

## RELICS OF CHINESE JEWRY ON DISPLAY

For several centuries, Western scholars have been intrigued by reports of a small colony of Chinese Jews living in K'ai-feng, in Honan Province, Northern China. The Jesuits who went to China in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries made contact with some of them, and several nineteenth century churchmen visited the city and its Jewish families.

It remained for a Canadian, Bishop William C. White, to make a study of this obscure community, its history and genealogies, and, in 1942, to write what is still the definitive work on the subject, *Chinese Jews*. A new edition of this book was published in 1966.

While studying and photographing these twentieth century representatives of this ancient colony, Bishop White (who later became Curator of the Far Eastern Department of the Royal Ontario Museum) arranged for the memorial stone recording early history of the community to be preserved, and collected relics of the vanished synagogue of K'ai-feng. He brought the objects he was able to assemble to Toronto, where they have been in the Chinese collections of the Far Eastern Department for many years.

### HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The objects are varied, and rich in historical associations. Although the Rolls of the Pentateuch had been taken to England in the nineteenth century, the lacquered wooden Torah case was obtained for the ROM, and the Bishop was able to find some manuscript leaves from the Book of Genesis. Perhaps the most handsome piece is a black sounding-stone originally used to call the worshippers together, and carefully preserved by the leading Jewish family of the city in the years since the synagogue had fallen into disrepair and then been demolished.

There are, in addition, two ornamental stone bowls once situated in the synagogue courtyard, and a stone object that was probably the mouth of the drain into which water from ablutions was poured. While the memorial stone recording the community's history from the first building of the synagogue in 1163 into the sixteenth century remained in K'ai-feng, a facsimile copy of it, as well as ink rubbings of the original, were specially made for the Royal Ontario Museum.

These objects, together with the photographs of the community taken earlier in the twentieth century by Bishop White, form a unique record of a religious group whose links with the West go back more than 1,000 years and whose faith endured for many centuries despite its isolation.

### DISPLAY LOANED TO SYNAGOGUE

The objects have been scattered in study areas of the Museum, and have not been on display, owing to lack of gallery space. The Curator estimates that it would cost about \$10,000 to prepare a proper setting for them because of the diversity of their characteristics and history and, since the funds have not been available for this purpose, the Museum has made an extended loan of nine of the K'ai-feng objects to Holy Blossom Temple, Toronto, where a handsome display has been created for the enjoyment of the whole community.

The objects on display are: rubbings of two inscriptions, 1489 and 1512, from a stele; two stone basins, believed to be of fifteenth-century date; a stone drain-mouth; a stone chime; a lacquered Torah case; three leaves from the Book of Genesis; and a single leaf from a New Year's prayer.



*Dr. Hsio Yen-Shih, Curator of the Far Eastern Department, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, and Rabbi Gunther Plaut, of the Holy Blossom Temple, Toronto admire a lotus-carved stone basin of fifteenth century China, with members of the congregation. The Museum recently made an extended loan of the rare Judaica from China to the Jewish community of Toronto.*