

In memoriam Irene Eber (1929–2019)

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Irene Eber in her study in Jerusalem, 2018.
Photo printed by kind permission of her daughter
Miriam Eber.

Irene Eber, Louis Frieberg Professor Emeritus of East Asian Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Senior Fellow at the Harry S. Truman Research Institute, died in Jerusalem on 10 April at the age of 89. With her, Sinology loses a respected researcher of Chinese intellectual history, literature and religions, especially Judaism in China and the role of the Bible in Chinese-Western cultural exchange.

At Home in Many Worlds was the title of a commemorative publication dedicated to her in 2009 by colleagues, students and friends on the occasion of her 80th birthday.¹ Irene Eber owed her ability to be at home in many worlds and cultures to her multilingualism – she spoke English, Polish, German, Yiddish, Hebrew and Chinese. The beautiful title, however, conceals the sorrowful path that led to this cosmopolitanism: Irene Eber was born on 29 December 1929 in Halle an der Saale as the second daughter of Jewish parents and she initially had a sheltered, middle-class childhood. Since her

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- 1 Raoul David Findeisen – Gad C. Isay – Amira Katz-Goehr – Yuri Pines – Lihi Yariv-Laor (eds.), *At Home in Many Worlds. Reading, Writing and Translating from Chinese and Jewish Cultures: Essays in Honour of Irene Eber*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2009. This commemorative volume contains contributions on the distinguished person as well as articles on Chinese philosophy, literature, Chinese Bible translations and Judaism in China, and a bibliography of Irene Eber's publications up to 2008.

father Yedidia Geminder came from Poland,² the family was expelled there by the Nazis in 1938 and stayed with relatives in his hometown Mielec – the first traumatic break in the life of Irene Eber. The family lived in Mielec until the deportation of all Jews from there in March 1942. She documented her personal odyssey, which led finally to the USA via various stations in Poland and post-war Germany, in her impressive book *The Choice: Poland, 1939–1945*.³ She owed her survival to former Polish neighbours in Mielec, who took the twelve-year-old in after her escape from the Dębica ghetto and hid her in a chicken coop for almost two years.

Despite her childhood and youth, marked by flight and persecution, and despite minimal educational opportunities during that time, Irene Eber later achieved an impressive career. After studying Asian Studies and History, she earned a doctorate in 1966 from the Claremont Graduate School (now University) in California with a thesis on the Chinese intellectual Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) and his political thinking.⁴ The dissertation was not published in its entirety, but appeared in excerpts in various journals, including *Monumenta Serica*.⁵

In addition to Chinese intellectual history, Irene Eber devoted herself to Chinese literature, both classical and modern. With *Voices from Afar: Modern Chinese Writers on Oppressed Peoples and Their Literature*, she produced a ground-breaking study on the role of translations of Western literature in 20th century China, dealing in particular with the reception of Polish, Irish, Yiddish and Afro-American writers in China against the backdrop of contemporary and literary upheavals.⁶ This monograph is based on two questions that Irene Eber was to repeatedly address in her research life: How are ideas conveyed through translation from one culture to another and how do minorities live (survive) in a majority society?

Irene Eber also established herself as a translator by translating the lectures of the important German sinologist Richard Wilhelm (1873–1913) on the Chinese *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) into English.⁷

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- 2 See the biographical entry on Yedidia Geminder in the “Gedenkbuch für die Toten des Holocaust in Halle,” www.gedenkbuch.halle.de/gbdatensatz.php?num=116 (accessed on July 1, 2019). Irene Eber’s father was executed in Poland, her mother Helene and her sister Lore survived the Holocaust because they were on Schindler’s famous list.
 - 3 New York: Schocken Books 2004. Published in German with the title *Ich bin allein und bang: Ein jüdisches Mädchen in Polen 1939–1945*, from the English by Reinhild Böhnke, Munich: Beck 2007.
 - 4 “Hu Shih (1891–1962): A Sketch of His Life and His Role in the Intellectual and Political Dialogue of Modern China,” Dissertation, Los Angeles, Claremont Graduate School and University Center, 1966. Her supervisor was Chen Shouyi 陳受頤 (1899–1978), a scholar who was a personal friend of Hu Shi.
 - 5 “Hu Shih and Chinese History: The Problem of cheng-li kuo-ku,” in: *Monumenta Serica* (MS) XXVII (1968), pp. 169–207.
 - 6 Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan, 1980. An article on this research topic appeared several years earlier, also in *Monumenta Serica*: “Poland and Polish Authors in Modern Chinese Literature and Translation,” in: MS XXXI (1974–1975), pp. 407–445.
 - 7 *Lectures on the I Ching: Constancy and Change*, Princeton University Press 1979, last published 2014. The title of the German original is: Richard Wilhelm, *Wandlung und Dauer: Die Weisheit des I Ging*, Düsseldorf et al.: Diederichs 1956.

In 1983 she organized an international conference on Confucianism at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where she had moved in 1969. She published the contributions in the volume *Confucianism: The Dynamics of Tradition*.⁸

Irene Eber's interest in minorities focused on the history of Judaism in China and the interrelations between Jewish and Chinese culture. A fundamental article on the identity and assimilation of the Jewish community in Kaifeng during the Song period appeared in 1993 in *Monumenta Serica*.⁹ Irene Eber had also already dealt with Kaifeng and the early days of Judaism in China in various other articles.

Irene Eber was a welcome guest at international conferences. She also participated in the international conference "From Kaifeng to Shanghai – Jews in China" organized by the Monumenta Serica Institute and the China-Zentrum in 1997 in Sankt Augustin, where she contributed to the more recent history of Judaism in China, namely the flight of thousands of European Jews to Shanghai during the period of National Socialism.¹⁰ Years later, from a biographical perspective, she once again devoted herself to Jewish emigration to Shanghai with the bibliophile and richly illustrated volume *Voices from Shanghai. Jewish Exiles in Wartime China*,¹¹ in which she made poems and essays from German and Yiddish magazines in Shanghai as well as diary entries and letters from Jewish migrants available in English translation – a sensitive and touching testimony to Jewish exile literature in China and to the "Jewish condition of homelessness" (p. 86) experienced as universal. At the age of more than eighty, Irene Eber published another historical work about the Jews in Shanghai, the monograph *Wartime Shanghai and the Jewish Refugees from Central Europe: Survival, Co-Existence, and Identity in a Multi-Ethnic City*.¹² Shortly before her death, she published a final title on this subject, a collection of historical documents on the Jewish refugees in Shanghai.¹³ Against the backdrop of her own biographical experiences of flight and persecution, it is not surprising that she dealt intensively with the Jewish flight to Shanghai throughout her life.

Another important research focus of Irene Eber was the translation and reception of the Bible in China and the role this not only religious but also literary work played in the various upheavals of recent Chinese intellectual history. She presented two important monographs on this topic: The conference volume *Bible in Modern China: The Literary and Intellectual Impact*, which emerged from a conference she organized at Hebrew University and was published in 1999 in the Monumenta Serica Monograph Series,¹⁴ and

8 New York: Macmillan 1986.

9 "Kaifeng Jews Revisited: Sinification as Affirmation of Identity," in: *MS XLI* (1993), pp. 231-247. Abbreviated reprint in: Jonathan Goldstein (ed.), *The Jews of China, Volume One: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, Armonk, NY – London: Sharpe 1998, pp. 22-35, with the title: "Kaifeng Jews: The Sinification of Identity."

10 Published with the title "Flight to Shanghai 1938–1939 and Its Larger Context," in: Roman Malek (ed.), *From Kaifeng ... to Shanghai: Jews in China*, Monumenta Serica Monograph Series, vol. 46, Nettetal: Steyler Verlag 2000, pp. 417-432.

11 Chicago – London: University of Chicago Press 2008.

12 Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter 2012.

13 *Jewish Refugees in Shanghai 1933–1947: A Selection of Documents*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht 2018.

14 Edited by Irene Eber, Sze-kar Wan and Knut Wolf in collaboration with Roman Malek, Nettetal: Steyler Verlag. The book was also published in a shortened Chinese translation: *Shengjing yu jindai Zhongguo* 聖經與近代中國, Hong Kong: Chinese Bible International 2003.

the study *The Jewish Bishop and the Chinese Bible. S.I.J. Shereshevsky (1831–1906)*.¹⁵ The first title contains various contributions on the translation of the Bible in China and its literary and intellectual reception and appropriation from the 18th to the 20th century.¹⁶ The second book could be described as her *opus magnum* and at the same time as a fusion of her two research topics “Jews in China” and “Bible in China.” It deals with the person and work of Samuel Isaac Joseph Schereschewsky, a Jew and Bible translator from Lithuania. After his conversion to Christianity he was active as a missionary of the American Episcopal Mission in China and was even ordained bishop of Shanghai. His translation of the Old Testament (*Jiuyue quanshu* 舊約全書) from Hebrew into the North Chinese colloquial language (*guanhua* 官話), published in Beijing in 1875, was one of the most read Bible translations in China until the appearance of the Protestant *Union Version* (1919), on which it exerted a great influence.

In addition to Schereschewsky, Irene Eber also dealt with a second personality of Jewish origin and his role in Chinese-western intercultural encounters: the philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965) and his reception of Daoism. For this she published, again in *Monumenta Serica*, the article “Martin Buber and Taoism,” in which she deals with Buber’s examination of Daoist ideas in *Daodejing* 道德經 and in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子.¹⁷ She also published a volume on Buber’s writings on China as part of the complete edition of his works.¹⁸

The anthology *Chinese and Jews, Encounters between Cultures*, published in 2008, which she had also published in Hebrew a few years earlier and which unites several of her articles published in various journals, provides a good insight into the breadth of Irene Eber’s research.¹⁹

Her connection with the Monumenta Serica Institute is evidenced not only by her various publications in the Institute’s publications, but also by her correspondence with the then editor-in-chief Roman Malek. To his 2017 Festschrift *Rooted in Hope* she contributed the article “Translating King David” by comparing two Chinese versions of the biblical

15 Leiden *et al.*: Brill 1999.

16 Irene Eber’s article there, “The Interminable Term Question,” pp. 135-161, deals with the Protestant controversy over the appropriate translation of biblical terms into Chinese in the second half of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries.

17 MS XLII (1994), pp. 445-464. This article recently appeared in a Chinese translation in Huang Mei-ting 黃漢婷 – Wei Siqi 魏思齊 (eds.), *Xifang yu Laozi de xiangyu: Huayi xuezhizhi Laozi lunwen Zhongyi jingxuan ji* 西方與老子的相遇—《華裔學志》老子論文中譯精選輯 (*The Encounter of the Western World and Lao Zi: Chinese Translations of Selected Articles on Laozi in Monumenta Serica*), New Taipei City: Fu Jen daxue chubanshe 2019, pp. 77-100.

18 *Martin Buber Werkausgabe*. Band: 2.3, *Schriften zur chinesischen Philosophie und Literatur*, edited, introduced and commented by Irene Eber, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2013. The volume essentially collects Buber’s transmissions of “Speeches and Parables” from the *Zhuangzi* and “Chinese Ghost and Love Stories” from the Qing Dynasty work *Liaozhai zhiyi* 聊齋志異 (Strange Stories from the Liao Studio) by Pu Songling 蒲松齡. Buber relied for this on the English translations of Herbert Giles and collaborated with Chinese colleagues.

19 London – Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell. The Hebrew edition *Sinium yi Yehudim: mifgashim ben tarbuyot* appeared in the Bialik Institute in Jerusalem in 2002.

story of King David (Samuel 1 and 2) in the translation by Shereshevsky and the Protestant *Union Version*.²⁰

Personally, Irene Eber was characterized by a modest and likeable appearance, coupled with great expertise and clarity of language and thought. In an interview in the documentary “The Journey – The Way of Irene Eber,” she said regretfully about her life and education: “I am running behind. I have lost time and I’ll never catch up.”²¹ But given the years lost during the war and the persecution, Irene Eber has left behind an admirably rich sinological work that will live on.

20 Barbara Hoster – Dirk Kuhlmann – Zbigniew Wesolowski (eds.), *Rooted in Hope: China – Religion – Christianity. Festschrift in Honor of Roman Malek S.V.D. on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, Abingdon, Oxon – New York: Routledge 2017, vol. 2, pp. 609-616.

21 The impressive film was made in 2015 by two students at the European School of Journalism in Halle, Evi Lemberger and Maria Göckeritz, and can be seen under the following link: www.youtube.com/watch?v=0zacxVPQNeY (last accessed August 15, 2019).