

Did China Have a Jewish President?: Tracing the Liu Shaoqi Saga

By Jonathan Goldstein

Since 1969, when I have mentioned my interest in Sino-Judaica, I occasionally have been asked “Was China’s President Liu Shaoqi (1898-1969) Jewish?” On my first visit to China in the 1970s I posed this question to Israel Epstein, a longtime member of China’s National People’s Consultative Congress with an encyclopedic knowledge of Jews in twentieth century China. Epstein had never heard of Liu being Jewish. The most current comprehensive biography of Liu, completed by historian Lowell Dittmer in 1998, makes no reference to Liu’s possible Jewishness.¹ Nevertheless, the perennial nature of this question, the fact that it has been posed to me in America, Europe, Asia, and Africa, and the repetition of the claim in the American press have all led me to wonder about the origin of this allegation.²

The facts about Liu are as follows. He was born in Huaminglou, Hunan province, not far from Mao Zedong’s birthplace, in 1898. He became a devoted follower of Mao and reached the pinnacle of his power as President of the People’s Republic of China in the 1960s. He then fell out of favor and was villified and caricatured during the Chinese Cultural Revolution as “China’s Khrushchev” and the individual who would “lead China back to capitalism.” He died under house arrest in Kaifeng, Henan province in 1969.³

¹ Lowell Dittmer, *Liu Shaoqi and the Chinese Cultural Revolution*. Revised edition. [Armonk, NY and London: M.E.Sharpe, 1998]. Earlier biographies about Liu and anthologies of his writings include the 1974 first edition of Dittmer’s work [Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press]; Howard L. Boorman, “Liu Shao-chi: A Political Profile.” *The China Quarterly* [London] no. 10 [April-June 1962], pp. 1-22; “Liu Shao-ch’i,” in Howard L. Boorman, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of Republican China*, volume two [New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1968], pp. 405-11; Chen Zhaozhou, *Liu Shaoqi zai bai qu* [Liu Shaoqi in the White Areas] [Beijing: Chinese Communist Party History Publishers, 1992]; C[harles] P[atrick] Fitzgerald, ed., *Quotations from President Liu Shao-ch’i* [New York and Tokyo: Walker/Weatherhill, 1968]; Huang Zheng, ed. *Liu shaoqi yi sheng* [A life of Liu Shaoqi] [Beijing: Central Documents Publishers, 1995]; A[nn] E. Kent, *Indictment Without Trial: The Case of Liu Shao-chi* [Canberra: Australian National University, Department of International Relations, Working Paper No. 11, 1969]; Donald W. Klein and Anne B. Clark, *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Communism 1921-1965*, volume one [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971], pp. 616-26; Henry G. Schwarz, *Liu Shao-ch’i and “People’s War”: A Report on the Creation of Base Areas in 1938* [Lawrence, Kansas: Center for East Asian Studies, University of Kansas, 1969]; and Xu Guansan, *Liu Shaoqi he Liu Shaoqi de luxian* [Lu Shaoqi and his line] [Kowloon, Hong Kong: Zhongdao Publishers, 1980].

² Arthur A. Chiel, “The Red Friar: Is Anti-Semitism a Factor in the Chinese Power Struggle?” *The Jewish Digest* [Houston, Texas] vol. 8, no. 11 [August 1968], pp. 7-8; Chiel, “Anti-Semitism a Factor in Red China’s Power Fight?” *The Jewish Chronicle of Pittsburgh*, December 12, 1968.

³ Dittmer, *Liu* [1998 edition], pp. 8-91, *passim*.

It is also clear that as early as 1961 the allegation of Liu's possibly Jewish origin had begun to surface in the West. A French-language paperback published in Paris in 1961 by Editions Denoel may be the source of that claim and certainly helped the allegation gain momentum. The book is entitled *Liu Shao Chi: le moine rouge* [Liu Shaoqi: the red monk]. Author Hans-Heinrich Wetzel is described in the volume as an "ex-member of the German Communist Party [unclear which one or when—ed.] who had lived in the Soviet Union and Asia for twenty years."⁴

The book, which is unsourced, presents a dialogue between twelve year old Liu Shaoqi and his great uncle Liu Tsofang. The topic is family history. The uncle informs the nephew that although young Liu was born in Hunan province, his family originated in "Sian-kiang" where

all the rich traders and bankers are the Jews [as one calls them in Western China]...Your grandfather came to live in Hunan from Shansi, the northwestern Chinese province...Our ancestors lived in Henan. They inhabited Kaifeng, the capital. They were part of the 'Ye-Se-Lo-Ni ' [Chinese word for Israelites or Israelis —ed.] or 'Le-Khtze-Kin' [cutters of veins], a name given because of their special methods for slaughtering cattle.⁵

Young Liu then inquires "who were these people?," to which the uncle responds:

Having come to China from Ceylon during the Han dynasty [202 B.C.-220 A.D.—ed.], they resided in China for two thousand years before becoming completely Sinicized [Wenzel incorrectly adds in a footnote that this was 'the only known case of complete assimilation of Jews into the country they inhabited' --ed.]. Their priests, the 'labini' [rabbis], were called the 'Aronites' or 'Asonites' and were part of the tribe of Asher. They worshipped Ji-Hi-Wei [Jehovah? —ed.]. Today they can be found everywhere. Then they inhabited Peking, Ningpo, and Canton. Little by little they dispersed.

When the barbarians on red horses came into China the 'Le-Khtze-Kin' no longer knew how to read their holy books. Their

⁴ Chiel cites Wetzel's book in his 1968 news articles. I found a copy of the book in Oxford University's Bodleian Library in February 2003. All translations of quotations in this article are by Jonathan Goldstein.

⁵ Hans-Heinrich Wetzel, *Liu Shao Chi: le moine rouge* [Paris: Editions Denoel, 1961], pp. 30, 52.

temple, the ‘sina-go-goui’ [synagogue? –ed.] was half destroyed and ruined.⁶

Young Liu then asks his uncle: who were the barbarians on red horses? The uncle replies:

The British. They wanted to help the ‘Le-Khtze-Kin’ rebuild the ‘sina-go-goui’ but the ‘Le-Khtze-Kin’ refused and went off this way and that. Your grandfather and I have saved the book of prayers of the ‘Le-Khtze-Kin’ temple of Kaifeng. I would like to pass it on to you.

After this speech, the old one retreated in order to meditate and the child did not disturb his silence. Dusk fell slowly on the river.⁷

Wetzel makes no further reference to Liu’s possible Judaic origin. The rest of the book, also interspersed with dialogue, is a history of Liu’s rise in the Chinese Communist Party.

Lowell Dittmer, the authoritative biographer of Liu, refers only once to Wetzel’s book. As already noted, that reference makes no mention of Judaism.⁸ Until some cogent evidence comes forth about Liu’s religious origins, the claim about his Judaic ties should be treated cautiously. The allegation of his possible Jewishness almost certainly will continue to circulate. As Dittmer observes regarding the ways in which other aspects of the Liu Shaoqi saga have been chronicled:

It is an unfortunate fact of political life that a large quantity of plausible falsehood can outweigh a small quantity of truth.⁹

⁶ Wetzel, *Liu*, p. 52.

⁷ Wetzel, *Liu*, p. 52.

⁸ Dittmer, *Liu*, 1998 edition, p. 294, footnote 27. This same footnote reference appears on p. 15, footnote 23, of the 1974 edition of Dittmer’s work. Wetzel’s book does not appear in either Dittmer’s 1974 or 1998 bibliography.

⁹ Dittmer, *Liu* [1998 edition], p. xiii.