

# FULLY JEWISH, I

Jason Jia was last year's recipient of The Society's Postgraduate Bursary, for his ongoing project, *Fully Jewish, Fully Chinese*, on the Chinese Jewish community in Kaifeng, China, and their return to Israel after 1000 years. Here, we discuss his work to date



Concerning the little known story of the Chinese Jewish community in Kaifeng, China, and their return to Israel after 1000 years, The Society's 2012 Postgraduate Bursary project, *Fully Jewish, Fully Chinese*, by Jia Shuo, commonly known as Jason Jia, is compelling.

Born in 1988, in Guangzhou, China, Jason graduated with a BA in International Journalism from Hong Kong Baptist University in 2011. He is particularly interested in current affairs, and cultural and

**Top** Jin's home, Chinese and Israeli flags decorate the top of the tv set.

**Above** Jin's family hosts a Shabbat dinner on a Friday evening after sunset.

**Right** Gizzon prays by the Western Wall, drawing the attention of a curious bystander.

# FULLY CHINESE



religious topics, while a background painting has encouraged him to tell stories via a visual medium. His final year BA project, a story about Chinese veterans who fought in the Sino-Vietnamese conflict in 1979, was shortlisted for the Hou Dengke Documentary Photography Grant.

Following his undergraduate studies, Jason undertook an internship with China's second largest news agency, the China News Service, after which he enrolled on an MA in Photojournalism and Documenta-

ry Photography at London College of Communication. Selected as Emerging Talent at Reportage by Getty Images, he was the recipient of an Ideas Fund grant in 2012.

Jason had the idea for *Fully Jewish, Fully Chinese*, the project for which he received the RPS Postgraduate Bursary, in May last year, when he came across some articles that mentioned the existence of the Chinese Jewish community in Kaifeng.

Undertaking weeks of research, he found a fascinating story. "Around the 10th cen-

tury, a group of Persian Jewish traders travelling through the Silk Road arrived in Kaifeng, then China's capital city", he says.

"As with other peaceful traders, they were warmly welcomed: one of the Jewish families was even granted the Emperor's surname, Zhao. In return, the Jews offered, 'Boundless loyalty to the country and prince', and established a significant community that lasted for centuries.

"They identified themselves as Yiciley people, a direct translation of Israel, at



**Top** The Kaifeng Jews are building a sukkah, a temporary construction for the Jewish festival Sukkot. Rev Menachem helps the young men building the sukkah, as well as teaching them the rules and reasons behind it.

**Above** Shai in class discussion with Rev Menachem.

**Right** The Kaifeng Jews prepare a typical Chinese dinner at their flat on the outskirts of Jerusalem.

a time when the modern state of Israel didn't exist. They worshipped the Hebrew god and kept the kosher diet, while accustomed to their surroundings and absorbed in the local culture.

"Living the Jewish life in a Chinese way, they thrived for centuries, until their synagogue was destroyed by a flood 200 years ago and never rebuilt.

"Since then, the community has dwindled and, without a place for congregation, many of their religious activities have no longer continued. And, as a result of intermarriage commencing around the 14th century, they look similar to other Chinese. But one thing has never changed: they know where they come from, and long to go back.

"When Israel and China established diplo-

matic relations in 1992, following the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, many Kaifeng Jews believed that it was the time to return. However, this proved not to be straightforward.

"Contrary to Jewish matrilineal tradition, the Kaifeng Jews pass down their heritage through the paternal line. But according to the Law of Return, a person is born Jewish only if their mother is Jewish, otherwise a conversion is needed. Therefore, many considered them Jewish descendants rather than Jews.

"In a country that comprises 56 ethnic groups meanwhile, the Chinese authorities deny the existence of the Jewish population. It is said that there are no Chinese Jews, only Chinese.

"But even with so many obstacles, a small

community of returned Chinese Jews in Israel has slowly emerged and begun to thrive."

Realising that this was a story waiting to be told, Jason spent the next couple of months attempting to make contact with the subjects.

"It was very difficult in the beginning", he says. "I contacted Shavei, an Israeli NGO dedicated to helping Jewish 'lost tribes' return to Israel, which has close ties to some members of the Kaifeng community in Israel. Trust was slowly built through months of email correspondence, and finally, in late August, it agreed to give me access to the subjects when I came to Israel."

Jason was meanwhile working on a lead that gave him access to the Kaifeng Jewish community in China. "By good fortune, I'd found a young Chinese Jew on Facebook



– Jin – who had already returned and was living in Israel”, he says. “She was kind enough to give me the contact number of her father in China, who is an important figure in the community.”

At this point, Jason felt that, aside from funding, he had everything in place to enable him to commence the project. “I applied for the RPS Postgraduate Bursary, because the costs were high, and I couldn’t afford to do it without external funding”, he says.

Jason set off to Kaifeng, China, in early July, and stayed there for three weeks, at his own expense, before the results of the bursary were announced.

“I interviewed as many families as I could, and developed a close relationship with Jin’s father”, says Jason.

After receiving the bursary in August, Jason travelled to Israel in September. He spent two weeks in Jerusalem, interviewing every Chinese Jew that lived there: 13 in total.

“I met the Chair of Shavei as soon as I got there”, says Jason, “and he put me in touch with the Chinese Jews, as he had promised. Later, I learnt that this was the only way to get access to the subjects, and that many other interview requests from Chinese media had been denied.”

Returning from his trip, Jason edited his photos into book form, and then participated in his MA final show, for which seven of his pictures from the project were selected. “I showed two large A0 sized prints, one A2, and four A4s, all mounted on MDF, with a semi-matt sealing”, he says.

“This project matters, and the RPS Postgraduate Bursary made it happen. I can’t begin to express how grateful I am, and how much this bursary meant for the project.”

Jason is currently based in Guangzhou, China, shooting personal projects and assignments, and his work has appeared in newspapers internationally. **David Land**

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#### RPS Postgraduate Bursary

The closing date for the £3500 2014 RPS Postgraduate Bursary is 28 June 2014. An application form will be uploaded to the RPS website presently [www.jasonjiafoto.com](http://www.jasonjiafoto.com) [www.reportagebygettyimages.com/jason-jia](http://www.reportagebygettyimages.com/jason-jia)