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Chinese Food for

Thought

Cantor Helzer's presentation at Beth Am shows the Chinese-Jewish connection is more than a Christmas meal tradition

JANUARY 14, 2016 BY [MELISSA GERR](#) — [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

According to Cantor Robyn Helzer of Temple Sinai and Sixth & I Historic Synagogue in Washington, D.C., it turns out those buoyant kreplach in your chicken soup could be a close relative to dim sum, the stuffed dumpling delicacy that is a staple of Chinese food.

Helzer's connection to China started with an invitation from the United Jewish Congregation of Hong Kong, followed by about six years traveling back and forth officiating for High Holiday services and family milestone events.

"It was my work with the Jews of China that got me interested in exploring the history of the Jews of China," she said at a recent sold-out evening presentation at Beth Am Synagogue, which culminated, of course, with a 1,200-piece dim sum buffet expertly prepared by Luana Dias and Ben Rubin's AllSpice Hospitality of Columbia.

Helzner explained that present-day Jews in China are not indigenous but are primarily expatriates working as professors, diplomats, journalists and students from the United States, United Kingdom, Israel and Australia, and from all over Europe; most are associated with the World Union for Progressive Judaism, an international arm of the Reform movement, though the Chabad-Lubavitch movement arrived in 1987. A branch of Haredi Orthodox Sephardic Jews also calls Hong Kong home.



The 5,000-strong Hong Kong Jewish community includes two religious schools and a JCC with a social hall, classrooms, gym, pool, library, kosher restaurant and kosher grocery.

Hong Kong is home to Ohel Leah, the only active synagogue that was originally built as a synagogue (in 1902). Helzner's congregation, though, "meets in a cave-like space around the corner from the Jewish Community Centre of Hong Kong complex, which is like a paneled basement," she said.

Modern-day China also hosts a Jewish community in Beijing, with about 2,000 Jews. There can be found the Kehillat Beijing Reform synagogue and a Chabad-Lubavitch center. Shanghai, which only Chabad-Lubavitch served for many years, is now also home to Kehillat Shanghai. Helzner said five years ago there were about 300 Jews in Shanghai, and now there are upward of 2,000, so it is one of "the fastest-growing Jewish communities in the world."

Helzner also touched on remote Chinese Jewish history, which many attendees were surprised to hear about.

"I only knew about the post-Holocaust population" of Jews in China, Jonathan Epstein of Fells Point said, enjoying the dim sum buffet with his wife, Hillary. She added, "I didn't know about the different waves of [Jewish] immigration" in China.

Jews came to China during the eighth and ninth centuries, Helzner said, Mizrahi Jews mainly traveling from Baghdad via India, making their way along the Silk Road trade routes. Ultimately they arrived at Henan Province and the city of Kaifeng.



“Jews had heard about the Chinese friendliness to foreigners,” so they asked the emperor for permission to settle there, and he agreed, Helzner said.

The Temple of Purity and Truth was the first known synagogue in China, built in 1163. At the height of the Ming Dynasty there were about 5,000 Jews there, Helzner said.

European communities were expelling or murdering Jews, but, Helzner said, the Chinese allowed them to live as they pleased, and they ended up assimilating and absorbing more and more Chinese customs, dress and culture. Eventually, the Jewish tradition faded away, and by the 1920s, a Jewish community was no longer viable. “Jews began to assimilate in appearance and culture, but they didn’t eat pork,” she added.

Perhaps, she explained, it is the similarities of the Chinese and Jewish cultures that allowed for them to live side by side, as “both share a long history [and] both stress importance of education, revere ancestors, find success in business and don’t proselytize.”

More Jews, such as Lord Lawrence Kadoorie, also arrived in Hong Kong in the 1840s following the first Opium War. Kadoorie’s “family was said to be responsible for the incredible economic growth in Hong Kong after World War II, and he was also a great philanthropist,” Helzner said. Sir Matthew Nathan, a Jewish governor in Hong Kong from 1904 to 1907, still has a boulevard named in his honor.

Shanghai experienced three waves of immigration, Helzner said, first with the Mizrahi Jews, then with an influx of Russian Jews escaping pogroms during the Russian Revolution in the early 20th century, and then from 1933 to 1941, when about 20,000 European Jews arrived while escaping from Nazi Germany. The new immigrants opened theaters, shops, restaurants and cafés and added much to the commerce of their adopted country. Examples Helzner cited are Sir Victor Sassoon, who built one of the finest hotels in Shanghai that still stands, and Silas Hardoon, who “amassed massive real estate holdings” in the city.

With the revolution in 1949, Communist leader Mao Zedong declared the creation of the People’s Republic of China, and all personal property was confiscated. Jews left mainland China, which was, in essence, the end of the Jewish community there. Of the six synagogues in Shanghai, only two remain, and only one of them is open to public — Ohel Moshe Synagogue, which is now the Jewish Refugees Museum. The other is Ohel Rachel, which houses Chinese government offices. Today, Helzner, who leads Jewish tours to China, said, “There is this idea that Jews are good in

business. It's not anti-Semitism, it's appreciation" of the culture.

One student she met is studying Hebrew because, "he was captivated by a language that was revived after 2,000 years." And Dr. Xu Xin, head of the Jewish Studies program at Nanjing University, said, "We are attracted by Jewish wisdom, intelligence, success and survival. Chinese can benefit learning about Jewish values."

Which likely is why these books are so popular: "Secrets of the Talmud: the Jew's Code to Wealth;" and "The Great Wisdom of the Jewish People, the World's First Commercial People." Helzner added that a Cantonese version of "Hava Nagila" was recently named as a Top 10 song of the year.

Writer and author Elaine Weiss thought it was interesting that "in modern times, the Jewish community [in China] is growing," harkening back to its mercantile roots; and Beth Pepper, an attorney practicing in Washington, D.C., said, "It was a marvelous evening, very educational and informative, and it opened my mind to a whole new horizon of Jews in the world, Jews in Asia. [Helzner] made history come alive, both past and present."

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