

CW Weekender
Finding China's Jews

Thomas Talhelm

Just south of Kaifeng's Fourth People's Hospital lies an oddly named *hutong* with a metallic street sign written with blue Hebrew. Jiaojing Hutong doesn't appear on Google maps, and, were it not for the sign, this lane that winds through a higgledy-piggledy stretch of modest houses would do little to reveal itself as the home to China's millennia-old Jewish population.

This *hutong* is the legacy of a group of Jews that came to what is now Henan around a millennia ago. After an initial welcome from a Song Dynasty emperor, Kaifeng's Jews were nearly wiped away for good through regime change, war, persecution, and an imperial edict to intermarry with local Chinese. Yet an unassuming house on that lane--the Zhao family residence--is still home to practicing Chinese Jews whose house sits where their old synagogue used to stand. Looking at the undeniably Chinese faces of the family portraits in the Zhao house, it's clear that most outward signs of their Jewish identity disappeared along with the synagogue. Nowadays there is no doctor to do circumcisions, no formal place of worship, and no one fluent in Hebrew.

Even in their heyday, the Jews of Kaifeng were as much a bewilderment to their Chinese neighbors as they are now. Many thought simply that the Jews were Muslim, calling the synagogue a *qingzhen si*, the term used for mosques. Even "Teaching the Torah Lane" was originally named "Pluck the Sinew Lane," a reference to their Kosher tradition of removing tendons from meat, which was probably what stuck out most about the Chinese Jews to their neighbors.

Wandering the streets dusty with construction around Kaifeng's today, it's hard to imagine this was formerly the center of the Chinese empire and one of the largest, most cosmopolitan cities in the world. Yet this unexpectedness makes tracking down the clues of Kaifeng's Jewish legacy--the old well in the depths of the Fourth People's Hospital; the small blue Hebrew sign; the yarmulked family photo in the Zhao household--so fascinating.

Getting there:

Look for one of the many fast trains (anything starting with 'D') that take a mere

five hours to travel from Beijing West Station to Zhengzhou. From Zhengzhou, direct buses to Kaifeng depart every 10 minutes from the Deyi Hotel (德乙酒店) for only 7 Yuan.

Staying there:

The Song Dynasty-style Kaifeng Hotel has double rooms in the old town for as little as RMB 200 a night. 66 Ziyou Lu, 自由路66号 (0378-595-5589).