In memoriam
Irene Eber (1929–2019)

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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. 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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father Yedidia Geminder came from Poland, 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*. 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. The dissertation was not published in its entirety, but appeared in excerpts in various journals, including *Monumenta Serica*.

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. 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.

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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/gdatensatz.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.


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.


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

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\(^8\) New York: Macmillan 1986.


\(^12\) Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter 2012.


\(^14\) Edited by Irene Eber, Sze-kar Wan and Knut Walf 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).* 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. 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*. She also published a volume on Buber’s writings on China as part of the complete edition of his works.

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.

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

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.” 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.

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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=0zaczVPQNeY (last accessed August 15, 2019).