

February 01, 2010

## 2010-02-01: Jews and China: A wisp of historical thread

Samantha Fodrowski  
*Northeastern University*

---

### Recommended Citation

Fodrowski, Samantha, "2010-02-01: Jews and China: A wisp of historical thread" (2010). *News@Northeastern*. Paper 505.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d20001748>

This work is available open access, hosted by Northeastern University.

## Jews and China: A wisp of historical thread



James Ross is the program director of Jewish Studies and a professor of journalism at Northeastern. Photo by Craig Bailey

**February 1, 2010**

James Ross, program director of [Jewish Studies](#) and professor of [journalism](#) at Northeastern, has written and lectured extensively on the Jewish Diaspora, with one of his focal points being the little-known history of Jewish communities in China. Here, Ross discusses some of that history, as well as current Chinese perceptions of Jews and Jewish culture and the implications of those beliefs.

### How did you come to study Jewish culture while you were teaching in China?

I first learned about Jews in China in August of 1986, after I returned from my second summer teaching journalism at the Shanghai Foreign Languages Institute (now Shanghai International Studies University). I read a brief article in The New York Times about an American group that was working with the Chinese government to prepare a study of the 20,000 Jews who had escaped the Nazis and fled to Shanghai between 1938 and 1941.

I was surprised to discover that there had been a Jewish community in a Shanghai neighborhood I knew quite well—I passed through there each day on my way to the university. I discovered that there had been Russian and Baghdadi Jews in Shanghai as well, and that Jews had a long history of living in China dating back to the eighth century.

I spent the next seven years traveling around the world to interview survivors of the Shanghai refugee community, and returned to Shanghai to again walk through the neighborhood they had left in the late 1940s.

### Why are the Chinese so fascinated by the Jewish culture?

When I first visited China in 1985, Chinese young people often approached me to practice their English. It was quite common for them to ask me my religion. When I said I was Jewish, the response was invariably “Jews are the best!” along with a thumbs up.

There are now virtually no Jews in China other than foreign visitors. But eleven Chinese universities offer Jewish Studies courses and graduate degrees in Jewish Studies. I think one reason for their fascination is that Jews have an ancient history, even longer than Chinese history.

### What are the most common preconceived notions or misconceptions that Chinese people have about Jewish people and culture?

The Chinese grow up knowing that Marx, Einstein and Freud were Jews. So the common stereotype is that Jews are smart as well as rich and politically powerful. The bookstores and blogosphere are filled with books and blogs that stereotype all Jews as wealthy, crafty and good at business. Despite the stereotypes, which in some ways mimic “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion,” there are few negative comments. Many Chinese today want to learn from the Jews, particularly as their economy expands so rapidly.

### You have been presenting your research findings to local cultural groups. What has been the response?

My talks have generated a lot of discussion about how Jews should respond. Some of the stereotypes may seem flattering, but I think the general response is that it's important for the Chinese to have a more nuanced understanding of Jewish religion and culture and the relationship between American Jews and Israel. One way to do that is to promote cultural exchange and send more academics to China to teach Jewish Studies.

### Archives

The following news stories and features are available. For information about older content, please contact University Communications and Public Relations at (617) 373-5471.

#### 2010

- [January](#)
- [February](#)
- [March](#)
- [April](#)
- [May](#)
- [June](#)
- [July](#)
- [August](#)
- [September](#)
- [October](#)
- [November](#)
- [December](#)

### Share



Like

Sign Up to see what your friends like.

Stereotypes can be dangerous. Although there's virtually no history of anti-Semitism in China, it's possible that tensions with the West or conflict in the Middle East could foment anti-Semitism in China.

**Can you tell us about your new course on the Jewish Diaspora?**

It's the most challenging and rewarding class I've taught in my 20-plus years at Northeastern. We're exploring the religion, culture and identity of more than a dozen Jewish communities outside the United States and Israel. I wrote about some of them, such as the Abayudaya of Uganda, in my book "Fragile Branches: Travels through the Jewish Diaspora." We're also looking at Mountain Jews in the Caucasus, as well as Jews in Argentina, Cuba, South Africa and Ethiopia, through film, music, art and literature. For me, the joy of teaching is the opportunity to learn about history and culture and to pass on that newfound knowledge to my students.

To learn more about the School of Journalism at Northeastern, visit: <http://www.northeastern.edu/journalism/>

To learn about the Jewish Studies program at Northeastern, visit: <http://www.jewishstudies.neu.edu/>

---

For more information, please contact Samantha Fodrowski at 617-373-5427 or at [s.fodrowski@neu.edu](mailto:s.fodrowski@neu.edu).