



Educator's Guide

Who are the Chinese Jews of Kaifeng?

In the ancient city of Kaifeng, China, Jewish life thrived for centuries, blending with Chinese culture while maintaining its unique identity.

Today, with no synagogue, rabbi, or official state recognition, the community has dwindled, with some making their way to Israel to reclaim their Jewish roots. Meanwhile, those who remain in Kaifeng continue to live quietly, holding onto their ancient heritage in defiance of history's attempts to erase it.

[Link to video](#)

Resources compiled by Doug Berkowitz

Big Ideas

1. The Jews of Kaifeng have a thousand-year history in China.
2. The Jews of Kaifeng were isolated from other Jewish communities yet still had practices and traditions similar to Jews elsewhere.
3. The Jewish status of the Jews of Kaifeng is complicated in both China and Israel.

Essential Questions

1. What does it mean to be a Jew?
2. How have non-Jewish influences integrated themselves into Jewish culture and practice?
3. Can Jewish life survive in a community without proper resources?



Review Questions

- 1.** Judaism is one of the five religions recognized by the Chinese government.
 - a. True
 - b. False**
- 2.** Jewish merchants who settled in Kaifeng came from which foreign land?
 - a. Rome
 - b. Jerusalem
 - c. Persia**
 - d. India
- 3.** At first, the Chinese distinguished Jews and Muslims from one another based on:
 - a. The color of their head covering.**
 - b. Their name for God.
 - c. The foods they ate.
 - d. The day they rested.
- 4.** When Jews first appeared in China, the emperor allowed them to participate in which of the following aspects of Chinese life:
 - a. Studying in Chinese universities.
 - b. Serving in the Chinese government.
 - c. Marrying Chinese women.
 - d. All of the above.**
- 5.** When the Jews of Kaifeng were “rediscovered”, visitors to the city found the Kaifeng Jews:
 - a. Observed Shabbat



- b. Kept Kosher
 - c. Had a *mikveh*
 - d. **All of the above.**
- 6. Which of the following was **not** a characteristic of Jewish religious life in Kaifeng?
 - a. **The synagogue was modeled after the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.**
 - b. The synagogue faced Jerusalem.
 - c. Some prayers were recited in Mandarin.
 - d. Incense was used during services.
- 7. The Jewish community in Kaifeng declined in the mid-1800s due to which of the following reasons?
 - a. Isolation
 - b. Assimilation
 - c. Natural disasters
 - d. **All of the above.**
- 8. How did the Chinese government reclassify Jews when it chose not to recognize Judaism as an official religion?
 - a. Arab
 - b. Other
 - c. **Han (Chinese)**
 - d. Christian



Discussion Questions

1. Lacking leadership and location

In the 1800s, the rabbi of the Jewish community of Kaifeng passed away and was not replaced. Not long after, the synagogue was destroyed and wasn't rebuilt.

Do you think a Jewish community can survive without a rabbi? Why or why not? For which situations do you think a rabbi would be absolutely necessary? Which situations would community leaders be capable of handling without a rabbi?

Do you think a Jewish community can survive without a synagogue? Why or why not? For which occasions is a large, central meeting location important for Jewish practice? On which occasions is a Jewish community able to make do without a synagogue?

Which aspects of your Jewish community do you think your community could not live without (e.g., synagogue; Jewish school; kosher food; etc.)?

2. Who is a Jew?

Under traditional Jewish law, Jews are those who were born to a Jewish mother OR have formally converted to traditional Judaism.

The Jews of Kaifeng have Jewish heritage, but due to intermarriage, they no longer necessarily have an intact chain of matrilineal descent. In Israel, this causes a dilemma, as the Kaifeng Jews aren't considered Jewish unless they undergo the proper conversion process.

How would *you* define who is a Jew? Would patrilineal descent qualify a person as a Jew in your eyes? Why or why not?



Do you think the Kaifeng Jews, who considered themselves to be Jewish for centuries, should be considered Jewish even without having converted? Explain your answer.

3. Keep holding on

The Kaifeng Jews were isolated from other Jewish communities for hundreds of years yet still maintained Jewish traditions in such a way that they looked nearly identical to Jewish practice outside of Kaifeng. Kaifeng Jews have also faced threats to their Jewish identity, legally speaking, yet have managed to maintain their connection to Judaism and attempt to live Jewish lives.

What can the Kaifeng Jews' perseverance in the face of numerous threats teach us about Jewish continuity and the Jewish spirit?

4. Shabbat keeps the Jews

Ahad Ha'am said, "More than the Jews have kept Shabbat, Shabbat has kept the Jews." What do you think this means? How might it relate to the story of the Kaifeng Jews?

Learning Activities

1. Lesson plan

Use our ready made lesson plan on the Jews of Kaifeng [HERE](#).

2. Getting to know our relatives abroad

The Kaifeng Jews are not the only group of Jews to find themselves living in far-off or isolated locations. Ask students to research another group of Jews who live in [surprising](#) or [remote](#) locations (e.g., [Nigeria](#); [India](#)). Have students present this other group to the class, sharing the following:

- Where the group lives/lived
- When and under what circumstances they moved there



- The status of the community today (e.g., approximate population; whether members made *aliyah*; etc.)
- Any differences in practice, customs, or traditions from your community
- Three unique facts about them

3. We're so glad we found you

The Jews of Kaifeng were isolated from other Jewish communities for lengthy periods of time. When they were reconnected with the outside world, visitors to the area found that, with some exceptions, their practices were identical to the practices of Jewish communities in other parts of the world.

Split students into small groups and ask them to complete the following tasks:

- Come up with a list of signs you might look for to know whether a newly discovered group of people could be Jewish (e.g., they wear *kipot* or *tzitzit*; they don't eat pork; they pray facing the direction of Jerusalem).
- Suppose the newly found group IS Jewish and they ask to be brought up to speed on Jewish practice and history. What four things would you want them to learn and become familiar with? Explain your choices.
- What three questions would you ask the people of this group in order to get to know them better and understand their history?

4. Design your own synagogue

One way in which Chinese culture influenced Jewish practice in Kaifeng was that the synagogue looked like any other Chinese temple. There are other synagogues around the world which reflect the influence of the culture surrounding the Jewish community (you can find some [here](#)).

Split students into small groups and ask them to design a synagogue (including architectural style, materials used, color palette, symbols, etc.) that they think reflects a mixture of Jewish tradition and the culture in which they live. Then, have groups share their synagogues and explain why they chose each aspect of their design.

5. Give your students our Kahoot on the [Jews of Kaifeng](#)!



Reflection Questions

1. Hardships of *aliyah*

The Kaifeng Jews have Jewish heritage through patrilineal descent, but since Judaism is passed through the mother, they are not considered Jewish unless they undergo a conversion.

How do you think the Kaifeng Jews would feel upon being asked to undergo the conversion process before making *aliyah* to Israel? Do you think this is a reasonable request by Israel's rabbinate? Explain your answers.

How might you feel if you were asked to undergo a conversion process before making *aliyah*? Explain your answers. (Note: The same was asked of both the Beta Israel from Ethiopia and the [Bnei Menashe](#) from India.)

2. Signs of assimilation

As the Jews of Kaifeng integrated into Chinese culture, Chinese culture started to become integrated into Jewish practice. For example, some prayers were recited in Mandarin, incense was used during services, they had a corner dedicated to honoring ancestors, and the synagogue looked like any other Chinese temple.

How has the dominant culture in your country/state/region leaked into Jewish practice where you live?

Has Jewish culture moved into the broader culture as well? If so, in what ways?

How do you feel about this exchange of cultures? Do you like that the cultures overlap or would you prefer that they be unaffected by each other? Explain your answers.

3. Honoring your ancestors

In their synagogue, the Jews of Kaifeng had a corner dedicated to honoring their ancestors. How does your synagogue honor ancestors and prominent members



of the community (e.g., *yahrtzeit* plaques)? In what other ways could your synagogue recognize these individuals?

Which other ancestors and prominent members of your community/country do you think should be recognized in your synagogue? Who would you nominate to receive this honor? Explain why you think these individuals deserve to be recognized.

Further Learning

1. Unpacked for Educators:

- [Unpacking the Igbo People of Nigeria](#) (video)
- [The Lost Tribe of Menashe in India](#) (video)
- [How Jews Ended Up in India and China](#) (video)
- [10 Off-the-Grid Jewish Communities](#) (video)
- [5 Surprising Locations Jews Live Today](#) (video)

2. The Israel Museum, [The Synagogue Route | The Israel Museum, Jerusalem](#) (article)

This article describes the four international synagogues which have replicas on display at the Israel Museum.

3. My Jewish Learning, [The Jews of Kaifeng: China's Only Native Jewish Community](#) (article)

This article provides an overview of the history of the Jewish community in Kaifeng.

4. NBC News, [Chinese Kaifeng Jews Seek New Lives in Israel](#) (article)

This article tells the story of a woman from Kaifeng who seeks to make *aliyah*.

5. Aish, [Jewish-Chinese Connections | Aish](#) (article)

This article describes some connections between Jewish and Chinese peoples and cultures. Among these connections are the Jews of Kaifeng and the Jewish Ghetto in Shanghai.