Choosing Judaism in Asian-Jewish Homes

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When Mark Zuckerberg married his longtime girlfriend Priscilla Chan last year, the tech world was surprised at the unannounced nuptials. But the Jewish world wasn't. The American Jewish intermarriage rate has surpassed 50 percent for almost two decades, and the October 2013 Pew Research Center report puts the rate at 58 percent for marriages from 2000 to 2013.[1] Jewish-Chinese connections in particular are far from rare, and many extend more deeply than the Jewish cultural cliché of Chinese food on Christmas. We don't have precise quantitative data about marriage between Jews and people of Chinese descent, but the qualitative information alongside the broader data about Jewish-Asian American unions show a remarkable trend that bucks larger statistics about intermarriage: Jewish identity for the household and children is very high.

Intermarriages between people of different races or ethnicities has increased immensely since *Loving v. Virginia* abolished racial restrictions to marriages in 1967; the most recent comprehensive study in 2008 marked interethnic marriages at an all-time high of 14.6 percent.[2] When American Jews marry non-Jews, then, they follow a larger American trend of embracing unions across identity lines. Many Jewish leaders frame this as "the problem of intermarriage" and assume that intermarriage means the loss of Jewish individuals and their children to the community. In some cases, they are right. Sylvia Barack Fishman's 2004 study of Jewish-Christian marriages suggested that only about a third of couples with children decided to raise them Jewish, and the 2001 National Jewish Population Survey suggested a similar figure across all Jewish intermarriages.[3] And yet: in the case of Asian-American-Jewish marriages, Jewish identification — both religious and cultural — appears to be the norm.

When Colleen Fong and Judy Young set out to study Chinese and Japanese Americans who had married whites, they found that 18 percent of those white partners were Jewish.[4] In light of the fact that only 2 percent to 3 percent of white Americans identify as Jewish, this proportion is striking. The classical assimilationist theory claims that the more people fit into a society, the less race and religion matter as factors in marriage. And this holds true: About half of Jews marry out; about a third of Asian-Americans do.[5] But this can't explain the rate of Jewish-Asian-American marriages. People also tend to partner with someone of a similar socioeconomic and educational background. In its most pragmatic version, this helps account for where people meet prospective partners. Especially in more educated demographics, such as Asian-Americans and Jewish Americans, this frequently means work or school. Still, a close look at the research suggests that there is more to the story.

In 2012, sociologists Noah Leavitt and Helen Kim interviewed 24 Jewish-Asian-American couples with children. They found that "almost uniformly, these children of these intermarriages are being raised as Jews."[6] Moreover, unlike many households in Jewish-Christian intermarriages, none of Leavitt and Kim's interviewees described their household as "interfaith," "multifaith," or teaching children two religions. Because many of the non-Jewish parents described themselves as having "no religion," choosing Judaism to the exclusion of other religious practices seemed to cause little tension.

Why might these Jewish-Asian-American intermarriages be so likely to become Jewish families? The same reasons researchers cite for the higher frequencies of Jewish-Asian-American marriages also contribute to choosing Jewish identity for the family. Interviewees noted that both Jewish and Chinese cultures value "strong family ties and educational achievement."[7] Of course, not every Asian-American parent is like "Tiger Mom" Amy Chua, who also happens to have a Jewish spouse, but interviewees consistently cited the importance of education for themselves and their children. While parents see education similarly valued in both cultures, they may find accessing and participating in Jewish culture easier, in part because of a greater availability of institutions.

The other common theme was that of the centrality of family. One woman interviewed in Leavitt and Kim's study remarked: "I really have found the Jewish culture and the Chinese culture very similar… how we were raised and family values and such." When

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[1] "A Portrait of Jewish Americans," Pew Research Center, http://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/

[2] Jeffrey S. Passel, Wendy Wang and Paul Taylor, *Marrying Out: One in Seven New U.S. Marriages Is Interracial or Interethnic.* (Washington: Pew Forum, 2010) DC: Pew Research Center.

[3] Sylvia Barack Fishman, *Double or Nothing? Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage*, (Brandeis, 2004).

[4] Colleen Fong and Judy Young, "In Search of the Right Spouse: Interracial Marriage among Chinese and Japanese Americans," *Amerasia Journal* 21.3 (Winter 1995/1996): 83.

[5] Passel, et al.

[6] Helen K. Kim and Noah S. Leavitt, "The Newest Jews? Understanding Jewish American and Asian American Marriages," *Contemporary Jewry* 32.2 (July 2012): 153

[7] Fong and Young, 83.

the non-Jewish Asian parents talked about their support in raising children as Jews, they cited these same values. A Chinese-American man explained his feeling about joining his wife's family as "comforting" and said that "it seemed very similar" because of the importance placed on family. Another Chinese-American man explained that "both Jewish and Chinese value systems are very compatible… I wasn't really ever concerned about how we wanted to raise our kids" because of the fundamental similarities he experienced. In these cultural senses, intermarrying didn't seem quite so much like "marrying out," and it facilitated decisions about raising children.

The presence of institutions like synagogues, community centers, and schools make fostering Jewish identity accessible, often in a way that is more available than institutions that foster Asian cultural identity. While the two cultures are not mutually exclusive, the availability of Jewish culture and religion can make Jewishness easier to instill and maintain than an Asian identity from which today's Asian-American parents may already feel a generation removed.

Through conversion, adoption, and being in Asian-Jewish families, more American Jews of Asian descent come into the Jewish community each year. Some Asian-Jewish families have struggled to find a synagogue where they feel at home, but others tell stories of warmth and welcome. Surely, not every Jewish-Chinese-American marriage will add to the ranks of the Jewish community, but it is clear that those who lament the "loss" to the Jewish community have been premature.

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From the Tang Dynasty to Today

IRENE EBER

Jews have been coming to China as tradesmen for a very long time. Some may have arrived as early as the Tang dynasty (618-906) to do business at the lively Chang'an Market. One of the earliest records of a Jew in China — a written prayer for *selichot* — was found in Dunhuang, the traditional gateway to Central Asia. As paper was not in general use anywhere but China, the writer of the prayer had most likely been in China and had left by the overland route. Permanent communities, though, were not founded until some centuries later in trading centers like Kaifeng, Ningbo, Yangzhou, or Ningxia. Unfortunately, all but one — the Jewish community of Kaifeng in Henan province — have disappeared without a trace.

Kaifeng was then the capital of the Song dynasty (960-1278), a flourishing, cosmopolitan city that attracted international trade. The Jewish traders probably came well before the mid-1120s, when warfare by Central Asian tribes engulfed most of North China. Return to their countries of origin was out of the question with marauding soldiers everywhere. Although a peace treaty was signed in 1141, by then many or most of the newcomers had decided to remain in Kaifeng, and, 20 years later, the first synagogue was erected. Although we have no way of knowing whether Jewish women accompanied the men, it is highly doubtful that these tradesmen would have taken their women along. But, as Sephardim, they were polygamous, and they could take Chinese wives depending on their finances. Primogeniture was not practiced in China, and children of secondary wives had equal rights together with the offspring of primary wives.

Having Chinese children paved the way into Chinese society for the Jews. This was further facilitated when Kaifeng Jews received Chinese surnames and the Chinese mode of family lineage was adopted. In the Chinese context, a lineage traced its origin to one ancestor, went by one surname, was domiciled in one locality, and held some properties, including a burial ground, in common. Two sources confirm the transformation into lineages: four ancient stone slabs with inscriptions erected at different times in the synagogue courtyard with versions of the community's history in Kaifeng, and the mention of family cemeteries, rather than a Jewish cemetery for the entire community. Eventually, identification with the larger Jewish community elsewhere began to recede as family identity and lineage in China predominated.

The Jews were apparently regarded as a sectarian religion (or teaching), similar to those that flourished on the North China Plain. Like other sectarians, the Jews had a special sanctuary, a set of scriptures that only they read, a leader of the sect, and special dietary practices. The integration (or sinification) of the Jews into Chinese society included the rise of some families