and he remains the only scholar that indicates Kaifeng Jewry were India-rooted. Opinions are divided in relation to the time of their settlement. Few hold that the migration to China unfolded as early as in Zhou dynasty (1046-256 BC), corroborated by verses in *Daodejing* (*Tao Te Ching*, also known as *Laozi*) “corresponding the name of Yahweh” and others (Fryer, 1915). Some, based upon the evidence from the stele “*Zunchong Daojingsi Ji*,” believe the Jewish merchants started to reside in China since Han dynasty (202 BC-220 AD) (Wei, 1993). Most scholars lend credit to the narrative that the Jews reached China around Tang (618-907 AD) and Song (960-1279 AD) dynasties (for example, Leslie, 1962; Rhee, 1973; Paper, 2012) as substantial surviving archives and steles suggest. For example, the aforementioned documents in Judeo-Persian and Hebrew date from the ninth century, when the Silk Road played a growingly essential role in the exchange of products, cultures, as well as populations between China and its neighbouring states. The stele “*Chongjian Qingzhensi Ji*” [重建清真寺记] also registers that they settled in Kaifeng, the capital city of Song dynasty, and were granted residence permits by the emperor, who ordered the Jews to “naturalise to our Cathay, observe their ancestral customs, and settle in Bianliang (Note 4)” (Tobar, 1912; Wei, 1993; Tenney, n.d.). The Kaifeng Jewish community was thus preserved, and the earliest recorded synagogue was established in 1163.

Despite the fact that the Jewish community had existed in China for hundreds of years, they did not come to be noticed outside China until 1605, when it was for the first time spotted by a Jesuit priest from Italy, Matteo Ricci. Ricci's acquaintance with the Chinese Jewish functionary Ai Tian was quite dramatic and has never failed to fascinate scholars of Sino-Judaic Studies. When they first met, each took the other as a member of his own faith as both religions share the Hebrew *Bible* as classic work. This account was first published in 1615, translated by Trigault (Ricci, 1953), and repeated for several times. Donald Leslie (1972), in his *The Survival of Chinese Jews*, invoked Rudolf Löwenthal's (1946) translation of Ricci's diary, which presents certain details of Kaifeng Jewish community then through Ai's narration. According to Ricci, Ai referred to himself as an “Israelite” but had no concept of designations of Jews; he knelt to the image of Jacob and Esau to show veneration although he did not worship images; his two brothers studied Hebrew and served as rabbis in the local synagogue. However, issues have also been raised: Ai recounted the difficulties and obstructions in practicing the law of their religion, including circumcision, purification of food, abstinence from pork, and others.

Here, one other central question that has always haunted Sino-Judaic studies' scholars surfaces: how did Sinification happen amongst the Kaifeng Jews? Or more precisely, how did they negotiate the boundary of being Jewish and Chinese at the same time?

On the one hand, although substantial community members still self-identify as Jews, scholars generally agreed upon the fact that Sinification did occur amongst the Kaifeng Jews. The most prestigious scholar in the Chinese-speaking world to study this issue was the ethnologist Pan Guangdan. He argued that the Sinification represents an ethnic harmony in China (Pan, 1983), which bears abounding political connotation considering the zeitgeist of the Mao regime that trumpeted a “great superior Chinese race.” This sentiment of “Han superiority” was echoed by other scholars more recently, such as Zhang Sui (1990). Scholars use acculturation or even assimilation when describing Kaifeng Jews' cultural identities, contending that they have undergone a process of

Sinification out of various reasons. Zhang Qianhong (1994) summarised a series of causes that contribute to such Sinification: (a) seclusion and isolation from the rest of the Jewish world, as proposed by Finn (1843) and MacGillivray (1928); (b) intermarriage with ethnic Han people, by Wang (1992) and Rhee (1973); and (c) imperial bureaucratic examination (*Keju*, 科举), by Rhee (1973) and Zhang (1990), which can also be attested to by Ai's account that many of them renounced their traditions and customs and embraced Confucian-Han legacy for the sake of promotion in the imperial bureaucratic system. A plenty of Confucian elements, therefore, were also invited into the synagogue and profoundly influenced not only the architecture but also their ritual life.

On the other hand, there is a disagreement upon the extent of Sinification. Irene Eber (1993) points out that rather than wiping out the Kaifeng Jewish community, integration with Chinese society in effect led to a reinforcement of Jewish memory by associating individuals with kinship and localities. In other words, their Jewish lineage and identity were preserved through families and surnames. As a result, there formed a signified Jewish identity that focuses on clans. Stephen Sharot (2007), however, does not question why Sinification happened, but asks why it did not happen more quickly and what rendered the survival of the community despite the above three factors as well as its small size. By comparing with the extinction of the Catholic Church in Imperial China, he concludes that the fact that the Jews did not oblige a total exclusive commitment but adopted, if not internalised, a mainstream ideology, they were exempted from expulsion like the Catholics. And the permeable boundaries of major Chinese religions, i.e., Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, as well as pluralism of religious milieu contributed to the acculturation of the Chinese Jews.

Xu Xin (1999) holds that such acculturation made the total assimilation of the Kaifeng Jews with Chinese society inevitable. Yet it was the demise of the last rabbi in 1800 that marked the official decline of this community. The decayed synagogue, ebbing religious fervour, illiteracy in Hebrew, as well as the purchase of Torah scrolls and Hebrew manuscripts by European Christian missionaries all contribute to its obscurity. Nevertheless, traditions were still followed, though not publicly. Historian and geographer, Zhang Xiangwen (also known as Chang Hsiang-wen) set down an oral history from a Jew, Zhao, during his visit to Kaifeng in 1910: "The district magistrate wanted to take from us the site of the synagogue and intended to move our stele. We protected violently and the project was abandoned" (Chang, 1945). Zhao recounted the visit paid by an Englishman, Pan, who claimed to be commissioned by "our king" (the king of Jews). This idea of looking for the kingdom of Jews enthralled Zhao and rendered him to leave for Shanghai and look for his co-religionists (*ibid.*).

Cognisant of the critical role played by European Christian missionaries in "re-discovering" Kaifeng Jews, Zhou Xun (2005) contends that the discourse of "Chinese Jews" is purely a "hoax" invented by the West out of orientalist fascination. This construction was later appropriated by Chinese cultural elites at the turn of the 20th century to affirm a Chinese racial and national identity. This orientalist fetishism takes on a distinct appearance following the end of the Cold War. In 1992, China's official embrace of free-market economy coincided with its establishing diplomatic relations with Israel. Kaifeng marketed itself to be a "Jewish economic zone" (Zhou, 2016). Such a link with "Jews" brought this ancient city prosperous tourist economy in this era of neoliberal economy. At the same time, in other parts of the world, many other Jewish communities came on the horizon, striving for institutional recognition. The next section will be a tentative attempt to conceptualize these emerging Jewish communities in a more global discourse.

3.2 Conceptualising Emerging Jewish Communities

As shown before, Kaifeng Jewish community's existence is claimed to date from at latest 1163, when the first synagogue was put up. People may ask: does it still count as one of the emerging Jewish communities? The answer is yes. To be exact, the notion of "emerging Jewish communities" comes from Kulanu, an American organisation aiming to help communities which embraced Jewish identity in modern times. With the destruction of the synagogue and the decease of the last rabbi, important customs that are considered Jewish, such as circumcision, were not preserved, and community members had to seek to re-affirm their Jewish identity via an alternative authority. Moreover, since the opening of the 21st century, the community has resumed Jewish festive celebrations and prayer service following decades of obscurity, as recorded by multiple scholars and observers (Bernstein, 2019; Davis, 2015). This form of revival of Kaifeng Jewish community hence makes it in line with the emerging nature of other communities.

In their edited book *Becoming Jewish* (Parfitt and Fisher, 2016), Tudor Parfitt and Netanel Fisher situated the Kaifeng Jewish community within the context of bountiful emerging Jewish communities around the globe in the late 20th century. The primary characteristic distinguishing the "new Jews" from the "old Jews," according to them, is their "choice" to become part of the Jewish people, "either through marriage, conversion or self-identification as Jews." They continue to argue for the religious nature of this trend in general (*ibid.*, ix). Whilst

the articles in this volume examine both new Jewish individuals and groups in diverse countries, ranging from the more developed North, to the Third World countries such as India, Ethiopia and Madagascar, Nathan Devir's *New Children of Israel* (2017) selects three emerging Jewish communities in particular—Beit Israel in Ghana, Beit Yeshourun in Cameroon, and Benei Ephraim in India—as case studies, and principally focuses on the religious elements of those Judaizing movements, intersecting with the influence of technology and digital media in facilitating the construction of their Jewish religious identity. As anthropologists and historians have demonstrated, religiousness tends to be a sweeping feature amongst most, if not all, emerging Jewish communities, via insisting on strict observance of religious traditions (for example, Zykov, 2015; Buijs, 1998). As Devir notes, secular Jewishness was never an option (Devir, 2017). Only through devotion to Judaism can they assert their Jewishness.

Another commonality of these communities is that they often associate their ancestry with biblical mythology and name themselves after ancient Israelites. Some trace their roots to the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel, such as Ephraim and Menashe, which justifies their claim of Jewishness. This resonates with the trend in Israel upon its establishment to go “back to history” and “identify themselves [Jews] as a historical people” for the sake of Jewish understanding (Webber, 2007). In fact, the topic of “Jewish genes” has attracted massive scholarly attention, and there are many attempts made from a variety of disciplines to theorize the so-called “genetic structures” of Jewish people (Behar et al., 2010; Atzmon et al., 2010; Egorova, 2014). Both Benei Menashe and Lemba, for instance, display some genetic relatedness with the remaining Jewish population. Benei Menashe's *aliyah* (literally means ascent, also immigration of Jews to Israel) is a result of syncretism of race and religion, and it further reinforces the racialisation logic behind Judaism and Jewishness (Egorova, 2015), contributing to what Noah Tamarkin terms “racialization of religion” (Tamarkin, 2011). Moreover, because of this “racialization of religion” that connects Judaism with “whiteness” (Brodkin, 1998), those Lemba “black Jews” were not given recognition as an ethnic group in South Africa (Tamarkin, 2011). Relevant research on those emerging Jewish communities, as Misha Klein comments, has inspired and reframed the discussion about the relationship between race, colour, and Jewishness (Klein, 2014). However, as Yulia Egorova (2014) points out, “the question that remains to be asked is whose voice is more likely to be heard in the mass media and to be taken into account in policy-making process.” In other words, it is up to the Israeli authority to decide the weight of “Jewish DNA” in their *aliyah* to Israel.

It is not hard to notice that these Judaizing movements that either adopt Jewish belief without claiming Jewish descent or justify their Jewishness via genetics have legacies from the Third World countries, in Africa, Asia, or Latin America. This fact bears at least two layers of significance.

First of all, asserting the identity of “new Jews” represents a struggle of socio-economic empowerment. Benei Ephraim, who are considered *Dalits*, are amongst the most impacted groups by the caste hierarchy in India. On one hand, the perceived “ethnocentricity” of the Jewish culture has helped them acquire recognition from the upper caste, enabling them to leap out of the caste system as well as the resulted discrimination and making social mobility possible to some extent (Zykov, 2015). On the other hand, their embrace of Jewish identity allows for larger freedom of self-expression, constituting a “project in communal self-empowerment” (Egorova and Perwez, 2012); it also grants them opportunities for immigrating to Israel. As such, the issue of Judaizing movements, despite its undoubtful religious connotations, is also a problem of the gap of socio-economic development between the Global North and the Global South.

In addition, majority of the emerging communities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America share a Christian theological background. Many accumulated knowledges about Judaism through Christian missionaries. For example, the *Bible* was translated into Assamese in 1833 by William Carey of the British Serampore Baptist Mission who went to Assam with the intention of converting the Assamese to Christianity (Parfitt, 2013), which promoted the popularisation of Christianity in India. And many of later-converted Benei Menashe then started practicing Judaism “in the belief that Jewish customs and Jewish faith are compatible with ... indigenous tribal religion” (Weil, 1997). The Kaifeng Jews had a similar experience. Upon finding out Ai's religious affiliation, Ricci endeavoured to convert him to Christianity, though failed. Nevertheless, this contributed to the Kaifeng Jews' self-recognition, not as followers of “*Tiaojingjiao*” (Sinew-plucking religion) or “*Lanmao huihui*” (Blue-capped Hui- hui), but as part of the whole Jewish world. As shown before, the words of the English Christian missionary Pan that delineated “a kingdom of Jews” ignited Zhao's passion in stepping out of the town and finding more about his belief system as well as the political institutions (Chang, 1945). Whilst the Christian influence epitomizes a colonial experience, adoption of Judaism functions as a form of resistance to recover cultural practices that are independent of the Christian imperialists. Just as Devir (2017) remarks, such “avowals frequently take the form of anticolonial or anti-neocolonial rhetoric” and their belonging to Jewish movements is

part of a “microlevel drive to reform society through religion, rather than through ... political or economic macromeasures.”

With the recognition of Beta Ethiopian Jews by the Israeli Rabbinate in 1975 and the ensuing massive *aliyah* in the 1980s (Anteby-Yemini, 2005), more emerging Jewish communities have managed to immigrate to Israel. Therefore, apart from studies on the emerging communities’ activities in their country of birth, a significant amount of research revolves around their lives upon their settlement in Israel.

Considering that those Judaizing movements emphasize religiosity in the first place, one aspect scholars tend to focus on is their religious practices. In a piece of work examining the Benei Menashe community in Israel, Egorova (2015) suggests that although once the conversion procedure is completed and citizenship is granted, the new immigrants are “free to embrace any forms of religiosity,” the majority of Benei Menashe adhere to Judaism and identify as *dati* (religious). Moreover, based upon the racialisation logic, Benei Menashe, who do stand out among the proverbial Israeli on the street, often have to pronounce their Jewishness through sartorial means, including wearing a kippah for men and covering hair for married women; both are considered expressions of religiosity.

Another common perspective to approach this issue is their social integration within Israel, which is approached via (a) transformation of identities, and (b) communication technology use in the host country. Those emerging communities, migrating from their countries of birth to Israel, have transcended the boundary of nation-states, and are confronted with conflicting identities in this process. By investigating the extent of self-identifying as Israelis amongst immigrants from the West, the Former Soviet Union (hereon FSU), and Ethiopia, Amit (2012) concludes that the social integration process is anything but uniform in divergent immigrant communities. Anteby-Yemi focuses on the transnational nature of the Ethiopian immigrant community and demonstrates that they have formed an Ethiopian-Israeli transnational identity, “articulating and reconstructing local and global identities in the context of their new nation-state” (2005). Weil looks at the ethnic enclaves of the Benei Israel community in several Israeli cities, emphasizes their status as “Indian diaspora,” as defined by the Embassy of India in Israel, and the reinforcement of the cultural and familial ties with each other (2012). On the other hand, just as Devir (2017) notices the significance of media and technology in organising the Judaizing movement in Cameroon (he nicknames them “Internet Jews”), digital humanities do play a critical role in facilitating immigrants’ integration. Scholars have studied their information needs in the process of settling and integrating with Israeli society (Shomron and Schejter, 2020; Elias and Lemish, 2011). However, linguistic barriers—familiarity of Hebrew—are yet to be overcome.

In this section, by reviewing the literature on emerging Jewish communities in and outside Israel, I want to highlight both their similarities—a certain level of religiosity, colonial encounters and socio-economic conditions of the repatriate countries—as well as divergences—the absence of a claim of biblical roots—with the Kaifeng Jewish community. Embarking on a journey to “return,” their Jewishness is subject to contestation, which poses a primary obstacle for them to claim Israeli citizenship and for their integration within Israeli society.

3.3 Disputed Jewishness in Israel’s Immigration Policy

In his work on the political system of Israel, Oren Yiftachel (1999; 2007) proposes a model of “ethnocracy,” which represents a regime that emphasizes preference toward a specific ethnicity (or ethnicities). Yiftachel approaches this issue primarily from two dimensions—the selective immigration process that is solely open to Jews, as well as unidirectional land transfer from Arabs to Jews. Both cases attest to the state’s imposition of Judaisation upon its population and territory. Accordingly, Mahmood Mamdani differentiates the process of “Zionization”—construction of a settler society—and “Judaization”—creation of a Jewish majority—in Israel (Mamdani, 2020). Israel is quintessentially the only Western democracy that still lacks a well-formulated immigration policy (Avineri, Orgad, and Rubinstein, 2010), and its immigration policy is disposed towards Jews over non-Jews. Such a political tendency is often faced with fierce criticisms for being discriminatory and even racist (Zreik, 2008); yet there have also been multiple scholars who defend this policy and justify Jewish self-determination in *Eretz Yisrael* (Gavison, 1999; Gans, 2008; Kaplan, 2015). Chaim Gans, for instance, argues that a priority to Jews in immigration to Israel is legitimate for the sake of cultural preservation (Gans, 2007). Thus, here comes the central questions of this discourse: who is a Jew? Who decides a Jew?

The notion of Jewishness has been placed under scholarly scrutiny since the inception of the Zionist ideology in the 18th century. Forefathers of Zionism proffered various ways of conceptualising the connotation of “being a Jew.” Theodore Herzl, for example, deemed Zionism a politicised term and considered Jewish people a “nation;” Ahad Ha’am, on the other hand, endorsed the traditionalist path and trumpeted Jewishness as a cultural-spiritual identity that incorporates certain elements from Judaism, emphasising its “quasi-religious moral purpose”

(Shimoni, 1995). Other ideologues such as Micha Joseph Berdyczewski completely negated the viability of one's religious conviction and resorted to a discourse of "ethnicity," insisting that "a person born a Jew could never be detached from his Jewish identity" (ibid., 296). Indeed, the racialising of Jewish identity has never ceased to attract discussion, which also gave rise to "race science" within the Jewish communities *infin-de-si èle* Europe (Efron, 1994). As such, the Jewish identity is construed both on a biological and a religious level. And given all the *edot* (sub-ethnic groups in Israel from backgrounds of different repatriate countries and regions) and cultural diversity under one label of "Jew," it is impossible to identify a "Jewish culture" detached from Judaism. Considering all the disagreements over the notion of Jewishness, Charles Liebman (2003) has distinguished between a "thick" and a "thin" Jewish culture/identity. Whilst the former refers to an embrace of the Jewish tradition of a "communal, cultural, ethical, and emotional nature" inclusively, the latter denotes an individual who is reluctant to accept any specific definition of Jewishness.

A significant number of scholars has pointed to the constructed nature of "race" (Banton, 1998; Ifekwunigwe et al., 2017). Certainly, the racial-biological logic of Jewishness is conceptually flawed. However, despite that, it is hard for people to forsake such a way of formulation, and the Jewish identity has evolved to be what Yadgar terms a "biological, quasi-racial exclusionary logic" (Yadgar, 2020, 2). According to the *halakha* (the collective body of Jewish religious law), which contains biblical law, Talmudic and rabbinical law and tradition, a person is considered Jewish in the following two circumstances: either (a) their mother is Jewish, or (b) they formally converts to Judaism with approval of rabbinical authorities (Egorova, 2009). Therefore, lack of a Jewish "genetic marker" does not disqualify a halakhic Jew, although, given the racial logic, it does "thicken" one's Jewishness. Yet, as examined before, "Jewish genetics," politicised as it is, does not guarantee the eligibility for *aliyah*, which is still in the hands of the Israeli state to decide whether to approve of or to oppose their immigration.

Thus, despite the multi-layered significance of Jewishness, the *halakha* remains the only criteria that mandate one's entitlement for *aliyah*. Upon the establishment of Israel, on 5th July 1950, the Knesset passed the *Law of Return* with the first article declaring: "Every Jew has the right to come to this country as an *oleh* (a Jew who immigrates to Israel; the plural form is *olim*)" (Knesset, 1950). Later, an amendment was added to it: "For the purpose of this law, "Jew" means a person who was born of a Jewish mother or has become converted to Judaism and who is not a member of another religion" (Knesset, 1970). Therefore, suffice it to say, the *Law of Return* only applies to halakhic Jews, whilst up to now, there is no immigration policy regarding non-(halakhic)-Jews (Rubinstein, 2007). Avineri et al. have argued that the absence of an effective entry administration for non-Jews has led to today's chaos in immigration in Israel: non-Jews enter Israel under various types of visa such as tourist and worker visas (Avineri, Orgad, and Rubinstein, 2010). They also notice that immigrants who are not entitled to undertake *aliyah* under the *Law of Return* "have no specific and structured path that has naturalisation as its natural and ordinary outcome" (ibid., 67) and there is no absorption policy for them.

However, as a range of research has shown, immigration open to non-halakhic Jews is significantly differentiated between different *edot* as well as different time periods. "Black Hebrew" immigrants from the United States in the 1960s, those from the FSU in the 1990s and from Latin America in the 2010s constitute salient examples in demonstrating the stratified *aliyah* and the politicised nature of Israel's immigration policy.

The Russian-speaking immigrants from FSU in the 1990s were not considered "Jewish" in many aspects. Due to the Soviet Union's nationality policies, Jews were no more than a matter of (depoliticised) ethnicity rather than religion. The only synagogue in Birobidzhan, the capital city of the Jewish Autonomous Region of Russia, burned down towards the end of the 1950s; no synagogue was rebuilt since then (Emmons, 1997). The Soviet Jews thus stopped practising Judaism and were deprived of their religious heritage. Many, upon arriving in Israel, claimed to be non-Jews. Moreover, their immigration to Israel resulted from the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the United States' suspension in offering refugee certificates to Soviet Jews (Philippov and Bystrov, 2011). Many expressed their intention to improve their socio-economic status by immigrating to Israel. Since their motive of immigrating is not by itself Zionist, Larissa Remennick (2002) refers to them as mere economic immigrants rather than *olim*. The FSU immigrants were confronted with other problems in Israel, including difficulty in linguistic integration, stigmatisation by mainstream Israeli society, and the most critical challenge came from civil life—they were "halakhic" enough to embark on *aliyah*, but not "halakhic" enough to be allowed in "Jewish" services such as marriage, burial, and adoption. In the name of "nation mission," Israel even initiated a state-run, massive conversion project "underwritten by a national-Zionist biopolitical logic" to promote the FSU immigrants to formally convert to Judaism (Krael-Tovi, 2012). Such alienation of the FSU immigrants in Israel has compelled their fellows who have not undertaken *aliyah* to rethink their tie with their "national home" Israel (Golbert, 2001).

The emerging Jewish communities in Latin America in the past decade, on the other hand, faces a different situation. This being said, with more and more Judaizing movements on the horizon across the globe, the power of mediating conversion procedures has been handed over to non-governmental organisations (hereon NGOs), such as Shavei Israel and the Itim Institute. The Israeli government “has not expressed any willingness to examine whether or how the [Latin American] emerging communities might come to be recognised by the official Jewish world, at least not explicitly” (Yezerky, 2019; Egorova, 2015). Meanwhile, via interviews and governmental-protocol-reading, Yezerky reveals a contradictory mentality of the policymakers: eulogising the “myth of a homogeneous, unified people” on the one hand, and excluding and marginalising groups that “do not fall under the most favoured nationality—Western and Orthodox” on the other (Yezerky, 2019). After all, although the *Law of Return* does not state preference toward specific *edot*, immigration policy’s implementation still succumbs to a stratification amongst groups with different extent of religiosity and racial backgrounds.

The most extreme case is the Black Hebrews, also known as African Hebrew Israelite Community (hereon AHIC), who migrated from the United States in the 1960s during the civil rights movement and arrived in Israel with the belief that as diasporic Jews, they ought to return to the ancestral homeland. However, their Jewish status was not recognised by the Israeli state. They also refused the option of conversion to Judaism thus could not acquire Israeli citizenship by naturalisation. Such a refusal contributed to their stay in the Negev Desert as refugees for decades. In the 1990s, under joint efforts made by Israel and the United States, AHIC were granted temporary visas, which got extended in the early 2000s (Jaynes, 2019). In 2009, Elyakim Ben Israel became the first AHIC member to claim Israeli citizenship without conversion (Alush, 2009). Markowitz et al. term their engagement and connection with Israel a “soul citizenship” (Markowitz, Helman, and Shir-Vertesh, 2003). AHIC’s case poses to be a “self-making” rather than “being made” form of national citizenship and thus opens a fissure for more discussion on the notion of citizenship as well as its acquisition.

The aforementioned three cases of non-halakhic-Jewish groups are confronted with different issues in making *aliyah*. Each group’s Jewish identity is being fiercely disputed by the Israeli authority and also to a different degree: Soviet Jews, whose “Jewish lineage” is recognised, are welcomed by the state as immigrants, whilst are treated as “outsiders” in practice upon immigration; the emerging Jewish community in Latin America, though have undergone conversion process, are not necessarily favoured by the state as *olim*; the Black Hebrews are not considered as Jews by the state and thus cannot claim Israeli citizenship without naturalisation. Each of the three cases either challenges or reinterprets Israel’s Jewish identity during their struggles for recognition by Israel. The Kaifeng Jewish communities joined such struggles towards the end of the 20th century when the first few Kaifeng Jews managed to arrive in Israel. But before that, their Jewish ethnic identity was initially contested, if not erased, by another powerful regime as well as its institutions.

4. Kaifeng Jewry in the PRC

4.1 Ethnic Classification in Modern China

In this chapter, I want to review the historic situation of the Kaifeng Jewish community upon the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (1949-, hereon PRC). In order to gain a basic understanding of the position of Kaifeng Jewry in today’s China, let us start by revisiting the term “ethnicity” and the ethnic classification campaign, lasting from the 1950s to the 1980s. It is during this campaign that 55 minority ethnicities aside from the dominant Han ethnicity got recognised by ethnologists dispatched by the central government. Meanwhile, the centralist rhetoric that there are in total 56 ethnics that form a “unified, multinational country” (*tongyi de duominzu guojia*) was also finalised.

However, it is necessary to clarify that due to the semantic discrepancy between Chinese and English, the word *minzu* can be an intractable term to translate. Whilst official governmental protocols tend to translate it as “nationality,” I argue that “ethnos” is a more appropriate way to formulate such a concept because the *minzu*s in the realm of modern and contemporary China (1911-) have never managed to establish independent nation-states under the principles of self-determination. Nevertheless, due to a lack of uniform terminology amongst academics, the concept of *minzu* will also be addressed as both ethnonationality and ethnos in this thesis. (Note 5)

The PRC’s *minzu* policy is deeply influenced by its Soviet counterpart. Nominally, the Soviet Union posed to be a federalist union of several neighbouring republics. Following the dispute in Georgia’s relation with Russia (1922), Vladimir Lenin envisioned a soviet way to form a sovereign socialist federation, with its neighbouring nation-states joining in a semi-independent manner. National self-determination, as confirmed by Lenin pre-1917, came to bankruptcy as such. In response, the policy of *korenizatsiya* (indigenisation) was adopted to preserve and cultivate the political and cultural roots of the titular nation of each republic. Under such influence, national

languages were taught in schools, and national representatives emerged on local administrative levels (Suny and Martin, 2001). Despite the reversal of this policy in the 1930s, “distinguishing” national cultures became a prominent characteristic of Soviet nationality policy.

From the 1920s, the Soviet authorities maintained strategic relations with the two major domestic political powers in China—the Marxist-Leninist party CCP, and the by-then ruling regime Guomindang (hereon KMT), out of pragmatic geopolitical reasons (Mullaney, 2012). In the meantime, the Academia Sinica Institute of History and Philology (hereon IHP) was established in 1928. Scholars at IHP initiated the first campaign to recognise and classify the ethne within the Chinese territory. Their efforts were directed by the political discursive vibe of “constructing” a “single-race republic” (Liu, 2004) of one “nation-race” (Dikötter, 2015). Although the conceptual distinction between “Hanness” and “non-Hanness” has long been put under heated discussion even in Imperial time, the demarcation was formalised only after the ethnic classification campaign, contributing to the re-negotiation of ethnic and national frontiers.

In 1949, the CCP overthrew the KMT regime and established the PRC. The ethnic classification campaign starting from the 1920s continued and lasted for another three decades. In total, the ethnic classification campaign in the PRC can be roughly divided into three stages.

First, from 1949 to 1953, the *minzu* policy primarily focused on (re-) naming ethnic units and preliminary research launched by scholars affiliated with local governments. The very first census of the PRC in 1953 identified over 400 *minzus*, as registered by people of different ethnicities based upon their own cognitive identification. The deluge of “registered” ethnicities required more detailed intra-ethnic classification.

1954 to 1964 thus constituted the second major stage of this campaign. During this decade, the National Ethnic Affairs Commission (hereon NEAC) sent numerous ethnologists to areas where massive non-Han people inhabited, such as Guizhou and Yunnan provinces. They conducted a larger scale of ethnic classification by classifying and conflating formerly registered ethne, narrowing the number down from approximately 400 to 54. By 1964, the campaign basically finished and not many more ethne were left to be identified.

From 1964 to the late 1980s, the ethnic classification campaign entered the third and also last stage where scholars identified the communities claiming to belong to “ethnic minorities.” In 1981, the State Council’s leading group for census, the Ministry of Public Security, and the NEAC jointly published *Notification Regarding the Principles of Restoring or Correcting Ethnic Composition [Guanyu Huifu huo Gaizheng Minzu Chengfen de Chuli Yuanze de Tongzhi]*. According to this document, “all ethnic minorities whose ethnicity were wrongly defined whenever and for whatever reason, should be allowed to restore their ethnic status when applying to.” Under such guidance, during the third census in 1982, over 5 million people demanded a re-examination of their ethnic status and over 2.6 million managed to modify their ethnic status on identifications (National Ethnic Affairs Commission, 2007). By the time the fourth census took place in 1990, 56 *minzus* have all been identified, of which there are 55 minority groups in addition to Han, which is referred to by many as the dominant “ethnic Chinese.” The purpose of the ethnic classification campaign is not just to exert biopower (Foucault, 1978) and facilitate control over the population, but also to further equality between ethnic groups by granting differential (relative to the Han ethnos) economic and social benefits. For example, in certain provinces, examinees from ethnic minorities would enjoy extra credits in the Uniform University Entrance Examination (*Gaokao*)—a policy that can be considered a Chinese counterpart of Affirmative Action.

How did the researchers determine one’s ethnicity? It is important to note that to a large extent, the scholars who were involved followed Stalin’s nationality theory as guidelines during identification. One of the leading figures of this campaign, Fei Xiaotong (1910-2005) articulated in an essay, which originally was his script for the National Committee of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (hereon CPPCC) in 1978:

“At the beginning of our work on ethnic classification, we studied the Marxist-Leninist theory of nationalities, with special emphasis on Stalin’s famous definition of a nation: “A nation is a stable community of people with a common language, a common territory, a common economic life, and a common psychological quality expressed in a common culture.” We believe this is a scientific summary of the formation of Western nations during the capitalist period and should be used as a guideline for our research on ethnic classification. How to use this theory to study the specific ethnic situation in our country is the key to ethnic classification” (Fei, 1980). (Note 6)

As Fei suggested, China does not dogmatically copy the “Soviet model” nor the “Western model,” but has developed its own approach. In practice, the ethnic classification campaign was oriented by socio-linguistic theories. In particular, Thomas Mullaney holds that the campaign was greatly inspired by Henry Rupert Davies’s language-based taxonomy (Davies 2012). Davies’s taxonomy classifies the ethne within the geographic area of

China into four groups, drawing upon linguistic discrepancy: (a) Mon-Khmer family, (b) Shan family, (c) Han family, and (d) Tibeto-Burman family.

The other team leader, Lin Yaohua (1910-2000), referred to “ethnic potential”—the potential for a cluster of smaller groups to come into a state of unity despite differences in the present (Mullaney, 2012)—as the decisive ingredient in forming an ethnos. Only then can these ethnic blocs, which he termed “plausible communities” (ibid., 85), be conflated and classified into full-fledged ethnonationalities. He conceded that “in reality, many minorities do not fulfil the four characteristics which Stalin pointed out” and quoted Stalin that “the necessary components of the nation—language, territory, common culture, etc.—do not simply descend from the heavens... These components, however, are at this time in a stage of infancy, and at most form nothing more than a potential that, in the future, under advantageous conditions, will help form into a nationality” (Lin, 1954, 47). For Lin, the ethnic classification campaign is more political- than academic-oriented. He admitted: “The work of minority research before us is certainly not purely for the sake of academic research. It must unite with politics, particularly with the problem of national security” (Lin, 1987). By security, Lin alludes to the prospective foreign intervention that can be resulted from transborder *minzu* interaction, and this will be elaborated on in the following section.

In any case, Fei and Lin reached an agreement on the principle of “*ming cong zhuren*,” which is glossed as “names follow their bearer’s will” by Stéphane Gros (2004). Therefore, it can be argued that the guidelines of the ethnic classification campaign in the PRC were quite flexible. It was first and foremost guided by specific “objective” criteria, i.e., the four elements the Stalinist definition of a nation entails, as well as linguistic differences. However, the campaign was also subject to political concerns of this fledgling country, national security in particular, and people’s socio-cultural identity that tends to be collective rather than individual.

The complexity and flexibility of these guidelines have resulted in confusion when it comes to practice. The recognition and negation of the status of the Kaifeng Jewish descendants are a case in point.

4.2 Jews? Jewish Descendants?

In the case of the Kaifeng Jewish community, the confusion as mentioned earlier lies in deciding their ethnic status. In the past seven decades, the recognised ethnic status of the Kaifeng Jewish community under the CCP regime, has shifted from “Jews” to “Jewish descendants,” and sometimes they are even denied being “descendants” but are vaguely addressed as “Hui” or “Han.” Essentially, the authority’s stance on this issue can be viewed from two perspectives: their attitude toward the people’s ethnic identity as “Jews” and toward the local Jewish religious practice. As Jewishness can be considered both an ethnic and religious trait—an argument I have raised in Chapter 1, these two perspectives are intertwined markedly.

Xu Xin has reviewed the Chinese government’s policy toward Judaism (Xu, 2006). According to him, the Kaifeng Jewish community maintained good relations with regimes before 1950, and there was no particular policy directed at them at the time. Although the community ceased to practice Judaism from the 19th century, and most customs that are considered Jewish were not followed, the community still existed in name. The members “remember their ancestry and insist on their Jewish roots when talking about their identity” (ibid., 92). The 1953 census, as the first census, was an initial attempt to classify massive ethnonational groups. It was conducted when the ethnic classification campaign just began to unfold. As the authority had not officially formulated the official discourse and *minzu* policy, people had more freedom in reporting their *minzu* status. Many Kaifeng Jewish descendants, when being asked, classified themselves as “Jews” and put “Jewish” in the catalogue of *minzu*. The Kaifeng Jewish community was thus given recognition, at least at the local level, in the early 1950s.

The local recognition brought Kaifeng Jewry to a larger stage where they were noticed by the central government. For the 1952 National Day’s celebration, local governments were encouraged to select people from different ethnic groups and send them to participate in the celebration banquet in Beijing. The purpose of such an act lies in showing national solidarity as well as the prosperity of a “unified, multinational country.” It also corresponds with a resolution (Note 7) endorsed by the central government to ensure that “all minority groups who scatter in China enjoy equal national rights” (The State Council of the PRC, 1952). Two Kaifeng Jewish descendants were chosen by the municipal government as representatives of the Jewish *minzu*. One is called Ai Fengming, who joined the CCP and worked in an Air Force unit in Kaifeng; the other is called Shi Mingying, (Note 8) who worked in the Foreign Affairs Office of Henan Province (Xu, 2006). The two Kaifeng Jewish descendants were received by key Party functionaries, including Mao Zedong (1893- 1976), Zhou Enlai (1898-1976), and Zhu De (1886-1976), and attended the state banquet on 16th October 1952. Xinhua News Agency, the official state-run press agency, mentioned Jews as a separate ethnic group in the same breath as

other 45 ethnic groups, such as Mongols and Uighurs (Xinhua News Agency, 1952).

However, as the ethnic classification campaign progressed, Kaifeng Jews' ethnic status was also contested. In August 1953, the United Front of the Central Committee in Beijing received a telegraph from the United Front of the Bureau of Central South (Xu, 2006). Such a telegraph was also read and approved of by top leaders such as Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997). In this telegraph, a significant question was posed: Is it appropriate to acknowledge the Kaifeng Jews as an ethno-nationality, independent from Han and Hui? In response, the Central United Front wrote:

“...[t]he Jews scattered in Kaifeng have no direct connections economic wise, they don't have a common language of their own and a common area of inhabitation. They have completely mixed and mingled with the majority Han population, in terms of their political, economical and cultural life, neither do they possess any distinctive traits in any other aspect. All this indicates that it is not an issue to treat them as one distinctive ethnic group, as they are not a Jewish nation in themselves.” (Note 9)

The Central United Front admitted that the negation of Jews as an existent ethno-nationality in China could possibly cause problems with regard to the stateless Jewish population in Shanghai. It also stressed that based upon historical archival evidence, the “difference between the Kaifeng Jews and their Han counterpart” is inconsequential, suggesting Kaifeng Jewry be treated as a part of the Han *minzu*.

At the closing of this piece, the Central United Front cautioned that “we should take the initiative to be more caring to them in various activities and educate the local Han population not to discriminate against or insult them.” The purpose of such an initiative is to “help gradually ease away the differences they [the Kaifeng Jews] might psychologically or emotionally feel exists between them and the Han.” In other words, whilst the Kaifeng Jewish descendants were treated indiscriminately policy-wise, they were still deemed different from the Han population (by the local Han people *per se*). Albeit subtle, such a difference was discerned by the regime. It is necessary to transform the way how the local Han people think of as well as behave toward the Jewish descendants in order to “incorporate” the Jewish descendants into the larger Han population.

Judging from the strikethroughs and corrections that came with this telegraph, one can tell that its author(s) and editor(s) had contemplated the wording carefully. For instance, the original text claims that it would be better not to state whether or not to acknowledge Kaifeng Jewry but to keep the principles solely to the leaders. However, those words were smudged in the later modifications.

The Central United Front did not grant the Jews the status as a separate ethnonationality because this community does not tally with the guidelines set forth by the authority. Professor Wu Xueli (Shirley Wood), who then served as a member of the Henan Provincial CPPCC, provided an account concerning the Jewish descendants' reaction toward the decision: “... several hundred inhabitants of Kaifeng, apparently unaware that Jews did not fit into any of the minority classifications set up by Peking, trooped to the various census centers, where, to the utter bewilderment of the clerical staffs, they attempted to register as members of a minority that, officially at least, did not even exist. Their efforts were of course to no avail” (Pollak, 1980).

Meanwhile, as I have argued, the recognition of Jews and Judaism can be parallel—Kaifeng Judaism (different from the religious practices directed by Jewish refugees in Shanghai and other Chinese cities) never became an officially acknowledged religion in the PRC. (Note 10) In my interview with Dr Wendy Abraham, an expert in Sino-Judaic Studies, I was told:

“At that time (the 1950s), the Jews were close to being declared a National Minority, but in the end, it was not to be, after the Bandung Conference in Indonesia in 1955, and China's alignment with the League of Arab Nations shortly thereafter. That was the closest time, and the only moment, Jews would have been officially on the “religious map” ... and Judaism might have been considered one of the five officially recognised religions in the PRC.” (Note 11)

Certainly, the authority's attitude toward Kaifeng Jewry and their practice of Judaism changes with its political concerns on the international stage. As the first international conference with representatives all from the Third World countries, the Bandung Conference is considered a milestone in the history of anti-colonialism and also a watershed in the history of Sino-Middle Eastern relations. For the first time, the PRC had an opportunity to establish connections with the Arab states in the absence of Israeli representatives. On 22nd April 1955, *People's Daily* published an article titled “People's Struggle for the National Independence in the Near/Middle East (*Jinzhongdong renmin zhengqu minzu duli de douzheng*)” (Gao, 1955). Five days later, Zhou Enlai delivered a speech at the closing ceremony, stating: “The Chinese people fully sympathize with and fully support ... the struggle of the Arab peoples for human rights in Palestine ... and the just struggle of all Asian and African

peoples for national independence and freedom of their peoples from colonialism” (Xinhua News Agency, 1955). Although these two remarks did not directly refer to Israel, for the first time Israel was excluded from the “progressive camp (*jinbu zhenying*)” drawn by the Chinese leaders (She, 2016). China’s decision to side with the Arab states during the Cold War made it almost impossible to improve its relations with Israel. For over three decades, China maintained a critical stance toward Israel, and Mao Zedong addressed Israel as “the military bases of the American Imperialism in Asia” (Wang, 2009). Until the late 1980s, the propaganda portrayed Jews as a distant enemy, associated with one of China’s prominent enemies—the Americans—as well as one of China’s closest allies, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (hereon PLO) (Zhou, 2016). Not until 1992 did China establish diplomatic relations with Israel. With that came changes regarding the policy toward Kaifeng Jewry, which will be elaborated on later.

Right before the Bandung Conference, in February 1955, the Central government dispatched three officials to study the Jewish community in Kaifeng. These three officials submitted a report titled “The Present Situation of the Kaifeng Jewish Descendants.” Based upon this document, Mao Zedong confirmed that the Kaifeng Jews were no longer a *minzu* (Ehrlich and Liang, 2008). Despite the intricacy of China’s foreign policy toward Israel and the nullification of Kaifeng Jewry as a separate *minzu*, in practice, the descendants’ Jewish ethnic identity persisted, albeit vestigial. In 1957, Timoteus Pokora, a Czech Sinologist, visited Kaifeng and set down a series of facts he observed: “Some attend Muslim services, others are Buddhists. Most see their Jewishness as nationality” (Leslie, 1972, 74). As late as 1980, the United Front of Henan Province raised the issue of Kaifeng Jewry’s ethnic status again. By citing the telegraph response in 1954, the Central United Front made a similar argument, saying that (a) Kaifeng Jews did not seek recognition as a minority people after 1953, and (b) most (younger) Kaifeng Jews do not expect to be recognised as a nationality. This policy document also proposes “consideration to the customs they keep” as well as “appropriate arrangements for representation” (Xu, 2006).

After four years, the Foreign Affairs Office of Henan provincial government issued a protocol addressing principles in dealing with Kaifeng Jewry (*ibid.*). The full text comes as follows:

1. Stick to the principle of denying Kaifeng Jewry as an ethnic group of its own. Various periodicals and newspapers should carry objective reports both domestically and internationally. Recognize the fact of historical migration, but put emphasis on the freedom and happiness that they have today. Use the terminology “descendants of Kaifeng Jews” when we address them without implying any country or ethnic group in order to avoid any unnecessary controversy. Be lenient to foreign scholars and tourists with the request of visiting Kaifeng synagogue relics, stone tablets and meeting with Jewish descendants. The Kaifeng Foreign Affairs Office will be in charge of their visits politically.
2. From the standpoint of historical materialism, we may consider opening the original site of Kaifeng synagogue and stone tablets to the public. Kaifeng municipal museum could keep historical files of Kaifeng Jewry in one of its exhibit rooms for viewing. Related introduction could also be made in books and paintings for publicity abroad and in tourist brochures.
3. Regarding donations made to Kaifeng by Jewish persons from other countries, acceptance could be considered if the donor has no political intentions, and is only doing it out of kindness for renovating historical sites, museums or other welfare purposes. If the donor’s purpose is religiously oriented or implying “a Jewish nation,” the donation should be turned down with grace. (Note 12)

According to this document, the regime allows using the title “Kaifeng Jews” in specific scenarios, i.e., as a historical phenomenon, underpinned by all sorts of evidence such as archives and synagogue relics etc. However, the regime does not recognise the existence of a “Jewish community” today, let alone the community’s practice of Judaism. Hence the replacement of “descendants of Kaifeng Jews” rather than “Kaifeng Jews,” a term that used to appear in previous official documents and news coverages. It is worth noting that what drives the regime to reach such a decision is the community’s lack of “a common language of their own” and “a common area of inhabitation.” Yet none of these policy documents mentioned halakhic reasons—patrilineality and absence of rabbinic Judaism.

Moreover, this document clearly bears the implications of directing Kaifeng Jewry to suit China’s political and economic agenda. It was issued against the backdrop of China’s “Reform and Opening Up” (*gaige kaifang*) policy. From the late 1970s, China’s economic ties with Euro-American countries deepened. More and more travellers from Euro-American countries had the chance to visit China. Under such a circumstance, the issue of Kaifeng Jewry has been highly politicised, with reference to “foreign scholars and tourists.”

Essentially, the ethnic groups in China can be conceptually divided into two groups: (a) those whose primary area of residence is merely in China, such as Hui and Qiang, and (b) those who are a branch of an ethnic group

across at least two countries, such as Mongols and Koreans. (Note 13)

Dan Rabinowitz (2001) has termed “trapped minority.” This concept was raised in order to analyse Palestinian citizens in Israel, who form a transnational community spreading across Israel, Palestine, and others. A “trapped minority” has the following five features: (a) they are a segment of a larger group across two or more states; (b) they tend to be citizens of a state hegemonised by “others;” (c) they are alienated from political power; (d) they have limited access to public goods; (e) they are marginal within their “mother nation” abroad. This concept can also be aptly applied in the context of China. Ethnic groups such as Mongols and Uighurs (with a historical tie with Turkic people) are demanded absolute loyalty to the Chinese state and could be easily suspected of involving in separatism, and charged with “undermining national unity.” Their relationship with the regime is largely swayed by the liaison between the two nations (in the case of Uighurs, it is between China, Turkey, and the Central Asian countries). Albeit not identical, Kaifeng Jewry is in a similar position. To deny the existence of Kaifeng Jews is also to deny their status being in the Jewish diaspora as well as their potential ties with the “Jewish homeland”—Israel. By highlighting “the freedom and happiness” of those Jewish descendants who live in China, the regime aims to convey a message to the world that China does not allow foreign intervention regarding the Kaifeng Jewry issue. Namely, the regime hopes to treat this issue as a domestic affair of the PRC, regardless of the suggestive involvement of other nation-states.

Nevertheless, as the document implies, both the provincial and the Kaifeng municipal governments welcomed “foreign scholars and tourists” for multiple reasons, political and economic. These travellers posed to be important resources for the local tourism industry, and the Jewish elements had contributed to a distinctive image of the city on national and international stages. From the 1950s, there have been numerous visitors coming to Kaifeng for this historical community and relics. Usually, they would need sanction from the government to meet with local Jewish descendants. Those “foreign travellers” were received with scrutiny and faced fierce restrictions until the 1990s.

For instance, The chair of Sino-Judaic Institute (hereon SJI), Rabbi Anson Laytner, was refused to enter Kaifeng in the 1970s several times and was told that the city was closed for foreigners (Laytner, 2017). Professor Albert Dien at Stanford University visited Kaifeng twice in 1981. The second time he was leading a group of visitors, but he “(wisely) did not want to subject the family to the trials of another group visit ... his was a random encounter—not an officially sanctioned visit—and ... the family obviously was subjected to either internal or external pressure” (Laytner, 1982).

Based upon the restrictions faced by Laytner and Professor Dien, it could appear that after the termination of the Cultural Revolution, the local authority has lifted the ban of visits by non-Chinese nationals, in accordance with the introduction of the “Reform and Opening Up” policy. However, the “political radar” of local officials did not stop functioning, but they stayed quite vigilant toward those “foreign visitors.” On the one hand, they hope to leave the “foreigners” a good impression that helps improve the image of China, facilitating its “opening up;” in order to do that, they even selected an array of Jewish families and trained them on how to respond to questions such as “Is the country treating the Jews well?” and “Do you suffer discrimination?” etc. On the other hand, the “foreigners” were considered actors who could potentially stir up sentiments and even engender instability in the serene community. It can be corroborated by the following case.

My interlocutor, whom I am going to call Naomi, and who identifies as an American Jew with Ashkenazi background, conducted research on Kaifeng Jewish descendants in the 1980s. She was once reported by an ethnic Hui police officer who disguised to be a Jewish descendant, for speaking to other Jewish descendants. She narrated her experience of being detained in Kaifeng:

“I was detained by the Public Security Police and forced to write a confession before being released... . In fact, the first reason I was given for my arrest, was for speaking to people who did not officially exist! It was hard to know where the interrogation could go after that, since if they didn’t exist, how was I supposed to write a confession apologising for meeting with them? It was at that point that all logic went out the window... I was then expelled.”

The reason Naomi was given for her detainment was groundless and absurd. But apart from that, the fact that the public security police sent an officer in disguise to monitor her interaction with the community, already attests to their animosity and mistrust to a non-Chinese Jewish person. Such mistrust was not just directed at Naomi. As the local authority considers the interaction between Naomi and her informants a mutual process, the mistrust derives from a belief that “Jews/Jewish descendants” are more easily bonded with “foreigners.” Therefore, Jewish descendants who can be roughly classified into group (b)—transnational ethnic groups—are required a higher level of loyalty to the regime than those in group (a), who can ally with the authority (in this case, for

example, with the authority stands the ethnic Hui officer). Especially when they are in contact with someone from another segment of this extensive transnational ethnic group.

This fright from foreign intervention is inherited from China's colonial past as well as from the Cold War ideology in which the CCP regime stood with the socialist camp against the capitalist one. On the other hand, although Han is one of the transborder *minzus* that spreads in not just the PRC but also Taiwan, Singapore and other Southeast Asian countries, it is exempted from such suspicion of cross affiliation. Such a fact signifies an ingrained mistrust toward those non-Han people that contests their loyalty to the Chinese state. This suspicion from the authority has a significant impact on the subsequent development of the Kaifeng Jewish community, rendering a precarious revival in the sense of both religion and ethnic identity in the 1990s.

4.3 A Precarious Revival

In 1984, Professor Louis Schwartz and David Buxbaum managed to establish contact with key officials at the Kaifeng municipal government. Under their encouragement, the municipal government began considering utilising the city's Jewish resource to facilitate economic investment (Laytner, 2017). This idea of highlighting Kaifeng's Jewish feature so as to attract national and international attention and to help develop the local tourist industry received extensive advocates in the 1990s, when the tensions between China and Israel got eased.

After the establishment of non-governmental representative offices in Beijing and Tel Aviv, several officials began lobbying the authority to propagate the Jewish feature of Kaifeng for the good of both the city and the country. In 1990, the branch of China International Travel Service (hereon CITS), a state-owned enterprise, published a policy document titled "A New Attempt—Developing "Kaifeng Jews" Tourist Resources," Procrastination and No Solution Yet," calling for rebuilding the synagogue on its historical location (Urbach, 2008). This synagogue, instead of being used for prayer service, will serve merely as a history museum and tourist attraction. Concerning the suggestive religious sentiments, the CITS issued another document, stressing a localised version of "Three No's Principle"—"(a) not admitting that China has Judaism; (b) not admitting that China has a Jewish *minzu*; (c) not admitting that Kaifeng has Jews" (ibid., 97-98). These declarations included the reconstruction of the synagogue into the municipal project to promote economic development and unequivocally distanced the local Jewish descendants from their Jewish ancestors as well as their ancestral religious practices.

However, dissensus did exist between the local and the central levels. In 1989, the CITS failed to organize a *bat mitzvah* in the Kaifeng museum due to opposition from Beijing. A senior CITS official complained:

"Everything we do needs to be done quietly. There is no reason to let the authorities in Beijing know every little thing because they get the wrong impression... It had no bad effect on the local descendants who participated...They made it out to be some sort of illegal religious activity when in fact it was a harmless friendly celebration" (ibid., 93).

Such a project of synagogue reconstruction was advanced with the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Israel in 1992. Soon after, the municipal government of Kaifeng inaugurated a Society for Research of the History and Culture of Chinese Jews (hereon SRHCCJ). In an article that made the front page of the official local newspaper, the SRHCCJ is said to be symbolising the historical *Yiciley* religion (Note 14) and would be taking charge of the synagogue reconstruction. The Construction Office affiliated with the SRHCCJ even raised \$3,957,170 for this project (Urbach, 2016).

Although the SRHCCJ was not established for researching the situation of the contemporary Jewish community, it's first head, Professor Zhao Xiangru, pronounced his Jewish descent, and remains one of the most vocal figures in support of reviving the Kaifeng- Jewish religion. Zhao was born to a Jewish family in Kaifeng and maintains a strong identity as a Jew instead of merely a Jewish descendant. He has publicly asserted his Jewish identity in different scenarios: "My ancestors were Jewish; I have got Jewish blood. All of this was given by God; It is not a personal choice. I feel proud that I am a Jew" (Poole, 2011); "we are part of world Jewry and we consider our ancestral home to be Israel" (Plafker, 1993). Zhao had a disagreement with the by-then curator of the Kaifeng Municipal museum, Wang Yisha, who was also on the team in charge of the reconstruction. Whilst Wang clung to the discourse that there are no Jews but only Jewish descendants, Zhao insisted on rejuvenating the Jewish identity and Kaifeng Judaism. Their debate caught attention from the Central United Front, rendering Zhao a forced early retirement from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the SRHCCJ (Urbach, 2008). Subsequently, the SRHCCJ, along with its affiliated Reconstruction Office, was dissolved under pressure from Beijing (Urbach, 2016). By late 1995, the voices in support of religious revival had slowly died down.

In addition to the religion, their ethnic identity as Jews was also challenged, if not suppressed. Despite Beijing's

unambiguous attitude that Kaifeng Jewry does not suffice a *minzu*, at the local level, Jewish descendants managed to assert their ethnic status as “Jews” on paper, i.e., the Household Registration Booklet (*hukouben*). It is unclear whether the local government had noticed their “false” ethnic classification because, before the popularisation of computers in the Residency Registration System, the information on the Household Registration Booklet was handwritten rather than printed, making it hard to archive and to trace.

However, in 1996, when one of the families made an attempt to seek recognition as “Jews” from the Israeli Embassy in Beijing, using the Booklet as a supporting document, the ethnic classification issue of Kaifeng Jewry once again was heard and mulled over by the central authority. Their striving for Israel’s acknowledgement suggests a tendency to transform Kaifeng Jewry from a domestic issue to an international one. Although unsuccessful, the prospects of Israel’s interference were intolerable, especially with Jews who constitute a transnational ethnic group. Thus, the year 1996 witnessed the local government’s initiative to modify the *minzu* designation of those who were registered as Jews on the Household Registration Booklet and replace the “Jew” with either Hui or Han. Guangyuan, who was amongst the first Kaifeng Jewish descendants to undertake *aliyah*, was told by the official that it was due to “no “name” of Jews (*Youtai*) within the 56 recognised *minzus*” (Sihu, 2002).

Despite the modification, the Jewish families got to keep their previous Household Registration Booklet. The Li family, for example, own two sets of original documents as proof of their *minzu*. The ethnoreligionality of Li Suisheng was marked “Jew” in the old Booklet. The new Booklet is handwritten and also has the word “Jew” for Suisheng and his daughter, although a closer look at the census record of Suisheng suggests that there is a trace of correction, which is said to be a mistake made by the census official but was corrected right away. Officials at the local police station denied the validity of their Booklet marked with “Jew”—the officials argue that, according to the Residency Registration document that had been digitalised and stored on the computer, the Li family are listed as Han (An, 2002). For some, the “Jew” classification on the Booklet symbolises “loyalty to history.” Quanyou, husband to a daughter from the Shi family, (Note 15) said:

“In the past, on our Household Registration Booklet, the column of her *minzu* was “Jew,” and then it was changed to Han when we received our new Booklet. There was no political or economic purpose for putting “Jew” in the past, but [we were] only being loyal to history. Now, we also want to respect history and restore our own identity as Jewish descendants.”

Unlike the Li family, who are reluctant to admit their ethnic status as Han, there are other Jewish descendants who accept it without discontent or remain indifferent toward the modification campaign. Xiaojing, a sociologist at the National Minorities Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, did not realize her Jewish descent until in 1980 at a conference. She found out that two men whom the attendees referred to as Jewish descendants were her paternal uncles during the conference. Before that, she had been raised a Hui Muslim. Checking with the older generation, Xiaojing confirmed that she “was descended from a Jewish merchant-adventurer named Jin Shide who came to China from “Arabia”— a catch-all designation ... for any Muslim country” (Pollak, 1980). It was also confirmed that the male family members wore skull caps during prayer service at the mosque. Aware of her Jewish descent, Xiaojing made a decision to send her daughter to study Judaism and Hebrew at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles (Abraham, 1989). From this story, it appears that not all Kaifeng Jewish descendants were conscious of their family lineage—some might have been raised as Muslims and thus had little to zero identification as Jews. In fact, as early as the 1920s, some of the Jewish descendants had been regarded as a sect of Muslims (Tenney n.d.).

Another Jewish descendant, Xingwang, a retired martial arts coach at a local high school and member of the Municipal CPPCC, actively offered to be registered as Hui because his “lifestyle is closer to Hui’s” relative to Han’s. Xingwang maintains an identification with his Jewish heritage—he wears a kippah and has a family collection of Jewish-related stuff, including a national flag of Israel and his photo with a former Israeli ambassador to China. Yet, he made no complaints about the modification campaign as he accepts the fact that Kaifeng Jewry “no longer has the basis for existing as a *minzu* on its own” (Yang, 2006).

For the entry of Hui, the NEAC website indicates several of their different streams and origins: “Muslim merchants from Arabia and Persia came to China by the sea in 651...They are regarded the ancestors of the “Hui-Hui” people. The Jews who came from the East during the Song Dynasty later became part of the Hui people due to their religious affinity” (NEAC n.d.). Xingwang’s explanation echoes with the official discourse of the authority: Kaifeng Jewry, as time goes, failed in preserving their customs, stopped “plucking the sinews,” consecutively left their historical colony “South Teaching Torah Alley (*Nan Jiaojing Hutong*),” and will be—if not have been—incorporated into more sizable *minzus*. Whether they merrily accept their new *minzu* status, or

bitterly reject the imposed one, the disappearance of the Jewish ethnicity from the official discourse seems to be irreversible.

4.4 To Summarize

This chapter has been an attempt to review the situation of the Kaifeng Jewish community in the second half of the 20th century. Kaifeng Jewry's failure in being recognised as a *minzu* should be situated in the larger context of the ethnic classification campaign. This campaign follows the "objective" Stalinist guidelines in defining a "nation." Yet the leading experts also agreed that the campaign was more political- than academic-oriented; it was not always consistent, but was oftentimes flexible, seeking to serve the national interests of the fledgling PRC.

The extinction of Kaifeng Jewry from China's *minzu* picture can be accounted for by both. On the one hand, features such as their lack in numbers, absence of a "Sino-Judeo" language, and descendants' emigration (from their historical colony) indicate that Kaifeng Jewry do not suffice a *minzu* in the Stalinist sense. On the other, China's changing relationship with the "Jewish homeland," Israel, has affected the local's tentative practice to restore Kaifeng's Jewish theme; but more importantly, the suggestive cross-border link between the descendants and their "foreign compatriots" aroused the vigilance of the regime, which leads to the erasure of "Jewish *minzu*" on paper. The regime's suspicion of the cross-border political ties renders Kaifeng Jewry an apt example of "trapped minority" in the Chinese context.

When approaching the issue of Kaifeng Jewry, one has to note that it is not a two-player interaction that involves only a homogeneous political regime and a homogeneous Jewish community. But a nuanced analysis entails attending to the dissonance within both of them. That is also the reason why I emphasize "local practice"—there exists a division between the central and the local authority. The local not just conjecture the intention of the central but would sometimes hold back from and even passively resist the central. I thus want to differentiate the local officials' agency and the central order. In the meantime, the Kaifeng Jewish community should not be envisioned as a monolithic actor that fiercely opposes the authority's decision to impose a Han/Hui identity on them, but, on the contrary, is divided concerning their ethnic identity. Some are fervent about restoring their Jewish status, aching for external recognition, like Suisheng. Some conflate with Han/Hui because their family Jewish traditions were at large, like Xiaojing. Others preserve their Jewish legacy in a depoliticised manner, whilst subject to the official discourse that Kaifeng Jewry is merely a historical phenomenon, like Xingwang.

With various interpretations of their "Jewishness," there have appeared two different options in asserting their Jewish identity from the turn of the century. In the next chapter, I want to approach the clash between these two options—to "return" and to stay.

5. To "Return" or to Stay, That Is the Question

5.1 Those Who "Return"

Guangyuan (Chapter 2) was born to a family that is actively identified as Jewish. This family indoctrination as Jews has a great impact on his choice of bringing his family to "return" to Israel, a point that I will return to in the following analysis.

In the early 1990s, Guangyuan was appointed an assistant of Professor Zhao Xiangru (Chapter 2) in rebuilding the synagogue. Like Zhao Xiangru, Guangyuan is a staunch advocate of Jewish cultural and religious rejuvenation; yet more importantly, he harboured a desire to return to his "ancestral land"—Israel. In April 1995, along with other two Kaifeng Jewish descendants, Guangyuan paid a visit to the Israeli Embassy in Beijing. The purpose of this journey was to win the Embassy's support in resuscitating their Jewish identity and, furthermore, to inquire about the Embassy's attitude toward their status under the Law of Return as well as their prospects for *aliyah*. However, this preliminary attempt did not fall through—they were rejected to meet with embassy officials. After sitting in the waiting room for two days, he was physically taken out by the security guard.

Recalling this experience, Guangyuan said:

"On the train back to Kaifeng, I did not stop crying the whole way. I wanted to die. So many people sent me, gave me their photos and documents. They said: "You must go meet with the Israelis, tell them of our situation" ... What would I tell them? I felt like an orphan of the world. Coming back, I lay sick with fever for a whole week. Then I got up and told them: Israel has forgotten us" (Urbach, 2008).

Following the dismissal of the Reconstruction Office, Guangyuan made another attempt. He somehow managed to retrieve a certificate from the municipal notary office, confirming his *minzu* as "Jew." Then he headed to Beijing again in October 1996, hoping to get an official notarisation letter from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign

Affairs (hereon MFA). Carrying a selection of documents, including the Household Registration Booklet listed “Jew” with him, Guangyuan went to the MFA and waited for a dozen days and received a notarised letter with not only the official stamp of the MFA, but also the stamp of the Israeli Embassy. With no knowledge of Hebrew, Guangyuan and his friends mistook the stamp for a sign of acknowledgement by Israel of their Jewish status, not knowing that it was merely to confirm the validity of the signature given by the Chinese MFA.

Given the previous debate over synagogue reconstruction, and dismissal of Zhao Xiangru from the Academy of Social Sciences, the burgeoning Jewish identity amongst the descendants have attracted attention from the authority. This piece of misinformation that Kaifeng Jewry had gained recognition from the Israeli side soon made to the Kaifeng municipal police station and then to the MFA in Beijing. The latter revoked the certificates. In addition, this event led to the local government’s decision to campaign to replace the Household Registration Booklet of the Jewish descendants and to reclassify their *minzu* status.

Guangyuan was sometimes blamed for that. He felt guilty: “I had no way of answering them, no face to speak (*meifa huida, meimian shuohua*)” (ibid., 129). Nevertheless, despite this setback, Guangyuan did not give up the idea of immigrating to Israel. He managed to establish contacts with a Christian Zionist organisation based in Finland that helps diasporic Jews undertake *aliyah*. In 1997, he arrived in Finland under a tourist visa with his wife, who was born to an ethnic Han family, and his 16-year-old daughter, Wenjing. It is unclear if some of them formally convert to Christianity during their four months’ stay in Finland. In the end, they arrived in Israel under a tourist visa; yet not being halakhically Jewish, the family were not qualified for an instant acquisition of Israeli citizenship.

Out of employment for over four years, Guangyuan and his wife relied on the Finnish organisation for living expenses. Until 2005, he managed to secure a job as a security guard in a supermarket outside of Jerusalem in the Palestinian territory. Wenjing, on the other hand, embarked on her journey to “learn to be a Jew,” albeit challengeable:

“At that time, my parents and I went to a crash course to learn Hebrew. After all the classes were finished, we started looking for a school. We found several schools in Jerusalem, but they didn’t take me because of my age and language.”

Fortunately, she finally got enrolled in a conversion program at a school named *Yemin Orde*. Since the school is based in Haifa, Wenjing did not get to spend much time with her parents.

“I am the only child at home and never had the experience of being away from my parents. I also found it difficult to communicate with people because I am a girl and because of my age and language. I once cried in the middle of a class as I missed my parents so much” (Xiong and Cheng, 2004).

It took her three years to complete the conversion process because she had more than average “puzzles and questions” regarding Judaism. In 2004, Wenjing officially converted to Judaism. She adopts and goes by a Hebrew name (Shalva, which holds the same meaning as her Chinese name—serenity), performed her national service at Shaarei Zedek Hospital in Jerusalem (Freud, 2004), and graduated from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem with a bachelor’s degree in East Asian Studies and Communication in 2008. Wenjing was the very first Kaifeng Jewish descendant ever to gain recognition as a Jew and make *aliyah*.

Yecholiah (in her 30s) is an extended family member of Guangyuan’s. Since childhood, Yecholiah’s father has been instilling the idea of “return” in her by reasserting her Jewish identity. In 2005, Shavei Israel (Note 16) made contact with the Kaifeng Jewish community and organised a meeting with 50 Jewish descendants, with two Orthodox rabbis present. “That was truly an inspiring meeting, as if it showed us a hope of ‘going back home’.”

Three months after that meeting, in January 2006, Yecholiah was told by her father that she, along with three other girls, would be “going back home” in one week’s time. “We, after settling in China for over a millennium, were finally going back home!” That year, she was 19. The Western Wall was Yecholiah’s first stop in Israel. For the first time, she got to see the “hometown” her father kept mentioning. However, the “being-home” feeling was evanescent. After the short visit to the Western Wall, Yecholiah and her fellows were brought to a girls’ seminary, where they would be spending the year coming. This seminary is located in an area called Bat Ayin, which is in Gush Etzion, an infamous Israeli settlement south of Jerusalem.

Many people have asked about her first impression of Israel: “You must have had a strong sense of belonging to be at home after so many years!” She would answer with regret: “Except that moment at the Western Wall, I never felt at home at that time.” She did envision countless times what it would be like to be living in Israel, and did long for return when she was in Kaifeng; but when she finally arrived, she soon found out that “the Promised

Land” was endowed with another layer of meaning—a land far away from family and friends, a land where she felt strange, lonely, and intimidated. “That was the first time I reckoned with the question—what does “return” mean to me, apart from parents’ will?”

Today, living in Israel does not just mean “return” to the ancestral land. Yecholiah also learned what “being an Israeli” entails—inevitably, every Israeli is involved in the Israeli- Palestinian conflict. For Yecholiah, her first time being directly involved occurred quickly. Upon starting her study, she was assigned a Jewish host family. That dad was a taciturn person. He would compose music and play the guitar; he had a happy family life, with twins and an elder son. One day, after his morning prayer, he went to the woods nearby to do meditation. He was stabbed dead by a Palestinian kid from a neighbouring village then.

“That was a terrible shock to me ... My counsellor told me that he died of a car accident. I believed because the weather was quite foggy, and the roads were zigzag. Not until the next day the school announced the real cause of his death; my head went blank.”

She repeated the word “shock” three times. But she held the negative feeling when speaking to her mom on the phone—“I lied and told her it was a car accident ... I didn’t want to worry her. She was already crying a lot with me gone.”

During our interview, one word came up constantly—homesick. Notwithstanding the strong yearning for home and parents, Yecholiah never regretted her decision to come to Israel. She formally passed her conversion on 17th January 2007. Whilst waiting for approval of her application for Israeli citizenship, she joined a religious kibbutz named *Sde Eliyahu* near Beit Shean. Yecholiah spent eight months at *Sde Eliyahu* before she was finally granted Israeli citizenship in 2008. She then joined a tour guide course at the University of Haifa and acquired a certificate. She was one of the first Kaifeng Jewish descendants who undertook *aliyah* with the help of Shavei Israel.

Today, the scale of Kaifeng Jewish community has reached an estimated number of 2,000 people, whilst 21 of them have undertaken *aliyah* and are residing in Israel. When I first spoke to Naomi, the researcher I mentioned in chapter 2, she asked: “Do you think their interest in making *Aliyah* to Israel, and their connection to Judaism or interest in reviving the religion in the community, is genuine?” Many people, who work with the Kaifeng Jewish descendants, have a similar concern. Admittedly, Kaifeng is a relatively impoverished city, especially in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It is unclear if their immigration involves economic or practical motivations, yet I would argue that it is their (a) family commitment and (b) theological passion that also derives from the former, that play the largest part.

“Return” has always been an essential ideology passed on from generation to generation in Guangyuan and Yecholiah’s family. Before Guangyuan’s father passed away, he said to his three sons (Note 17): “You have to return to the Holy Land if you can.” Yecholiah, too, was brought up listening to such instructions from her father. She admitted: “Throughout my life journey, my father had the greatest impact on me. He used his words and deeds to tell me that “return” is not just an action, but a faith.” In 2002, Yecholiah’s father co-founded the first modern Jewish school in Kaifeng—*Yicileye* school—with an American Judeo-Christian named Timothy Lerner. (Note 18) The school went through a difficult time: it only had one room as the classroom in the beginning; other Jewish families were also suspicious about this form of help from a “foreign Jew.” Yecholiah was the first student enrolled. Later, more Jewish families joined. This is where Yecholiah picked up most other knowledge pertaining to “Jew” before her *aliyah*.

“As my understanding toward my minzu deepened, I realised that I am not just of Jewish descent but want to become an “authentic Jew.” For the first time, the idea of “return” budded in me.”

Yecholiah and Wenjing were both taken to Israel during their formative years (before 20) primarily because of their parents’ choice, and both had little idea what “return” implies—a strange land, a new language, and sacrifice of family time. Despite all of that, Yecholiah’s father was always determined about this decision, regarding which Yecholiah recounted:

“It feels like this idea [of undertaking *aliyah*] was entrenched in my bones—I have always known since little that I have to take this step... My dad has a stronger faith than I do, even today. He had never been to Israel at the time; I wonder where that faith and perseverance come from.”

She attributes their success in making *aliyah* to “faith” and said in reference to their first meeting with Shavei Israel in 2005:

“Only after years did I know that they [the rabbis] from Shavei Israel were astonished by our community—we have long lost our synagogue, our rabbis, and the government’s approval of our Jewish

identity; but we kept that slight hope of “return.” It was probably the slight yet unshakable hope that touched them.”

Apart from “faith” that the family upbringing has indoctrinated, their *aliyah* is also imbued with theological connotation, which can be corroborated by an anecdote: how Yecholiah became Yecholiah.

At the seminary, the study was primarily about Judaism, preparing them for the formal conversion exam. Normally, anyone under the conversion process will be given a Hebrew name. I asked how she got this name, “It’s uncommon, but sounds ... mighty.”

“You think so? ... My Chinese name starts with the letter “J,” so I was looking for a Hebrew name with the initial of “yod.” One day I was browsing the Tanakh; that was where I found “Yecholiah.” I asked the teacher what it means, and he said, “God is able.” The moment I got this answer, I was certain—this is my name ... This is exactly what my entire clan has been trying to do—we are trying to prove that God is able to do anything. I think this name is given to me by Him.”

This name was frowned upon by her teacher of Judaism at the seminary and was also challenged for “not being Jewish enough” by rabbis at the conversion. “At the *beit din*, (Note 19) the rabbis were doubtful if it was a Jewish name. I had to prove it by searching in the *Tanakh*.”

Yet, she stuck to this name, because of the meaning it entails, which denotes the mission of her whole clan. Such an anecdote unambiguously demonstrates how theological passion, fused with family commitment, has motivated her *aliyah*. Reflecting on family influence, another Kaifeng Jewish descendant who came to Israel with Yecholiah said:

“I still remember my grandma always read her Bible like Isaiah. I think like 60 chapter said HaShem will like the eagle, bring his people come back. And always this word and scripture came into my mind. I think it is true.”

Moreover, both Guangyuan and Yecholiah believe *aliyah* is not just their family’s business, but they are eager to bring more Jewish descendants to Israel from Kaifeng. Yecholiah is particularly vocal and passionate about this idea. In one of her personal logs, she set down details of a dialogue between her and her father, Guangyuan’s brother:

“My father told me that from the very beginning, he had seen me as the pride of our clan. He knows the hardships I underwent until today, so he wants to help more Kaifeng Jews “return,” so that they don’t have to repeat what I went through. His words are also what I want to say.”

For Yecholiah’s father, there are multiple means of “return.” They believe that before the “true return,” every Kaifeng Jew should have an experience of a “psychic return,” that is, to encourage Kaifeng Jews to have a short-term visit to Israel. They termed this project “Visit your home (*huijia kankan*)” and proposed three potential ways: (a) travel (for all age groups), (b) summer camp (for the younger generation), and (c) kibbutz (for the middle-aged group). As foregoers of *aliyah*, their clan have displayed a sense of purpose for the full return of Kaifeng Jews.

Their use of “Kaifeng Jews” instead of “descendants of Kaifeng Jews” is also worth mentioning. During my interviews, all interlocutors address themselves as “Jews” rather than “descendants,” despite the erasure of Jews from China’s official discourse. Both Yecholiah and Wenjing have expressed their aversion toward the conversion process. “I was told I was a Jew growing up. Now you want me to prove that! To the majority of Jews, I don’t even count as a Jew!” She muttered with chagrin. As one of the few people who underwent the conversion process, Yecholiah has differentiated her individual identity as a “Jew” throughout her lifetime and her acquisition of the “Jewish status” via religious conversion. The use of “Kaifeng Jews,” although on certain occasions seems to be briefwriting for “Kaifeng Jewish descendants,” most of the time refers to where they navigate themselves in the genealogy of the world Jewry. Thus, the Jewish status, which represents an external institutional recognition, should be separate from one’s sheer cognitive identity—“Jew.”

Yecholiah also describes her experience of *aliyah* as her journey “in search of self.” She did confront uncertainty and doubt during this journey, but her faith was fortified as her knowledge about Israel incremented. The first time she thought about her relationship with Israel as a material, political entity rather than a remote, generational dream of her clan was after the death of her host family’s dad: “Why would he forsake their stable and affluent life to live in such a dangerous village? Will I make the same choice if I were him?”

The turning point happened at the kibbutz *Sde Eliyahu*. She chuckled and said:

“The Tanakh says Israel is a land of “milk and honey.” But you know, the dessert is really bleak ... I like

grapes, so I volunteered to work in the vineyard ... Although initially, I was going for the grapes, I got fascinated soon after—how can this land breed so sweet grapes?”

“You are free from distractions, and it gives you an opportunity to know the land and spend time with it alone. It was also the time I started to take root in Israel—just as the grapevines take root in the land. I had a strong feeling that I want to stay, not for my family but for myself.”

Although at the time Yecholiah had acquired the status of a “Jew,” with recognition from the rabbinate, her psychic bond with the so-called Jewish homeland did not generate until then. For her, being a “Jew” does not guarantee a natural affection toward Israel, neither does granting the Jewish status by the authority. But the existent bond between her and her Holy Land was a result of her continuous efforts of taking root like a grapevine.

5.2 *Those Who Stay*

Shasha (in her early 20s) is a niece to both Wenjing and Yecholiah. We met in a mutual friend’s apartment in Jerusalem in January 2018. “She is a Kaifeng Jew,” my friend murmured to me, whilst she was sitting at the table, writing Hebrew homework, sometimes scrolling on her phone casually, “her aunt immigrated here a decade ago.” Shasha is the first Kaifeng Jewish descendant I knew. She is the same age as my younger cousin, who also likes to use filtered selfies with bunny ears as the profile picture on social media.

Shasha was enrolled in a Hebrew instruction course at the Hebrew University between 2016 and 2018. It was a self-funded programme, with no financial support from Shavei Israel or the Israeli government. “The government didn’t even know there were [Kaifeng] Jews coming to visit.”

Reflecting on what brought her to Israel, she said:

“After I finished high school here [in Kaifeng], my grandfather asked if I wanted to come to Israel. After all, in his mind, he still felt that we were of Jewish origin, and he wanted us to take a look, whether it’s to immigrate, study, or just learn about it. At least at that time, I didn’t intend to immigrate, but just wanted to visit.”

After one year and a half at the Hebrew University, Shasha enrolled at the same girl’s seminary where Yecholiah had studied, under the same teacher. But she could not adapt to the religious lifestyle. She said:

“The people are very, very unsophisticated (*chunpu*). Everything revolves around religion and creed. Apart from prayer, they gather together and chat about the Bible. Nothing else. Although I do have a religious belief, it is impossible for me to dedicate my whole life to it. So, I left.”

Shasha is now living in Kaifeng and started working just recently. I asked whether she has any plan to undertake *aliyah* in the future.

“I have never thought about living in Israel long term. But if there is nothing for me to take care of in China (*guonei mei shenme shi*), I don’t mind visiting, though it won’t be too long—half a year at most ... I’m not like the older generation who think that as a Jew, one has to go back to Israel. First of all, I was born in China and native to China. So, if you really want me to adapt to life in Israel, surely, I won’t be able to do so.” “I still have Jewish elements in my blood ... if one day all the Jews in the future want to return to Israel to live or whatever, I will certainly not object. But I do not have such an intention (*wo meiyou zhege xin*), neither do I think returning to Israel is the sole way to lead a good life. I think life in China is the same; I feel more adapted to my lifestyle here.”

The only circumstance she would agree to immigrate to Israel, she said, is when her whole family are immigrating.

When I tried to approach Abigail (in her early 40s) through a social media platform, I was surprised to see that her ID was “Chinese Jew”—it is such a straightforward announcement of her Jewish identity to all her contacts! Abigail came to form her identity as a Jewish descendant via reading her maternal grandfather’s picture book in Hebrew when she was little, but then found out her Jewish identity was not recognised by Israel. She said:

“It’s like you grew up knowing who your parents are, and although you don’t live with them, you’re sure they’re your parents. But they tell you when you’re older: “You’re not my child.” That’s the same thing.”

“It won’t hurt me if the Chinese government don’t think we are Jew. It doesn’t matter ... the Chinese government say we are Chinese; so, that is no problem ... But Israeli rabbis don’t think we are Jew. It is a big hurt.”

Speaking of her choice of staying in China, Abigail explained:

“We are all instructed that we are Jew, and that Jerusalem is our hometown. One day ... we will go back. For me, I am, maybe, a little special. I like Chinese culture very much. I want to check how Chinese keep the language and culture thousands of years so lively, and then after this I will get it, then I will take it back to Jerusalem and help my people how to keep our Torah, our language, and our things ... If I don't want to keep culture so much, maybe I also think...”

In these words, Abigail explicitly elaborated on the reasons why she does not consider conducting *aliyah*. These reasons are basically from cultural angles. She graduated from Henan University with a degree in Chinese Literature and worked as a Chinese teacher at a local middle school for years. In one of her logs published on her WeChat account titled “Preservation of Jewish tradition in Kaifeng,” with an eloquent article introducing the history of the Kaifeng Jewish community, Abigail also uploaded a picture of her wearing traditional ethnic Han attire (*Hanfu*) in blue and white—the colour combination that is often attributed to “Israel” and “Jew,” with dozens of *Magen Davids* around her cuffs and neckband. This seems a perfect metaphor for her position in the crack between two *minzu* identities—Jewish and Han. Abigail is also a pioneer in preserving the local Jewish traditions. From 2008, she received a donation from an American Jew, and spent the money purchasing and collecting scriptures and materials. She is now running a Kaifeng Jewry themed family museum named “The Kaifeng Jewish History Memorial Center (hereon KJHMC)” and works as a tour guide showing the remnants of the synagogue and “South Teaching Torah Alley” part-time.

With families settling in Israel, both Shasha and Abigail have the option to “return” to Israel (Shasha even had the chance to take the conversion exam), but both have chosen to stay in Kaifeng instead. They made the same choice for different reasons.

For Shasha, her decision to come back to Kaifeng involves two major aspects of reasons: (a) her identification as a native Chinese person, and (b) her hesitation toward an Orthodox life. I once asked her if she has a Hebrew name and if she uses it. She answered:

“No, I don't. At the time, they wanted to call me “Shani,” which is also a name from the *Bible*, but then they transliterated it—it sounds exactly like *shǎ-nī* ... Then I said, forget it, I don't want this name.”

Shǎ-nī (傻妮), which shares the same Romanised transliteration with the Hebrew name “Shani,” literally means “muddle-headed girl” in some Northern Chinese dialects. Shasha did not adopt “Shani” because of its not so pleasant transliteration in Chinese. Through such a choice, she demonstrates an unambiguous priority for her Chinese linguistic identity compared to the Hebrew one—the way she approaches and weighs the Hebrew name is through a Chinese phonetic aspect, although few people in her Hebrew class knew the phonetic connotation behind the name. The name, as a symbol of one's identity, associates the self and others through the act of calling and responding. It is the Chinese part of herself that Shasha chooses to be constantly reminded of in the foreseeable future.

This example shows Shasha's identification with China as a cultural-linguistic unit. It can be further complemented by the following account of Xingwang (Chapter 2), who displays an identification with the Chinese nation-state as a political institution. Speaking of those who have undertaken or aspire to undertake *aliyah*, Xingwang once commented with disagreement:

“Although we have Jewish blood in our veins, we grew up in China. We are first and foremost Chinese. We have feelings for our homeland, and we are all patriotic.” “It's enough to know in your heart where you come from. After all, China is our home.”

In China, patriotism has become an unchallengeable mainstream discourse and consensus, permeating every aspect of society, including education, economy, and social policies. For Xingwang, he has formed a fused ethnic-political identity as a Chinese national, which entails patriotism and loyalty toward the country, and as a Jewish descendant simultaneously. The political part and the ethno-biological part are compatible due to the compromised depoliticisation of his Jewish identity. Thus, Xingwang is able to separate the political entity of “Israel” from his cognitive picture of “homeland,” with China being the sole nation-state to which his loyalty is dedicated.

Moreover, Shasha has differentiated herself and the “older generation (in the Kaifeng Jewish community)” regarding the attitude toward “return.” This being said, Shasha considers the compelling narrative that associates Jews with “return to Israel” outmoded, although the older generation had less chance to visit Israel in person when they were younger. Shasha, who was born at the end of the 20th century and grew up in the first two decades of the 21st century, witnessed the improvement of people's living standards benefiting from China's economic prosperity. A comparison between Israel and China, for someone who has lived in both countries like

Shasha, therefore becomes inevitable. Although Kaifeng is not located in the most developed area in China, it is considered by Shasha a more vibrant city compared to Bat Ayin. Recalling their impression about Bat Ayin, both Yecholiah and Shasha have expressed some form of disappointment:

“The life there was not easy ... It was a desolate village. Although Kaifeng is not a metropolitan, it is quite convenient living there; but here, everything is new.” (Yecholiah)

“It feels like a remote utopia (*shiwai taoyuan* (Note 20)), very secluded.” (Shasha)

It is the monotonous life in Bat Ayin, with its Orthodox elements and lack of “entertainment,” that Shasha cannot adapt to and compelled her to move back to China.

As for Abigail, however, her reason for not conducting *aliyah* is more “Jewish-centred.” Her identification as a “native Chinese” does not stand out but instead, she adopts a stance of “outsider” in viewing China. Her study of Chinese literature and “culture,” serves an ultimate goal to share the Chinese experience of cultural inheritance with her “people.” By doing so, Abigail seeks to internalize an objectified Chinese culture in order to supplement its Jewish counterpart.

Meanwhile, Abigail also poses to be a guardian of Kaifeng Jewish traditions, preserving both material and spiritual vestige of Kaifeng Judaism, which is marked by ingredients such as a Chinese-temple styled synagogue (in the form of a model kept at the KJHMC and the Diaspora Museum at Tel Aviv University) and Chinese-Hebrew *Torah* scrolls, etc. These ingredients, combined with Chinese elements, are distinguishable from the Jewish relics elsewhere around the world. So is their regionalised, particular identity as “Kaifeng Jews” instead of a generic designation of “Jews.” This distinct dual identification with Kaifeng and Jewry can also be seen in Yecholiah’s family. While reading Yecholiah’s personal log, I was astounded by the giant size of the watermark of “China Kaifeng” that spreads on every page of the PDF file. Yecholiah’s father is also used to wearing a customised kippah with a fringe that says “China Kaifeng” in both Chinese and Hebrew. Let alone their sense of mission to bring those Kaifeng Jewish descendants to Israel.

Abigail identifies herself as a Kaifeng Jew, a concept that should be distinguished from both a mainstream Jew that is recognised by the Israeli Rabbinate and an ethnic Chinese person that is an imposed identity by the official discourse in China. It is a regionalised Jewish identity, with Kaifeng Judaism being an essential component. It is also marginalised by both Israel and China. She has her own interpretation on the constructiveness of Jewishness: If the *Torah* says there should be no intermarriage between Jews and other peoples, where does the rule of matrilineality come from? Why is patrilineality inferior to matrilineality?

In fact, today’s Kaifeng Jewish community does not conform to a single rule of patrilineality or matrilineality but is mingled with both. Whilst Guangyuan and Yecholiah inherited their Jewish descent from the paternal side, both Shasha’s and Abigail’s identifications as Kaifeng Jews are influenced by their maternal grandfather (a descent that follows both patrilineality and matrilineality). Yet within the community, their identity has been accepted with no challenges whatsoever from their fellows. The elastic Jewish identity in the absence of rabbinate regulation, did not lead to a dilution of Jewish elements in this community, but on the contrary, has helped expand its scale by incorporating more members from both maternal and paternal lineages. Indeed, the aforementioned scale of 2,000 include not only those who were born to Jewish families, but also those non-Jews who intermarried and informally converted.

5.3 To Summarize

In this chapter, I have invoked accounts of four Kaifeng Jewish descendants, who made different choices regarding whether or not to “return” to Israel by claiming citizenship. This chapter seeks to answer one question: Is those Kaifeng Jewish descendants’ *aliyah* an act of flexible citizenship (Ong, 1999), or a result of genuine passion driven by religious and ethno- biological pulses?

On the one hand, both Guangyuan and Yecholiah’s decision of *aliyah* was a result of theological ideology and family inculcation that “as Jews, we must go back to the Holy Land at some point.” The difference, however, is that Yecholiah’s *aliyah* was more an arrangement prompted by parents than an informed choice of her own. One’s journey in search of self, I would argue, by no means proceeds merely from economic reasons to leap out of poverty but more a result of family legacy and theological passion.

On the other hand, Shasha and Abigail have stayed in Kaifeng for distinct reasons. Shasha, after living in Israel for two years during between 18 to 20, found out her attachment to China as a cultural-linguistic entity. Her remark can be supplemented by Xingwang, who detaches his Jewish self from Israel as a political entity and identifies the Chinese nation-state as his homeland. Abigail insists on a regionalised Jewish identity, mediated by Chinese elements. The negotiation between one’s Jewishness and Chineseness happens not only to those who

stay. In the meantime, those who “return,” are also undergoing a constant struggle on the borderland of being Chinese and being Jewish.

6. Being Chinese in the Promised Land

6.1 On the Jewish-Chinese Borderland

Ask a Chinese person passing by in the street what they think of Jews. The chances are that one will get an answer of “smart” and “good at making money.” The popular culture outside of academia has reinforced such a stereotype. Books with titles such as *The Jewish Pillow Book for Teaching Children* [Youtairen jiaozhi zhenbianshu], *The Encyclopaedia of Jewish Wisdom* [Youtairen zhihui quanshu], constantly get published and become best-sellers on the Chinese book market.

In her work *Chinese Perceptions of the Jews*, Zhou Xun mentioned a best-seller in the 1990s, *Revelations on the Jews’ Superior Intelligence*. According to the editor, the Jews have two characteristics: (a) excel in money management, and (b) are well educated and highly literate (He, 1995). The editor also quotes the following words to boost sale volumes:

When a Jew sneezes at home, every bank in the world will catch the cold.

When three Jews are together, they can deal with the global currency market (ibid., 1-2).

Yam, a former undergraduate student at the department of Hebrew Language and Literature at Peking University, China, elaborated on her reason for choosing this major in a video in collaboration with China Radio International. In this video, she spoke to her Israeli audiences:

“Surely you guys will want to ask me why I chose Hebrew. I think that the education of the Jews has made many Jews successful [*mutzlachim*]. So, it is worth understanding the education of the Jews” (Itzik hasini kan be’beijing 2017).

Admittedly, such a narrative that associates “Jews” with intelligence, wealth, and success is sometimes endowed with antisemitic connotation in Europe. However, in China, it tends to be more complimentary than derogatory. It is so prevalent in China that upon seeing a Jew, many will react by labelling him/her “clever” in a reductionist manner. Tomer, an Israeli Jew, told me:

“In China, when people know about my Jewish background, the first thing they say to me is “you must be really clever.”

Likewise, Yecholiah had a similar experience when she was studying at high school in Kaifeng. She recounted:

“I had some classmates and teachers who knew I was Jewish because of my former Household Registration Booklet. Then they joked and said, “I heard that Jewish people are very smart, but how come I don’t see that in you?”

Yecholiah was not offended by these words but referred to them as “playful banter” and ascribes them to her classmates and teachers’ lack of knowledge about Jews. Do they really think Yecholiah is not as smart as “other Jews?” Apparently, no, because they do not know enough Jews to tell. Nevertheless, an image of Jews as the Other was constructed relative to “Chinese *minzus*,” turning one’s Jewish ethnic status on paper into a conceptual difference in people’s mind. Although such fantasising and fetishizing narrative does not necessarily drive the Kaifeng Jewish descendants to immigrate, it certainly contributes to their particular ethnic pride as Jews and being different from the majority of Chinese people.

Yet does that mean the overwhelming public in China reject the Kaifeng Jewish descendants being “Chinese?” The answer is absolutely no. In May 2017, Pear Video, a Chinese short video producer, issued a three-minute documentary titled “When these Chinese Jewish descendants return to Israel” (Pear Video International, 2017) on Bilibili. (Note 21) In this documentary, one Jew from Kaifeng and one from Shijiazhuang, the capital city of Hebei Province, spoke about their reasons for making *aliyah* and their impression about Israel. To legitimize their appeal of making *aliyah*, both “Chinese Jews” in the video invoked biological evidence. However, this discourse of “Jewish blood” received an array of comments of challenges such as “even if you are 1/8 Jewish, you are still 7/8 Chinese.”

Moreover, both the comment section and the scrolling comments are filled with negative speech, either negating the legitimacy of their Jewish lineage or accused them of being “opportunists.”

For example, the comment that received the most likes (2563) goes:

“The real native Chinese Jews who have a pride had responded to the Zionist call to go to the Negev desert (Note 22) in 1945 to open up the wilderness and resist the Arabs. Those immigrants now are just real

villains who are greedy for the welfare of the developed country Israel.”

The second liked comment (1718) goes:

“After more than 2,000 years, the culture and lineage are completely different from the Jews, in fact, only the name remains.”

Many more simply asks them to “get away and never come back to China again.”

These comments further show that the Jewish descendants are required (by the Bilibili users, who tend to be from the younger age group with Internet access) a level of loyalty to the Chinese state independent of other nation-states. Such loyalty takes the form of “citizenship.” As China officially does not recognize dual citizenship, these Bilibili users equal obtaining another country’s citizenship with “betraying one’s homeland—China” and regard emigration as a gesture of ungratefulness; as Israeli citizenship is often intimately tied up with the Jewish race, their *aliyah* is further considered a renouncement of their “roots” as part of the larger Chinese race. In fact, Yaacov Wang in the documentary “came out” and said: “My grandfather always told us that we were not Chinese.” He used the word Chinese (*sini*) instead of “Han” or “Hui.” The difference is that Han and Hui are *minzu* categories that constitute a “Chinese race.” By addressing “we were not Chinese,” he indicates a demarcation between one’s Jewish and Chinese lineage, excluding himself from the Chinese race that is linked with the political entity, China. Last summer (2020), when I tried to interview some Kaifeng Jewish descendants who currently reside in Israel, three rejected. They are very meticulous with regard to media exposure (although I explained this is just for academic use) and want to avoid misrepresentation as much as possible. Pressure from public opinion is an essential factor contributing to their reaction.

However, are one’s Jewish and Chinese identities really incompatible?

In a 2010 program of Israeli cable TV network HOT, the team interviewed two Kaifeng Jews who had successfully claimed Israeli citizenship (Shavei Israel, 2010), including Yecholiah and another girl. Yecholiah admitted her yearning for China and said, “Israel is my home, and China is also my home.” When asked why she did not change her name, the other girl replied: “I am the daughter of the state, and the daughter of China as well.” (Note 23) In fact, she is not the only one who sticks to their Chinese names even after *aliyah*. Yecholiah, for example, explained that she registered with her Chinese name when applying for Israeli citizenship because “if I change my name, it will feel as if I no longer shared a connection with my father ... it is a name given by my parents.” Her Hebrew name is only known to her friends at the seminary, most of whom are not living in Israel currently. Yaacov goes by his Hebrew name, and that is where his Chinese name (*Yage*) comes from.

Such accounts provide an insight into their struggle to strike a balance between one’s “Jewishness” and “Chineseness.” Through formally converting to Judaism and undertaking *aliyah*, they have addressed their Jewish self; through keeping their Chinese names and retaining a tie with China, they are constantly reminded of their past being in China. Such a balance, however, can be volatile and sometimes breaks in certain scenarios. The weights of both sides can be negotiated in accordance with the context. They address one over another in specific occasion.

For example, Yecholiah emphasises her Chineseness by invoking “Chinese experience” in front of me. When being asked about her impression toward Yad Vashem, Israel’s official remembrance centre for Holocaust, she answered with gasps:

“Every time I visit Yad Vashem, I get strong feelings ... I think as a Chinese person—let’s put the Jewish part aside—just as an ordinary Chinese person, I have much resonance to it because China has been through a similar history.”

Here, by “a similar history,” Yecholiah is probably referring to the Nanking Massacre that took place in December 1937 during the Second Sino-Japanese War. It is estimated that a number of 40,000 to 300,000 unarmed civilians were murdered by the Japanese troop that captured Nanjing, accompanied by massive rape and looting (Levene and Roberts, 1999, 223-4). The history of being invaded by the imperial powers and this massacre, in particular, constitute a critical chapter in history textbooks and can be seen extensively in popular culture in China. Whilst the Holocaust has been shaped into an integral part of collective memory shared by Israeli Jews (as well as Jews around the world), the Nanking Massacre has also gained a similar status amongst Chinese nationals.

The way Yecholiah approaches the Holocaust is not through a “Jewish lens,” one that stresses the compassion toward her “compatriots,” her “people,” and one that deems the Holocaust a tragedy to all the Jews across the globe. Rather, in our conversation, she approaches the Holocaust from a “Chinese perspective,” comparing the Holocaust to its Chinese counterpart. In doing so, she demonstrates an unequivocal positionality as an “ordinary

Chinese person.” Admittedly, it is unclear whether her drawing such a comparison is an example of a socialisation strategy. That is, it helps to arouse the empathy of the other speaker and bring two of us closer by creating a bubble of shared knowledge—after all, the person she is conversing with, me, is a Chinese national who possesses as much knowledge about China as she does as well as shares a similar education trajectory. However, it is also worth noting that during the dialogue, she constantly used phrases such as “they Jews” and “they Israelis” rather than “us Jews” and “us Israelis.” Sometimes she addressed Israelis as “foreigners.” She would also compare “Israeli culture” to the “Chinese one” and conclude with the affinity between the two: “The more you know about Israel, its culture, you will find out that actually, they are quite similar to us the Chinese nation (*zhonghua minzu*).” It is a socio-cultural self-awareness and a sense of otherness, as reflected by her frequent use of these exclusive expressions, that strike me.

The boundary between “Jewishness” and “Chineseness” can be fuzzy and elastic. Yecholiah’s position on the conceptual borderland of being Chinese and Jewish makes it possible for her to resort to different narratives under different circumstances.

Let us get back to the question I posed before: are one’s Jewish and Chinese identities incompatible? Based upon the above analysis, we can draw the conclusion that for those on the borderland of both, Jewishness and Chineseness come into existence simultaneously. It is because they occupy different respects of one’s self.

As I have argued in Chapter 1, Jewishness, which bears dual connotations of religiosity and a racial logic, is a “racialization of religion.” The Kaifeng Jewish descendants’ identification as Jews is partially underpinned by their biological lineage, yet it should be considered more as a family commitment passed on from generation to generation. With more and more ethnic Han and Hui joining the family, the pure racial-biological logic gradually lost its validity, and the role of family commitment becomes more visible. Entering the 21st century, when *aliyah* turned out to be a viable option, family commitment started to take the form of religiosity and theological passion. That is why the majority of Kaifeng Jewish descendants I interviewed accredited their return to God. For instance, Shasha describes Israel as a “sacred” country and is a deeply pious follower of the faith in God, despite her decision to go back to live in Kaifeng. Their *aliyah*, therefore, can be understood as a striving for “spiritual citizenship,” rather than an approval of and quest for Zionism.

However, despite their indifference toward Zionism, their *aliyah* was certainly influenced by the diplomatic wrangling between China and Israel from the 1990s on, before which *aliyah* was out of the picture. Such diplomatic tie is premised on Israel as a political entity that offers Jewish people a homeland. Other factors facilitating their *aliyah* include (a) the role played by world Jewry, American Jews in particular, such as the Jewish visitors in the 1980s and 90s that stimulated their Jewish consciousness, the founder of Shavei Israel, Michael Freund, and volunteers dispatched by Sino-Judaic Institute etc., and (b) Christian Zionists such as the founder of *Yicileye* School Timothy Lerner and the Hebrew teachers teaching in Kaifeng nowadays who tend to come from a Christian organization based in Korea.

On the other hand, the Chineseness they display is detached from any religious elements or racial logic, but a socio-cultural consciousness and citizenship. Therefore, outside the realm of spirituality, they exclude Jewish/Israeli elements and fail to address their initial self-awareness as an “Israeli.” Instead, they admit having been incrementally socialised into an “Israeli.” Yecholiah, for example, said indignantly:

“Like what you said, *chutzpah*, (Note 24) I feel like I am affected because sometimes, if you don’t act fiercely, no one listens to you. In the past, my mom always said that I spoke like a cat and I would never raise my voice ... But here, you have no choice; sometimes, they really freak you out. The nicer you are, the more they ignore you.”

Following this, she recalled an experience of her being “*chutzpah*”:

“Once, I was leading a team to a hotel. One of my clients asked for two towels. I couldn’t believe it took them two hours. I was a bit irritated then, but still said politely: “If you cannot do it, just tell me, and I will get the towels for them. I do not want to yell at you like an Israeli because I think it’s rude.” Then the service person answered in a casual and laid-back manner (*youzai*): “Then you can also yell like an Israeli.” So, my good temper has been rubbed (*mo*) by hotels and the airport ... sometimes, you really should blow yourself up for a bit (*baoyixia*).”

Both Yecholiah and the service person attributed “yelling” to a trait of “Israelis.” Yecholiah underwent a process of transformation, i.e., from “like a cat” to “blowing up”—a very “Israeli manner.” This example shows her disapproval of certain national traits of Israelis, which she had to adapt to. Such transformation, however, is not an autonomous one but is quasi-forced on Yecholiah. In this way, her “Chineseness,” a form of socio-cultural

consciousness, co-exists and grapples with “Israeliness,” another form of socio-cultural consciousness. In other words, Jewishness does not compete with their Chineseness, but Israeliness does.

6.2 A Mirage of Integration

In 2012, four years after Yecholiah was granted Israeli citizenship officially, Shavei Israel published an article on its website, commenting: “Yecholiya is fully integrated into Israeli society: she speaks Hebrew, loves to eat *shakshouka* (a Middle Eastern dish), and works as the first Chinese Jewish tour guide in the Holy Land” (Shavei Israel, 2012). It is true that Yecholiah, having lived in Israeli for over one decade, have gradually adapted herself to the lifestyle in this once strange society. However, can one’s level of integration into Israeli society be measured by knowledge of Hebrew, love for *Shakshouka*, and a stable career in Israel? What type of integration are we talking about here?

Based upon the remarks in the previous section (4.1) and chapter (2), one can argue that Yecholiah does not see herself as an “Israeli” socially and culturally. On the one hand, her regionalised identity as a “Kaifeng Jew” should be considered independent from the generic racial category of “Jew,” thus not generating a natural bond with the Israeli state. On the other hand, it is her Chinese origin and her psychic bond with China that she re-addresses throughout our conversation. Such a bond gets materialised and permeates most aspects of her personal life: she married a Chinese national who is originally from Shanghai; the communication within her family is held in Mandarin; her two-year-old baby, an Israeli national, was given a Chinese name; the tourist company she is running with her husband targets at Chinese-speaking people around the world. Her bond with China and proficiency in Mandarin constitutes a core competency for her tourist company. Speaking of her business, she said:

“I think Chinese culture ... the locals cannot get it, and the difference is really quite big. I think the difference between hiring a native Chinese guide and a guide whose native language is not Chinese is quite big.”

Yecholiah is not the only Kaifeng Jewish immigrant that takes advantage of her linguistic capital and socio-cultural connection with China to develop a career. Her cousin Wenjing studied Chinese at the Hebrew University and works as a translator. She used to be a Mandarin language tutor for the previous Israeli Ambassador to China, Matan Vilnai. Chengzhi, who arrived in Israel in 2010 and acquired citizenship four years later, also works as a tour guide in Jerusalem, targeting Chinese-speaking tourists. He married one of his classmates in high school, who was born and raised in Zhengzhou, the capital city of Henan Province. By the time I conversed with his mother, Jiawan, in February, they were celebrating the Chinese Lunar New Year in Kaifeng. Now, Chengzhi is trying to arrange a visa to Israel for their one-year-old son, who was born in China and is a Chinese national. Jiawan told me, she and her husband are planning to buy an apartment in Jerusalem for Chengzhi’s family.

Moreover, Yecholiah has reached an agreement with her husband that their child, an acknowledged Jew and Israeli citizen, will be raised “first and foremost as a Chinese person.”

“We are not teaching him Hebrew intentionally. We still want him to learn Chinese well first, and he should understand Chinese culture. Because we think, for his Jewish identity, he was born here after all ... He will have a lot of time to learn what he wants to learn. I think this identity as a Chinese person, I think it is not to be forgotten. I think, in a sense, it is an advantage ... He has the Chinese blood.”

Apart from the “Chinese blood” Yecholiah and her husband hope that their child can identify with, there are two other reasons they are teaching him Mandarin instead of Hebrew: (a) their limited Hebrew proficiency; (b) Mandarin ability as an advantage and assets.

Although Shavei Israel’s official website lists her knowledge of Hebrew as an essential ingredient to her integration, Yecholiah mentioned her “lack of command of Hebrew” several times. She uses English much more frequently than Hebrew when being around friends. Additionally, her low proficiency in Hebrew has caused much inconvenience in life. Once, Yecholiah and her husband went to the Ministry of Interior to apply for a spouse visa. She complained about the procedure:

“We waited in line for two hours, and then when we entered, the clerk asked, “Have you filled out the form? Do you have your information ready?” We said we just wanted to ask what information we would need because we couldn’t understand the form, which was in Hebrew. The clerk said, “You don’t have the form, and all information is not ready. Come back when everything’s ready,” and kicked us out.”

Linguistic barrier, as demonstrated, has become one of the main factors that hold back her “integration.” Meanwhile, notwithstanding the prolonged period residing in Israel, she did not overcome such a barrier due to

frequent use of Mandarin at work and home, as well as lack of motivation to improve her fluency in Hebrew.

In addition to the low linguistic proficiency, the racialisation logic of Israeli citizenship is also what makes the Kaifeng Jews' integration a false proposition.

As I have argued in Chapter 1, the latent racialisation logic behind the discourse of *aliyah* connects Jewishness with "whiteness." Both Benei Menashe and Lemba "black Jews" have been challenged in this regard. The Kaifeng Jews, who do not conform to the proverbial images of Jews in the street, have also been vexed by a similar issue of being more "Oriental" than "the Jews of the Orient" (*yehudei ha'mizrach*). In other words, whilst the "Chinese Jews" can be a construct and a hoax that reflects an Orientalist fascination (Zhou, 2015), the Kaifeng Jews are confronted with an Othering gaze in Israel. Yecholiah has provided a great example of the "foreignness" attributed to them based upon their appearances:

"At the beginning, many people thought that we were Thai and that we came to get a job (*dagong*) here. My friend was joking that we should customize a T-shirt, saying: I am not a Thai worker."

Dagong is a Mandarin word that was coined in the 20th century. With its original meaning of "working for the boss" and "selling labour," the word is imbued with multi-layered meanings. According to Pan Ngai (1999), *dagong* signifies not only commodification and capitalist exchange of labour for wages, but also a lesser status in contrast to the glorified "worker." In most cases, *dagong* implies mobility from a less developed area to a more developed one.

Yecholiah's account demonstrates not only the racialisation logic that was, or still is, prevalent in Israeli society against East Asian faces, but also the Kaifeng Jewish immigrants' perception of Southeast Asian workers as "stratified others" (Lan, 2006).

On the one hand, having not acquired citizenship officially, Yecholiah and her fellows were situated in an awkward position in the binarised rhetoric of Israeli citizens and non-Israeli foreign labourers. Reluctant to be classified under one shared catalogue with the Thai workers, these aspiring immigrants navigated themselves in the reservoir of prospective citizens. Unlike those who came to Israel to sell labour for purely economic reasons, the Kaifeng Jewish immigrants arrived in Israel with a more relevant tie with the country's national identity and an exalted pursuit of *aliyah*. Additionally, such a nationality-based categorisation denotes the ethnic stratification of the Israeli labour market. This being said, in the envisioned hierarchy of the superior "Israeli citizens" and the inferior "foreign labourers," who can be physically distinct from the former, the Kaifeng Jewish immigrants hope to be distinguished from the latter.

On the other hand, aside from the discriminatory connotation hidden in her wording, the public proclamation of "I am not a Thai worker" can also be seen as an attempt at asserting their subjectivity and resistance to institutional racialisation in Israeli society. East Asian faces are associated with negative, sometimes illicit, conducts. Guangyuan was also subject to such racialising alienation. He recounted during a media interview: The Israeli immigration authority once mistook him for being an illegal immigrant worker and arrested him, despite the kippah he was wearing. An Israeli fellow prisoner shoved Guangyuan aside and said to him: "You're fake! You're wearing a kippah because you're afraid of being arrested." Until this Israeli person heard Guangyuan's prayer in Hebrew, did he realize that Guangyuan was "really a Jew." He then gave up his bed to Guangyuan (Xiong and Cheng, 2004). This example represents the Kaifeng Jewish immigrants' difficult struggle for recognition by mainstream

Israeli society. Both the institution and individual Israelis have portrayed *a priori* the image of a "proper Israeli" or a "proper Jew." Despite the known fact that one's Jewishness is not tied with particular socio-genetic characteristics, a person with facial structures related to East Asia is often excluded from the said racially diverse Jewish world. Only by displaying his religious commitment, did Guangyuan manage to be recognised by his fellow Israeli, who had a monopoly over the definition of "an Israeli," or "a Jew."

Notwithstanding the racialisation logic behind the institution's practice and the individual's comments, I do not intend to argue that mainstream Israeli society is inherently "racist" against East Asians. On the contrary, Guangyuan's fellow prisoner showed his awe toward this East Asian Jew, once he was convinced of Guangyuan's Jewish identity. Different from the discouraging comments below the "When these Chinese Jewish descendants return to Israel" documentary on Bilibili, comments below a documentary published on Shavei Israel's YouTube channel, titled "From Kaifeng to Kibbutz: China's Jewish descendants return to Israel" (Shavei Israel, 2009) are incredibly friendly. Apart from comments explicitly stating "I am not Jewish," an overwhelming number of those who claim to be Jews take on an ambassadorial role and welcome their "brothers and sisters" home. Some said they were deeply moved by their story and even burst into tears.

Therefore, it has to be clarified that the racialisation process, which attributes particular characteristics to a particular ethnic group, should be distinguished from racism, which connotes discrimination against a person, or a people based upon one's ethnic affiliation. Whilst the former can serve as the basis of the latter, it is not always discriminatory. However, despite that, I argue that it is the racialisation logic that alienates the Kaifeng Jewish immigrants and impedes their social integration. Such sense of alienation gets intensified with China's upgraded presence on the international stage and in Israel, luring the Jewish immigrants to strengthen their bond with China and stimulating their identification as "Chinese." This can be exemplified with the following remark from Yecholiah:

"As China gets stronger and stronger, you can also find that the treatment of Chinese people around the world has also improved. You will also find that before, when you came here, people might say you are Japanese or *Filipinim*. But now, many people on the road ... the first thing they say when they see you is, "ah, Chinese." You can really feel that when our motherland becomes strong, the life of overseas Chinese, including what they encounter, will also become better."

The above words suggest that for her, being addressed as "Chinese" serves as a significant criterion for the improvement of overseas Chinese people's life, echoing with the previous remark in regard to "Thai workers." In her mind, the categorisation "Chinese" is connected with more positive implications, and those who are considered "Chinese" receive more respect than those from other East Asian or Southeast Asian countries such as Japan and the Philippines. Such attribution has connected her even more intimately with China, which she merrily accepts. She carried on:

"In fact, I think as long as you are outside of the country, you will become more patriotic. You see, I didn't care much about Chinese holidays before, but now, I care a lot about Chinese holidays, including a lot of things China does in the world, and I actually care more after I came out. And I have always felt that I am very proud because I am half Chinese and half Jewish, which is something I have always been very proud of, but after this incident [the COVID-19 pandemic], I deeply appreciate that really ... the motherland is our strong backing, really. If the motherland is not good, we Chinese living abroad may not be necessarily leading a good life."

As Jew whose status is officially ratified by the Israeli Rabbinate, Yecholiah highlights her biological "Chineseness." As an Israeli citizen, she refers to China, a country of which citizenship she has forsaken, her motherland, or one of her motherlands. She regards China as the strong backing for her well-being in Israel. In Israel, where her Jewishness does not stand out, her Chineseness does. Her affinity to China is also underpinned by the aforementioned racialisation process—regardless of her will, mainstream Israeli society with the hegemony to prescribe what a proper Israeli should be like labels her a Chinese person based merely upon her physical traits.

Racialisation can transform into racism against the Kaifeng Jewish immigrants. In particular, this happens after the COVID-19 outbreak, when Chinese nationals confronted a fierce racist wave. Those who display East Asian socio-genetic attributes were also subjugated to risks of physical violence. On 16 March 2020, a young man from the Benei Menashe community was wrongfully taken as Chinese and was attacked in Tiberia. Yecholiah reflected on what she has encountered as "a Chinese person" during the pandemic:

"This pandemic really made us ... I think Israel is pretty good generally. It's just that there are some very ignorant children saying something like, "Corona, Chinese people all have Corona." we may have encountered this a few times. But I've heard that other countries have been quite anti-Chinese for a while ... My husband is more tolerant. He thinks that the pandemic caused everyone a bad mood. So, just let them say whatever they want. But my character is like ... Sometimes I would fight back. I thought, why would you say that to us? But now we have become quite calm. I think, we have said what should be said and have done what should be done, but sometimes people are so ignorant you cannot help. There are people like this everywhere ... there are times when I will tell them that "this is not correct, you can't say that," then they will also apologize immediately."

Similarly, Huilin, a graduate student at the Hebrew University, wrote in her log:

"Once a girl on a night bus asked my nationality. Then she shrieked in excitement and panic: "I am on the same bus as Chinese people. Let me see if I can survive tomorrow." She also tried to take a selfie with me to upload on her social media. Another time a driver who took me to the Lost and Found asked me: "What have you lost? Have you lost Coronavirus?" Sometimes on Zoom, my classmates would joke that I should be responsible for all the chaos in Israel."



Figure 1

Compared to Huilin and her fellow Chinese students, who are indignant about these verbal discriminations, Yecholiah appears to be less disturbed. By any means, as someone who can be classified as “Chinese” based upon socio-genetical characteristics, both Huilin and Yecholiah are inevitably associated with the Chinese nation-state and the people in its territory, although politically speaking, Yecholiah is no longer affiliated with the regime and will not be directly affected by its decision. Admittedly, Yecholiah did not express any disapproval of or opposition regarding this association with China. However, such an association that is forced by mainstream Israeli society on the Kaifeng Jewish immigrants, serves as a primary external cause for their more robust identification with China. More importantly, it has undermined their sense of belonging in Israel and thus significantly impeded their social integration.

With a “strong motherland backing her up,” Yecholiah feels she was never a victim of racial discrimination in Israel before the pandemic. She thinks that malicious comments are only occasional and praises Israelis for being friendly to Chinese people, relative to Europe. Whilst she highlights the “non-racist” respect of Israel, Huilin has drawn quite an opposite conclusion. Why does that happen? I would argue that one reason is that they have different perceptions toward Israel’s national identity.

Huilin specified that the racism she received was “predominantly from local Arab people,” and that “only when shopping in Jewish supermarkets can I have a moment of peace.” This is corroborated by Yaara’s account: “Mainstream Israeli media have been calling to stop racism against Chinese people. But as they are in Hebrew, they make very little difference to the behaviours of the Arabs.” On the other hand, Yecholiah ascribes “Jews are less racist” to historical anti-Semitism: “I always feel that Jews should be more empathetic because they have suffered discrimination from people of other ethnicities and other countries in their previous history. That’s why I feel that they should be more tolerant.”

Both Huilin and Yaara distinguished Arab people’s reaction from Jews’, and they see Arab people as an integral part of the collective concept of “Israelis;” whilst Yecholiah associates Israel with Jews and only with Jews, picturing Israel as a “Jewish state” and excluding Palestinian Arab people to mainstream Israeli society.

6.3 To Summarize

This chapter has explored two critical issues: (a) how the Kaifeng Jewish immigrants navigate themselves on the borderland of being Jewish and being Chinese, and (b) what contains their integration into Israeli society.

No matter in China or Israel, the Kaifeng Jewish descendants have to negotiate between their Jewishness and Chineseness, and the two have different manifestations. Their Jewish identification derives from a generational family commitment based on their biological lineage. When *aliyah* seemed a viable option at the turn of the century, family commitment started to take the form of theological passion, rendering their Israeli citizenship a spiritual one. Their Chinese identification, however, turns out to be a socio-cultural self-awareness that is detached from religiosity. Parallel to Jewishness and Chineseness, Yecholiah has also specified a form of Israeliness, which is closer to and grapples with the latter, signifying another socio-cultural self-awareness that these immigrants can be socialised with.

Then I continued to argue that their integration into Israeli society is held back by multiple elements, including the linguistic barrier and their psychic and material affinity with the incrementally powerful Chinese state.

Contributing to the latter is the racialisation logic that these immigrants are subject to. Whilst they are attributed to being Chinese by mainstream Israeli people and the institution and excluded from the hegemonic discourse of being an Israeli, they also conceptualised another racial hierarchy in which they, as prospective citizens from China, are superior to the foreign labourers in Israel. The COVID-19 pandemic witnessed the transform from racialisation to racism against those with Chinese origins, further strengthening the immigrants' identification with their previous "motherland" and undermining the basis of their integration into Israeli society.

7. Conclusion

This thesis has revolved around two core questions: from being referred to as "Jewish descendants" by the Chinese government and considered as non-Jews by the Israeli institution, to being recognised as "authentic Jews" and granted Israeli citizenship, what psychological and socio-cultural struggles have the Kaifeng Jewish immigrants undergone? What are the political, social, and theological implications of such a transformation?

First of all, I have situated the historical, political and societal context of the Kaifeng Jewry issue. I placed this community against the backdrop of emerging Jewish communities in and outside Israel and tried to theorise the issue of "Jewishness" as demonstrated by Israeli immigration policy.

The Jewish community in Kaifeng was erased from China's official *minzu* discourse because it does not suffice the Stalinist definition of a nation. I have also revisited the term "trapped minority" and distinguished two types of ethnicities in China: (a) those whose primary area of residence is merely in China, and (b) those who are a branch of an ethnic group across at least two countries. The crux of this division is whether there exists an intra-ethnic trans-border tie, to which the regime stays vigilant. Toward each type of constellations, the authority retains different attitudes and principles. The suggestive cross-border link between the Kaifeng Jewish descendants and their "foreign compatriots" aroused suspicion from the authority, contributing to the erasure of "Jewish *minzu*" on paper.

When approaching the issue of Kaifeng Jewry, one has to note that it is not simply a two-player interaction that involves only a homogeneous political regime and a homogeneous Jewish community. Instead, I differentiated the local officials' agency and the order from the central authority. Meanwhile, contrary to the perception that the Kaifeng Jewish community is a monolithic actor, fiercely rejecting the imposed Han/Hui identity, the individuals hold divergent opinions regarding their Jewish status and have made different decisions whether or not to undertake *aliyah*.

In order to explore their motivation to "return" or to stay respectively, I conducted discourse analysis based upon my interviews with three Kaifeng Jewish descendants, combined with relevant media reports. I conclude that their "return" was more a result of generational family commitment and theological passion, than purely economic pulls to leap out of poverty or quest for Zionism in a political regard. In addition, to dig deeper, I have noticed a profound connection between family commitment and theological passion. That is, the latter derives from the former, as it can be constructive to their journey claiming Israeli citizenship. On the other hand, the majority of the community stayed in Kaifeng for distinct reasons. For example, attachment to China as a cultural-linguistic entity and a political entity, insistence on the regionalised Jewish classification that is mediated by Chinese historico-cultural ingredients.

For those who made *aliyah*, I argue that their position on the conceptual borderland of being Jewish and being Chinese does not constitute a dilemma of identity. Rather, the two focus on different aspects. Whilst the Jewishness they demonstrate is a religiosity with slim backing of biological lineage, rendering their Israeli citizenship primarily a spiritual one, their Chineseness is a socio-cultural self-awareness. Therefore, Jewishness does not conflict nor compete with Chineseness. But Israeliness, which signifies another form of socio-cultural self-awareness, aloof from religious elements, does grapple with Chineseness, and serves as the gist of their social integration.

To clarify, however, the Kaifeng Jewish immigrants have been subjugated to a racialisation process that attributes them to being Chinese, and such a racialisation logic constitutes an essential impediment for their integration into Israeli society. The COVID-19 outbreak witnessed a transformation from racialisation to racism against those with Chinese origins. This pandemic not only strengthened the immigrants' identification with their previous "motherland" and undermined the basis of their integration, but also revealed an intuitive belief held by them: as long as Jews are not racist, Israel is not racist, because after all, Israel is a state for Jews.

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Notes

- Note 1. This thesis uses the pinyin system for Romanising Mandarin (Standard Chinese) and International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) system for Hebrew.
- Note 2. Moovit is a real time public transit app used extensively in Israel.
- Note 3. *Aroma* is a popular coffee chain in Israel.
- Note 4. The historic name for Kaifeng.
- Note 5. See Ma, Rong. 2017. “Reconstructing “nation” (minzu) discourses in China.” *International Journal of Anthropology and Ethnology*, 1(1), pp. 1- 15. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41257-017-0003-x>
- Note 6. Self-translated.
- Note 7. This resolution (*State Council's Resolution on Ensuring That All Ethnic Minority Group Scattering in China Enjoy Equal National Rights* [国务院关于保障一切散居的少数民族成分享有民族平等权利的决定]) was passed during the State Council's 125th meeting on 22 Feb 1952, and was subsequently published on 13 Aug 1952.
- Note 8. According to Xu Xin, the two Kaifeng Jewish descendants who were invited to participate in the 1952 National Day celebrations were called Ai Fenming and Shi Fenying. However, judging by consulting news coverage and interviewees, I believe their names should be Fengming and Minying instead of Fenming and Fenying.
- Note 9. The translation of this telegraphy is borrowed directly from Professor Xu Xin, who attached it as an

appendix of the article “Chinese Policy towards Kaifeng Jews” (Xu, 2006).

Note 10. Officially, the Chinese government only recognizes the following five religions and their practice: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, the Catholic church, and the Protestant Christian church.

Note 11. Dr Wendy Abraham kindly agreed that I cite her answers from email threads and Zoom interviews, despite restrictions to access Dr Abraham’s oral history tapes that are currently stored at Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

Note 12. The document is, again, in the possession of Professor Xu Xin. The translation is borrowed directly from Professor Xu.

Note 13. According to statistics from the 2010 population census, there are 1,830,929 ethnic Koreans in China who are Chinese citizens (National Bureau of Statistics 2010). The majority of them inhabit in Northeast China.

Note 14. *Yicileye* is the old way of transliterating “Israel/Israelite” and can be found on steles and historical archives. It should be distinguished from the standard transliteration of Israel in contemporary Mandarin Chinese—“*Yiselie*.” By referring to “*Yicileye*” instead of “*Yiselie*,” the local government seeks to highlight that the Jewish religious practice in Kaifeng first and foremost bears some Chinese characteristic. It also aims to distinguish Kaifeng Judaism as a historical reality from Israel as a political entity today

Note 15. Most Kaifeng Jewish descendants are under seven surnames, i.e., Zhao, Ai, Li, Zhang (张), Shi, Jin, Gao, and affiliated with 8 clans, including the above seven surnames and 章 that derives from 张. Those surnames are believed to be Chinese transliterations of biblical surnames such as Levi (Li), Sheba (Shi), and Adam (Ai), with the exception of Zhao, which was given to the Jews by a Song emperor. Yet, due to intermarriage, today, those who identify as Kaifeng Jewish descendants are not restricted in these eight clans—some are under other surnames such as Wang and Liu.

Note 16. Shavei Israel is a Jerusalem-based organisation aiming to help Jewish descendants across the globe “return” to Judaism and to Israel. Its founder, Michael Freud, is an American Orthodox Jew who conducted aliyah and served as Deputy Communications Director during Benjamin Netanyahu’s first term in office as Israeli Prime Minister.

Note 17. The three brothers are Guangyuan, Yecholiah’s father, and Shasha’s (in 3.2) grandfather.

Note 18. Lerner was believed by the local Jewish families to be a Jew, yet he later turned out to be a Christian. He was suspected of coming to Kaifeng with missionary purposes and secured the loyalty of several families by funding them. Although he argues he means no harm and was only helping the Kaifeng Jewish descendants “learn the Jewish lifestyle,” he was expelled after being found out.

Note 19. The religious court, where Yecholiah completed her conversion and was granted the status of an “authentic Jew.”

Note 20. In Simplified Chinese it writes as 世外桃源. Its literal meaning is “a land of peach blossoms outside of the world.” Here, Shasha refers to the seminary as a retreat away from the turmoil of the world.

Note 21. Bilibili is one of the most influential video-sharing platforms in China. It is featured with a scrolling commenting system nicknamed “bullet curtain” (*danmu*).

Note 22. The Negev is a large desert region in Southern Israel and covers more than half of Israel’s territory.

Note 23. “Ani bat shel ha-medina, ve gam bat shel sin.”

Note 24. *Chutzpah* can be roughly translated as “bravery and audacity.” It can be both positive and negative, depending on the context.

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