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Chinese silver-making has Jewish roots

Adrien von Ferscht is the only academic in the world who has been actively carrying out in-depth research into the 1,400-year tradition of Chinese silver-making. He also happens to have dual Israeli and British citizenship, and is about to settle in Beijing in order to run the newly his newly opened Research Institute at Tsinghua University.

Although at first glance the subject area might appear somewhat niche, it is actually a highly complex subject that straddles many academic disciplines. Some three years ago it was Adrien who discovered that the reason Chinese silver in the early Sung Dynasty was overtly "Persian" in appearance was because the art of silver-making was introduced into China by the Sassanians [Sassania being modern-day Iran and where the city of Susa, of Purim fame, was located].

Many of the Sassanian silversmiths were Jews, but they were highly unusual, given that



Adrien von Ferscht

they were remnants of the first exile and as such were what we know as Pre-Hasmonean Jews – they had no knowledge of a second temple having been built and as a result did not celebrate the Festival of *Chanukah*. It is also for this reason that the first synagogue built in Kaifeng loosely followed to footprint of the first temple.

It was these Jews who eventually settled in the Chinese city of Kaifeng. Coinciding with that mass migration to China, the style of silver produced in China became what we would recognise as being "in the Chinese style". Silversmiths still exist in China who can trace their roots back to Kai-

feng; one single operating silversmith still lives there!

Jews, therefore, play an important role in the development of the art of silver-making in China and in developing a definitive Chinese style. They also introduced the ancient art of filigree silver-making to China, examples of which are in a large collection of Chinese filigree silver at the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg that originally formed part of Catherine the Great's personal toilette accoutrements.

The newly established Chinese Silver Research Institute at Tsinghua is part of the International China-Russia Joint Re-

search Project [ICRSC] and is also an official Think Tank for the Prime Ministerial Dialogue Framework.

The institute is led by Adrien and his Chinese colleague Paul Jun Dong. But the institute is not exclusively all about Chinese silver. Given the crucial part Jews have in this fascinating and often convoluted story, two of the six main research areas are the history of Jews in China and their influence on Chinese and Russian culture and the decorative arts since the Han Dynasty.

Comparative studies in the trading relationship of Jews with China over the past 1,000 years with a focus on the similarities of mindsets and practices of the

Jews and the Chinese in the context of mercantile trade.

Adrien is a copious writer of articles on Chinese silver, and his papers are published around the world. What is particularly interesting is that Chinese silversmiths in the early 19th century made silver Judaica items, including some incredibly rare examples of megillot for the Sephardic communities in China, India and Iraq. Adrien also acts as an independent consultant and expert to museums, important private collections and private collectors, academics and enthusiasts around the world.

Adrien plans to stage some public lectures in Hong Kong later this year.



Silver service, Song dynasty (960–1279), 11th–13th century