



The Way Back Machine Shabbat in Kaifeng, August 1985

By Rabbi Arnold Mark Belzer

[Shortly after SJI's founding, Rabbi Arnold Mark Belzer led a tour to Kaifeng. This is the account of their visit, reprinted from Points East, 1:2, April 1986.]

Our group arrived at Zhengzhou Airport about 10 o'clock at night. We were met by Mr. Guang and Mr. Liu of CITS. We "enjoyed" an hour and a half bumpy and dusty bus trip to Kaifeng. Both Mr. Guang and Mr. Liu are very knowledgeable about the Jews of Kaifeng. It seems that they both memorized Bishop White's book and are very anxious for more information about the Jews of Kaifeng. They were most anxious to make our experience a special one.

The next morning we set out for South Teaching of the Scriptures Lane and the home of Mr. Zhou. As always, Mr. Zhou was a gracious and outgoing host. We looked at the model of the synagogue that Mr. Zhou is working on and talked with him for some time with the help of Mr. Liu and Mr. Guang. It is clear that he is quite used to greeting foreign visitors and enjoys all the attention. In a most interesting exchange with our entire group assembled, I asked Mr. Zhou how long this dwelling had been in his family and he held up one finger. I asked him if that means 100 years and he answered, "No, a thousand". It was quite impressive. I have never met a Jew who could show me their 1,000-year-old ancestral home. (Obviously, I am aware that because of the floods, it was probably rebuilt many times.)

We left Mr. Zhou's home with a promise to meet again in the afternoon at the Kaifeng Guest House along with other Kaifeng Jews. We walked off to the area in front of the hospital, the site of the former Kaifeng synagogue. It seems that some construction is about to take place and quite a significant area has been cleared. In my mind's eye, I saw the synagogue standing and in my soul, I felt a pang of hope that the buildings that were removed were to make way for a replica of the Kaifeng Synagogue, but, so much for fantasy. I was intrigued as I looked at the debris and by the thought that an excavation on that site might indeed turn up some relics from the past, but it does not seem that any attention is being paid to that possibility.

I was surprised to learn that neither the site of the synagogue nor South Teaching of the Scriptures Lane had

(continued on page 3)

A ChinaFile Conversation on China's Moves in the Middle East

Excerpted from <https://www.chinafile.com/conversation/what-make-of-chinas-moves-middle-east>, 19 August 2024.

[ChinaFile is an online magazine published by the Asia Society, dedicated to promoting an informed, nuanced, and vibrant public conversation about China, in the U.S. and around the world.]

In late July, 14 Palestinian factions including rivals Hamas and Fatah agreed "to end their divisions and form an interim national unity government" in a "Beijing Declaration" after negotiations in the capital that began on July 21. The talks followed an earlier attempt by China to broker a deal between Fatah and Hamas...

Attempting to reconcile Hamas and Fatah and other Palestinian factions is a continuation of a quest to be an alternative to the U.S. in the Middle East, and points to a shift in Beijing's strategy: Despite more than two decades of a growing economic and political relationship with Israel, including counter-terrorism cooperation, China's leadership has neither condemned the October 7 attack nor made any public statements of sympathy for its victims. Rather, Beijing has rebuked Israel and the United States, calling the war in Gaza a "tragedy for humanity" and a "disgrace for human civilization," and attributing the U.S. abstention from a United Nations vote demanding a ceasefire to "the hegemonic mentality of the United States."

What does Beijing expect to gain from the intra-Palestinian peace talks? What considerations shape China's position on the Israel-Gaza conflict, and on the wider geopolitical picture in the Middle East? How does China's support for Iran factor into its strategies? What can we expect next? — The Editors

Comments

Carice Witte

Beijing has long attempted, without real success, to take part in international efforts meant to resolve the Israel-Palestinian conflict. For example, in the years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, China hosted Israelis and Palestinians for talks. The gatherings did not generate agreements between the parties, but they did garner press attention for China. The recent round of

(continued on page 5)

Notice to Subscribers. Particularly Overseas Subscribers. Please Consider Receiving Points East Digitally

It is very expensive for us to mail out Points East, particularly to those of you outside the United States. Please consider receiving the electronic version of Points East and letting us put your dues to a better use. Just send an email to Laytner@msn.com and you'll be switched over. Thanks!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Featured Articles:

The Way Back Machine 1

A ChinaFile Conversation on
China's Moves in the Middle East..... 1

From the Editor..... 2

In The Field 3

Book Nook..... 14

Articles:

Reflections on Israel Studies
in China 9

In Memoriam
Dennis 'Den' Leventhal 14

A Kaifeng Siddur Concert
Premieres 16

FROM THE EDITOR

As SJI commemorates its fortieth anniversary, we also mark the tenth anniversary of the end of the Kaifeng Spring, when the authorities clamped down on any public expression of Jewishness in that city.

For those of you who need a reminder: by the spring of 2015 the authorities had closed down Shavei Israel's school and expelled SJI's teacher; they did not allow the community to meet collectively; they shuttered all Jewish exhibits at local museums; they removed all public signage relating to the historic Jewish presence; they sealed up and closed off access to the former synagogue's well, now in the basement of a hospital; and they forbade foreign Jewish groups from visiting Kaifeng. What remains of the active Jewish community there went underground in order to survive.

So our fortieth anniversary is a bittersweet occasion. Where the early issues of Points East brimmed with hope, like Rabbi Belzer's article reprinted in this issue, today we can only hope for a governmental reprieve that will allow the community to surface once again. All it desires is to be recognized for what it is, a Jewish community with more than a thousand-year history in China, that deserves the chance to remain connected to its Sino-Judaic roots.

And in the meantime, while they wait for a change of heart in their government, we wait with them because there is little we can do currently.

The Kaifeng Jews take the long view. After all, they have been without a rabbi for more than two centuries, and they have seen governmental attitudes towards them wax and wane. For SJI, the matter is different. Can we maintain our organization and sustain our programs long enough to survive this cold, dry season?

Anson Laytner

Points East

Anson Laytner, Editor

Points East is published by the Sino-Judaic Institute, a tax-exempt, non-profit organization. The opinions and views expressed by the contributors and editor are their own and do not necessarily express the viewpoints and positions of the Sino-Judaic Institute.

Letters to the Editor and articles for *Points East* may be sent to:

Preferred Form:

e-mail: laytner@msn.com

or to: Rabbi Anson Laytner
1823 East Prospect St.
Seattle WA 98112-3307

Points East is published three times a year, in March, July and November. Deadlines for submitting material to be included in these issues are January 15th, May 15th and September 15th.

FINANCIAL REPORT AVAILABLE

SJI members interested in receiving a copy of the annual financial report should send a self-addressed envelope to: Prof. Steve Hochstadt, Treasurer of the Sino-Judaic Institute, 34 Colgate Rd., Unit 1, Roslindale, MA 02131 USA

Sino-Judaic Institute
c/o Rabbi Anson Laytner
1823 East Prospect St.
Seattle WA 98112-3307

SJI Officers

Anson Laytner, President
Wendy Abraham, Vice-President
Steve Hochstadt, Secretary/Treasurer
Arnold Mark Belzer, Immediate Past President

Managing Board

Joel Epstein, Beverly Friend, Jeremy Goldkorn, Loraine Heller, Dan Levitsky, Ondi Lingenfelter, Abbey Newman, Kevin Ostoyich, James Peng Yu, Charlene Polansky, Eric Rothberg, Danny Spungen, Joshua Zuo, David Zweig.

International Advisory Board

Moshe Y. Bernstein, Jan Berris, Zvia Bowman, Mark Cohen, Avrum Ehrlich, Fu Youde, Judy Green, Len Hew, Tess Johnston, Dan Krassenstein, Den Leventhal, Michael Li, Yonatan Menashe, Maisie Meyer, Mark Michaelson, Sonja Muehlberger, Gustavo Perednik, Andrew Plaks, Pan Guang, Shi Lei, Yitzhak Shichor, Elyse Silverberg, Noam Urbach, Shalom Wald, Tibi Weisz, Xiao Xian, Xu Xin, Albert Yee, Zhang Qianhong.

Past Presidents

Al Dien, Leo Gabow

SJI MEMBERSHIP

Country	Total
United States	122
China	16
Israel	8
England	5
Australia	2
Japan	2
Taiwan	2
Canada	1
Germany	1
Mexico	1
Total:	160

Bequest Request

Please consider putting the
Sino-Judaic Institute in your will.

In the Field

• David Zweig's New Book

Mazal tov to new SJI Board member, Prof. David Zweig, on the recent publication of his book, *The War for Chinese Talent in America* (Columbia U Press, 2025), 246 pages. *The War for Chinese Talent in America* documents China's effort to access US technology and America's harsh counterattack and its successful efforts to disrupt the transfer of U.S. technology to China. It highlights how this tug-of-war has undermined Sino-American scientific collaboration and triggered an outflow of Chinese talent from America and back to China.

• Kevin Ostoyich's New Play

SJI Board member Kevin Ostoyich and fellow professor Kari-Anne Innes, along with students at Slippery Rock University (Slippery Rock, PA), have written a new play titled, "Lyrics and Laughter from Shanghai: A Relevant Cabaret with Historical Commentary." Using documents from the USHMM archives, the play features original songs and comedy routines from the Shanghai Jewish refugee community. Students performed the play on May 7th in the Stoner Black Box Theater on the Slippery Rock University campus. They will continue to develop the play, and Innes hopes to make it into a mainstage production (with professional lighting, sound, etc.). They will start working on the German version, so it can be performed at the Erinnerungsort BADEHAUS in Wolftratshausen, Germany.

• A Sign for SJI's Future?

While touring Jewish Shanghai with veteran guide Dvir Bar Gal, Nicholas Andrus snapped this photo at the Shanghai Jewish Refugees Museum:



Machine, continued from page 1

been marked properly for tourists. It seems like a very simple thing. If money is the problem, I am sure that even a bronze sign or marking could be made up in the U.S. and shipped and properly mounted for less than \$1000. I was later assured by Chen Li Bo (a CITS official) that the municipality is still working on this. Not being an old China hand, I suppose patience is not one of my virtues. While looking at the synagogue site, we met two young Canadian cousins who asked if we were looking for Jews and we told them no, we had already found them. Both were Jewish, one a physician from Montreal and the other, Dr. Jeremy Paltiel, a professor of Political Science at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada. He is fluent in Mandarin and we directed him to Mr. Zhou's home. We also invited both he and his cousin to join us in the event for our banquet.

In the afternoon, Mr. Shih and his nephew, Mr. Shih, Mr. Zhou, and his young granddaughter came to the Kaifeng Guest House for a far-reaching discussion. Present at the meeting was Mr. Chen Li Bo, Mr. Guang, Mr. Li, Mr. Gao, our national guide and all the members of the group. I began with a welcome to all those who came to the meeting, a thanks to Mr. Zhou for allowing us to visit his home and greetings from the Sino-Judaic Institute. What follows are some of the questions and answers:

Rabbi Belzer: What can we do for you now and in the future?

Mr. Zhou: I have five daughters and five granddaughters and would like for some of them to go to the U.S. to learn about our shared history, to learn about Judaism and to trace back genealogy.

Rabbi: Is there a desire to learn Hebrew?

Zhou: I would be interested in books with Hebrew letters. I would like to learn Hebrew calligraphy.

Rabbi: How do you pass on your sense of Jewish identity to other family members?

Mr. Shih, the younger: I have been trying to make contact with other

family members. There was a "family book". The book is useful in identifying other Kaifeng Jews.

Rabbi: Have you recorded any of the stories that you remember hearing from parents and grandparents so as to develop an oral history?

Mr. Shih, the elder: Tape recorders are new in China. It would be a very useful project. I want to share a story. When I was a child in Kaifeng during the 1930's I was asked by my schoolteacher along with other members of my class to put down our family's city of origin. I put down Jerusalem. It was during the Japanese occupation. When I told my father about it, he was quite disturbed, perhaps because of the Axis of Japan and the Nazis. He told me that from now on I was to put down, Kaifeng, and not Jerusalem. I protested, "But Grandfather always told us that our city of origin was Jerusalem". My father said, "Yes, of course, but from now on, write Kaifeng".

[Rabbi passes around Bishop White's book.]

Zhou: Many of the sources of this book are from my uncle. (Mr. Zhou then identified his own picture as a small boy. Mr. Zhou signed his name over the picture. I quoted the 1932 letter which was a request from Mr. Zhou's father to the Jews of the U.S. to help rebuild the synagogue.)

Rabbi: Is that what you would like today?

Zhou: The site of the synagogue belonged to Bishop White. My father wanted to get it back.

Rabbi: Would the Jews of Kaifeng like a community center to be available?

Zhou: No, it is not necessary to build a center for Jewish descendants of Kaifeng, only for a place for this replica of the synagogue and a Hall of Remembrance of the history of my family. Not for religious purposes, only for the sake of history.

Rabbi: If some kind of community meeting place were available, not as a center of religion but as a place for cousins to share

Zhou: If it had nothing to do with religion, then it would be okay.

Bernard Bober: Do you see any physical differences between yourself and other Chinese because of Jewish blood?

Zhou: Due to hundreds of years of intermarriage, there are no differences. Many years ago I remember some experts coming to take our pictures. They even measured our noses to determine if there were indeed any differences, but there are no differences.

Rabbi: What do you know about Jews in the world today?

Shih, the elder: We know that Karl Marx, Charlie Chaplin, and Einstein were Jewish. Other Chinese told us that they knew that Jews are smart and good businessmen. I was asked to be a business consultant. I think because it is known that I am a Kaifeng Jew.

Matilda Meyers: Are your wives Jewish?

Zhou: No, we trace our Jewishness through the father's line, in the traditional Chinese way.

Shih (taking out a notebook): I wrote down the 10 Commandments. Can I read them to you? Will you tell me if they are correct? (Mr. Shih reads the 10 Commandments, version obviously is from a King James Bible.)

Rabbi: Yes, they are correct. Do you always have them with you?

Shih: Yes.

Shih, the elder: Could you tell us about the Jewish holidays?

(Rabbi gives a rather long description of the various Jewish holidays with Mr. Shih taking copious notes.)

Rabbi: What was the Chinese title for Rabbi?

Shih, the younger: They were "Manla" but that is from the Persian.

(Other questions followed and the group adjourned for a special Song Dynasty banquet.)

The most interesting piece of information that came from our discussion is the fact that the Jews of Kaifeng have followed patrilineal descent throughout its history. As

explained, this is in the Chinese tradition (and Biblical tradition too) and was a way of insuring that honors conferred by the Emperors be passed down through the father's line. This piece of information has extraordinary implications in the Jewish world today with regard to the legitimacy of patrilineal descent.

At the banquet I made an effort to sit with Mr. Shih and his nephew. While Mr. Zhou protested about not being interested in Judaism as a religion, I detected that both the elder and younger Mr. Shihs had more than a scholarly interest in Jewish history. I pursued this and found that I indeed was correct in my perception. The lack of materials in Chinese about Jews and Judaism was of course noted.

Following dinner, we adjourned back to the conference room where we gathered to have a very late Havdallah program. Through Jeremy Paltiel, obviously a Godsend, I explained the significance and symbolism of Havdallah and used a service which a Sino-Judaic Institute Board Member helped prepare prior to our trip. It was clearly an extremely moving event. I suggested that it was perhaps the first time in well over 100 years that any kind of Jewish cultural ceremony had taken place in Kaifeng. We all felt the power of the moment and savored the taste of the sweet wine and the smell of the spices and the beauty of the flame. I can say that there were misty eyes for all of us. Even the guides commented on what a moving experience it was.

Following Havdallah, I gave out a number of presents to Mr. Zhou and both Mr. Shih's, including a large poster-size blow-up of some of the illustrations of Bishop White's book. I gave Mr. Shih, the elder, a Hertz Chumash (Pentateuch). I gave Mr. Zhou a full-sized Torah replica (on paper, not parchment) as well as the Havdallah set that we used, a number of kipahs, some beginner books in Hebrew with instructions on how to form the Hebrew letters. When I took out a mezuzah, Mr. Shih, the elder, put out his hand to touch it and then kissed his hand in the traditional way. We were all very

surprised and, of course, moved to see this. I asked him how he knew about that custom and he said he was told about it. It is clear to me that Jews of Kaifeng were told many things, some of which are remembered and some of which, of course, have been forgotten. The group said warm farewells to our Kaifeng cousins.

Very early the next morning by pre-arrangement, we met at Mr. Zhou's home to affix a mezuzah to the doorpost of his house. With the traditional prayers and many neighbors looking on, we put a very lovely large brass mezuzah onto his doorpost. From the experience the night before, I realized that Mr. Shih would also have liked to have had a mezuzah. I happened to have only two so I arranged to send one off to Mr. Shih the next morning with a note and instructions on how to affix it to his doorpost. Once again, it was a great privilege to be able to have such a special experience.

Another observation concerning Mr. Zhou: While he protests that he is not interested in Judaism as a religion, he seems entirely enthralled with all the symbols and accoutrements of Judaism. Another observation in regard to Mr. Zhou's entrepreneurship: During our discussions, I brought up the fact that many Jews would be coming through in the future and that I thought it would be entirely fitting if Kaifeng Jews prepared some kind of souvenirs to sell to such visitors. I even made some suggestions, perhaps a plaque with the Hebrew word "Shalom" and the Chinese equivalent. Mr. Zhou showed me a mockup of a proposed commemorative coin with a likeness of the Kaifeng synagogue. It is quite nice and I hope he is successful in that project.

We visited the Great East Mosque, which we found interesting. It seems obvious that some of the accoutrements of the Kaifeng Synagogue are indeed on that site, the lotus bowl being a notable example. We also visited the steles (memorial stones tracing the community's history) in the warehouse of the Henan Museum. Given their state of preservation, they are hardly impressive and their sad situation of

being relegated to that warehouse is most disheartening.

Some observations: In regard to the community—I was most interested in Leo Gabow's article in the Palo Alto newspaper. Lou is obviously correct, "There is no Jewish community" There are, however, people who strongly identify themselves as Jewish. The individuals that I met seem strongly private and family-oriented. But I believe that it is because there is no material focus for what can become a community. Permit my humble recommendations based on much too short a stay in Kaifeng but based on a gut feeling and a good deal of experience with Jews and Jewish communities, I believe that it is of the greatest importance that there be a person or persons from the U.S. Jewish community knowledgeable about Jews and Judaism and fluent in Mandarin present in Kaifeng from now on. No other single project could be more important to the Jew of Kaifeng. Such a person with skills of organization and knowledge of Judaism could literally perform miracles. I would encourage the Sino Judaic Institute to support such efforts. If it is necessary for another entity to be created for the purpose of developing educational materials, so be it. If it need be separate from the Institute, fine. But we should support the project. As to the matter of a material focus to the community, this discussion really involves a myriad of subjects including the issue of the multitude of Kaifeng museums. I believe that very high-level negotiations should take place with either the Mayor of Kaifeng (who is due in the U.S. soon) or even higher officials to propose that either a replica of the synagogue be built on some site in Kaifeng entirely with foreign money or that some other structure be converted to house some kind of Jewish commemorative presence. Such a building could contain replicas of artifacts, photographs, etc. and even have a room as a meeting place for what could become a "re-born Kaifeng Jewish community".

ChinaFile, continued from page 1

talks in Beijing between 14 Palestinian factions, most prominently Fatah and Hamas, has also garnered press for China. While the Palestinians do not seem to treat the ensuing "Beijing declaration" as having made a tangible difference, Beijing claims that the declaration puts an end to divisions and bitter rivalry.

Compelling Fatah to work with Hamas, Beijing is ignoring the historic divergence between the two, with the former agreeing to recognize the State of Israel while Hamas continues to call for Israel's destruction. Beijing is also ignoring its allies in the Middle East who have made it clear that they want to see an end to Hamas. This is an example of what the author Edward Luttwak termed "great state autism" whereby leaders of large, powerful states fail to maintain the constant situational awareness of foreign environments that are natural for regional small countries and necessary for accurate assessments at any given time. Such disconnect results in Beijing's promotion of the "Beijing declaration" as another mediation success comparable to the Saudi-Iran rapprochement. In fact, as I was told in private meetings with Chinese officials in June, China was more of a facilitator than a mediator since the deal was mainly complete when it was brought to China. Moreover, China's role in the Saudi-Iran deal seems to have insufficiently assuaged Saudi Arabia's long-term security concerns regarding Iran, as Riyadh continues to entertain normalization with Israel as part of a larger deal for a security alliance with the U.S. This causes one to wonder at the comparison between the Saudi-Iran deal and the Beijing declaration.

China's increasingly public focus on the Middle East is in line with its global interests. China sees the Middle East not only as a key arena in its competition with the U.S. but as a testing ground for its new initiatives (the Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative) and its stated plans to reshape global governance. This includes promoting the GSI as the new security architecture for the region. These interests are supported by China's investments; it has been the largest investor in

the Middle East since 2016. When its Belt and Road investments decreased worldwide in 2018, they grew in the Middle East.

China's efforts on behalf of the Palestinians are also aimed at burnishing its image as the self-declared leader of the Global South. China's bid for leadership is based on the claim (among others) that it "puts people first." There appears to be a growing awareness in Beijing of pressure to act like the great power it is perceived and wishes to be—putting people first is a move beyond rhetorical support to taking action on behalf of the Palestinians. China's unprecedentedly harsh stance against Israel, responding to the barbaric October 7 massacre of Jewish, Muslim, Druze, and Bedouin Israelis by calling for a two-state solution and refraining from identifying Hamas as a terror organization, has made it difficult for China to act as a mediator vis-a-vis Israel. Intra-Palestinian unity offers a platform for Palestinian "action" that will likely be well received by the Global South.

Going forward, Beijing will continue to work toward bringing the Middle East into its sphere of influence, with all this implies. Its stance regarding Israel and the Palestinians will adjust according to what best supports this longer-term goal.

Carice Witte is the Founder and Executive Director of SIGNAL Group (Sino-Israel Global Network & Academic Leadership), an Israeli policy organization that specializes in China-Israel and China-Middle East affairs. Witte initiated Chinese-Israeli Track-II exchanges in 2011. The same year, she initiated an annual program held in Israel for Chinese faculty on teaching Israel Studies as well as the establishment of Israel Studies Programs (ISPs) at universities across China.

Having led over 1,000 briefings in China and Israel, she established an annual conference on Israel's China policy in 2016 and a semi-annual China-Israel and annual China-Israel-U.S. Track-II dialogue in 2017. In 2019, Witte launched a seminar series for international China experts and policy professionals that evolved during COVID-19 into a monthly gathering. In 2022, she began developing SIGNAL Group's new strategic

agenda to strengthen Israel's geostrategic position in the context of China's growing role on the world stage and especially in the Middle East as well as the increasing tensions between Beijing and Washington.

Witte is on the board of the Israel Council on Foreign Affairs. She immigrated to Israel from the U.S. in 1987. She is a graduate of Yale University.

Joyce Karam

Eight days before the assassination of Hamas' political leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran on July 31, China hosted six representatives from the militant group, its archrival Fatah, and 12 other Palestinian groups. The two-day gathering established the "Beijing Declaration," a vague roadmap to end the 17-year Palestinian split between Hamas and Fatah.

The effort, which followed successive meetings for Chinese diplomats in Doha, Ramallah, and Beijing earlier in the year, underscores China's growing ambition and confidence in projecting power and wading into Middle East conflicts. The milestone Saudi-Iran agreement that the People's Republic brokered in March 2023 strengthened the view of how far China diplomacy has come in the region, guided by its talk-to-everyone, friends-with-all approach.

This approach, however, is still nascent, and its efficacy is being tested by the stubborn dynamics of these conflicts. On the Saudi-Iran front, full normalization has not materialized nearly a year and half after the agreement. On the Palestinian front, Hamas-Fatah reconciliation and the establishment of a new interim Palestinian government are very unlikely to happen before the end of the war.

Still, China seems pragmatic enough to realize its own limitations in shaping regional political and security dynamics.

In the intra-Palestinian talks, particularly, it's an uphill battle for China's diplomacy given its little to no leverage inside Gaza, lukewarm ties with the Palestinian Authority, worsening relations with Israel, and the events of the war that are undermining the Hamas external political wing.

Throughout its diplomatic engagement with Hamas, China has primarily relied on channels with the group's offices in Doha. While Beijing has not designated Hamas as a terrorist organization or condemned it by name after the October 7 attacks, its traditional partner among the Palestinians has been the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). This was especially the case under Yasser Arafat, who visited China 14 times from 1964 up until his death in 2004, leveraging Beijing's early recognition of the PLO in 1965, the first non-Arab nation to do so.

Three years after Arafat's death, a new, divided Palestinian reality emerged as Hamas took control of Gaza and ousted Fatah. The change has led China to broaden its outreach to Hamas as an integral part of Palestinian politics. Today, even as Israel continues to inflict a heavy toll on the group's leadership and military infrastructure in Gaza, Beijing seems to be operating under the assumption that the group's influence will endure after the war is over.

This expectation led to more intensified engagement between Hamas and China over the past six months.

China's March meeting with Haniyeh in Doha was followed by a Hamas and Fatah visit to Beijing in April. Hamas' delegation was led by the deputy head of its political bureau, Moussa Abu Marzouk, along with senior officials Khalil al-Hayya and Hossam Badran. Marzouk returned in July and signed the Beijing Declaration.

In the aftermath of Haniyeh's killing, however, the power dynamics within Hamas shifted. Yahya Sinwar, a hardline figure, and the mastermind of the October 7 attack, was named on August 6 as the new leader of the political wing of Hamas. The change weakens the external wing of Hamas and undermines efforts by Qatar, Egypt, and the U.S. to reach a ceasefire. By extension, it complicates China's efforts in expanding its influence and reconciling the Hamas-Fatah divide.

Nevertheless, for China, elevating its role on the Palestinian arena is a win-win in the Arab world. It re-

inforces a pro-Palestinian narrative that is well-received in the Global South and shows it in contrast with the United States, without necessarily aiming to replace Washington as a security guarantor in the region. Arab Barometer polling conducted in 2023-2024 in five countries showed China's favorability on the rise, while the U.S. image saw a sharp decline amid Washington's political and military support for Israel since October 7.

Securing a seat at the table is another objective for China in anticipation of the day-after talks in Gaza. Toward that end, China will lean on its strong relations with regional middle powers, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Iran, even as its current efforts falter.

Joyce Karam is the Senior News Editor at Al-Monitor and a journalist with decades of experience covering the Middle East, U.S. foreign policy, and international affairs. She authors Al-Monitor's weekly China-Middle East Briefing newsletter. She is also a Professor of Political Science at George Washington University.

Jonathan Fulton

What does Beijing expect to get out of the intra-Palestinian peace talks? I think hosting the talks was the primary accomplishment for China: it got a seat at the table. The meeting sent a message that Beijing is a serious diplomatic actor in the Middle East and did something the U.S. cannot—get all the Palestinian groups in a room together. This builds on last year's rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran that was also hosted in Beijing. In both cases, the ability to bring rivals together is meant to show the Middle East that China is more than an economic actor in the region—it is willing to wade into the big issues. The talks also build momentum for China's global initiatives—the Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative—demonstrating to the Global South that there can be tangible outcomes from working with China. In the process, Beijing gets to position itself as a credible alternative to the West and the U.S.

All of this is about messaging, how-

ever. I don't think we can expect too much from China in terms of implementation. Despite its increasing Middle East presence, China is not a significant political or diplomatic actor yet, and even if by some miracle it is able to convince the Palestinian factions to get past decades of distrust, competing agendas, and different visions of what they want for a Palestinian state, it would still have to convince Israel to get on board. Last year, China said it wanted to mediate on the Israel-Palestine conflict, but its response to the October 7 attack and everything that has happened since has done tremendous damage to the Israel-China relationship. So I think China has a limited capacity to play a meaningful role in what comes next.

How does China's support for Iran factor into its strategies for the Arab world? It certainly complicates it. China's interests in the Middle East are primarily economic, and the countries it has the deepest relations with, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, see Iran as a threat. In material terms, there's no comparison; in energy, trade, investment, and contracting China gets a lot more from the Arab side of the Persian Gulf than it does from Iran. And Iran's regional policy and its support for revisionist nonstate actors like the Houthis, Hamas, and Hezbollah destabilize the Middle East in a way that undermines China's economic interests. We have seen this explicitly with the Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping. In the wake of the December 2022 summit in Riyadh, Arab leaders had hoped that increased engagement with China would bring Beijing closer to their preferences for regional stability, and with that some expected that Beijing would use its perceived influence with the Iranians to stop the Houthi attacks. That it failed to do so underscored the limits of what China is able to do in the political or diplomatic space in the Middle East, and disappointed regional governments that expected more of Beijing. So its relationship with Iran makes for a more challenging regional environment.

Jonathan Fulton is an Associate Professor of Political Science in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences

at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, UAE, and a Nonresident Senior Fellow with Middle East Programs and the Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative at the Atlantic Council. An expert on Chinese policy toward the Middle East, he has written widely on the topic for both academic and popular publications. His books include China's Relations with the Gulf Monarchies (Routledge, 2019), External Powers and the Gulf Monarchies (co-edited with Li-Chen Sim, Routledge, 2019), Regions in the Belt and Road Initiative (Routledge, 2022), Routledge Handbook on China-Middle East Relations (Routledge, 2022), and Asian Perceptions of Gulf Security (co-edited with Li-Chen Sim, Routledge, 2023). Fulton has published over 30 journal articles, book chapters, and reports, and dozens of op-eds and analytical pieces. His analysis has been featured in global media outlets such as The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, CNN, and the BBC. He is also the host of the Atlantic Council's popular China-MENA Podcast and publishes The China-MENA Newsletter.

Mohammed Alsudairi

Any appraisal of the recent "Beijing Declaration" should take into account local dynamics when considering its tangible impact. (I made the same argument about the Saudi-Iranian detente agreement that Beijing brokered.) The declaration follows in the footsteps of many other preceding agreements between Palestinian groups that had been discussed or concluded over the past two decades (and there have been many, in Algiers, in Cairo, in Doha, etc.). Since 2006, intra-Palestinian reconciliation has been elusive, in large part because there are simply irreconcilable views among the different factions—primarily Fatah and Hamas—regarding power-sharing arrangements. This fundamental factor has not changed, and as one astute observer, Hamzé Attar, noted skeptically, "he who swore and broke his oath before the walls of the Kaaba will swear and break his oath before the Great Wall of China." He is alluding here to another ill-fated agreement, that brokered in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, in 2007.

So why would China pursue such a seemingly futile endeavor? As Min-

istry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Lin Jian indicated, the Beijing Declaration showcases a high degree of alignment with the majority of Arab and Muslim states in terms of establishing how peace should be brokered. This emphasis could be read as part of China's effort to harness Palestine's power to inspire indignation and solidarity (amongst Arab countries and elsewhere) in Beijing's propaganda struggle with the United States. Looking more closely into what is ascribed to the declaration, however, what is striking is how uncreatively adherent the Chinese official stance has been to a framework/roadmap that originates with the American-led Oslo process of the 1990s and the importance it places on a negotiated two-state solution that assumes parity between the two sides. (This holds equally true for China's past multi-pointed proposals as well.) Taking this into account alongside China's own limited capacity and appetite to cultivate real leverage in regional conflicts, it is safe to say that the declaration is more of an exercise in optics involving picking low-hanging fruit rather than an actual attempt at asserting a new diplomatic role for China in the Middle East.

This brings me to a more central point: there is practically little outside actors like China can do to cultivate peace so long as the United States and its Western allies continue to abide by a myopic and extremist approach when it comes to Israel. Consider the following: Gaza's infrastructure has been devastated with a death toll that has likely exceeded the 40,000 mark; and a system of apartheid—acknowledged by UN experts, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and well-reputed Israeli peace and rights organizations like B'tselem and Adalah—exists "between the river and the sea" (with a re-doubling of annexation efforts and violence against Palestinian communities in the West Bank). All of these are unequivocal war crimes—including many preceding the Hamas massacres in October 2023—taking place under a defiant right-wing Israeli government that has openly disavowed the two-state solution and is actively seeking to escalate and drag the region into an all-out war.

In any other context, this would have led to ample condemnation and sanctions to restrain and punish such behavior. This was certainly (and rightly) the case with Russia as a consequence of its invasion of Ukraine. Yet such responses are not only wholly absent from countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany, but all of them are in fact actively arming and diplomatically/legally shielding Israel from international censure. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—who is being considered for an arrest warrant by the International Criminal Court’s prosecutor for crimes against humanity—was met with a standing ovation by the U.S. Congress.

In this conflict, there is a very real asymmetry of power between a nuclear-armed and technologically advanced state, backed by a global superpower and its collection of allies, and a dispossessed and fragmented people subject to a violent settler-colonial project. Ultimately, unless real pressure is brought to bear upon Israel, compelling a change in its calculus to end the occupation and cease its supremacist and maximalist claims, there will be no peace, but repeated cycles of bloodshed and repression. The key variable is the United States, either by imposing pressure or withdrawing its unequivocal backing. This reality is what makes Chinese attempts at peacemaking, as embodied by the Beijing declaration, still-born and perhaps unserious from the very start. It explains, more pertinently, why such efforts might be viewed in Beijing and elsewhere as useful resources in China’s discursive propaganda war: Palestine brings into sharp relief the hypocrisy of Western states that decry the erosion of international laws and institutions, not to mention the universal principles of dignity and equality, while tirelessly dismantling them in turn.

Mohammed Alsudairi currently is a Lecturer in Politics and International Relations of the Arabic Speaking World at Australian National University. He holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Politics from the University of Hong Kong (HKU), an M.A. in International Relations and International History from the London School of

Economics and Peking University, and a B.Sc. in International Politics from Georgetown University. Prior to his appointment at CAIS, he was a postdoctoral research fellow at the Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences at HKU, working on a project examining the intersections between religion and infrastructure in the context of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Since 2015, he has overseen the development of the Asian Studies Program at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies based in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. More recently, in 2022, he was awarded a research fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation to work on his upcoming book manuscript.

*Informed by a multidisciplinary and multilingual approach, Alsudairi’s research focuses on the historical and contemporary connections between the Middle East and East Asia; the histories of transnational revolutionary and counter-revolutionary networks in the Arab world; ideological security bureaucracies and state-led cultural engineering practices across Asia; and Muslim religiosities and sectarian identities in the Middle East, China, and other areas. His academic work has appeared in multiple academic journals including *The Middle East Journal*, *Third World Quarterly*, *Journal of Arabian Studies*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, *Global Policy*, and *Oxford University’s Journal of Islamic Studies*.*

Michael Singh

Viewed from the West, it is easy to ascribe Chinese enthusiasm for the so-called “Beijing Declaration” between Hamas and Fatah to simple naivete. After all, while these two Palestinian factions have long paid lip service to the idea of Palestinian unity, in reality they are bitter enemies who espouse mutually exclusive approaches to the achievement of Palestinian political aspirations. The war in Gaza and accompanying tension and violence in the West Bank has perhaps led the two factions into something of a truce, but it has done nothing to ease the underlying opposition be-

tween them—indeed, Fatah officials bitterly complain that the egotism and extremism of Hamas leaders has brought ruin upon Palestinians.

Yet it would be a mistake to view Palestinian reconciliation as Beijing’s true aim. There are three motivations for Beijing’s sudden emphasis on the war in Gaza and on Palestinian politics. Two are longstanding. First, China has long sought to position itself as the champion and leader of the so-called “Global South.” Beijing has traveled a great distance on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, from actively supporting Palestinian factions during the Cold War, to cultivating close security and economic relations with Israel from the 1980s to 2010s, yet it has never totally abandoned the former impulse. Second, as it has grown in global prominence, China has sought to make a show of diplomatic activity on major diplomatic issues like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in order to underscore its own importance. To that end, Beijing has dispatched envoys to the region and hosted delegations from it, and has even released multiple self-styled plans for Israeli-Palestinian peace. While the plans largely consisted of vague invocations of conventional diplomatic wisdom, it was their promulgation rather than their content that was significant.

However, a third, newer, and more troubling motivation is also apparent in Beijing’s actions since the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel. Chinese officials and analysts have quickly pivoted from a relatively pro-Israel footing to indulging not just criticisms of Israeli government policy but permitting the spread of antisemitism in Chinese social and broadcast media. This appears to reflect not a newfound concern for Palestinian aspirations, but an effort by Beijing to use conflicts, whether in Ukraine, Gaza, or elsewhere, to rally global public opinion against the United States, even at the cost of sacrificing relationships—like those with both Israel and Ukraine—that it spent decades cultivating.

Yan Xuetong, dean of the Institute of International Relations at Tsinghua University, put it this way: “The Israel-Gaza war will reduce the global political influence of the United States. This is already very obvious,

because even its allies have to distance themselves from it on this issue. . . . As the US' strategic relations with other major powers will be undermined, the strategic balance between China and the US will become less favourable to the US." That Palestinian unity is unrealistic, or that Hamas rule would not serve the stability in the Middle East that China desires, is ultimately beside the point. What matters is that if the United States loses, Beijing—in this view of the world—wins.

Michael Singh is a Managing Director and Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He is also a Senate-confirmed member of the board of directors of the United States Institute of Peace. He was Senior Director for Middle East Affairs at the White House from 2007-2008, and a Director on the National Security Council staff from 2005-2007. Earlier, he served as Special Assistant to Secretaries of State Powell and Rice, and at the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv. Singh co-chaired the Congressionally-appointed Syria Study Group, and served on the Congressional Task Force on Extremism in Fragile States. In addition, he co-chaired Mitt Romney's State Department transition team in 2012, and served as Middle East advisor to the Romney campaign. Singh has been an Adjunct Fellow at the Belfer Center at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and an Economics Instructor at Harvard College. He also serves on the boards of the Vandenberg Coalition, a network of foreign policy practitioners advancing an internationalist U.S. foreign policy, and of Welcome.US, a bipartisan organization dedicated to assisting refugees. He is a graduate of Princeton and Harvard universities, and lives in Virginia.

Reflections on Israel Studies in China

By Song Lihong

Excepted from: *Song Lihong* (27 Dec 2023), From enemy studies to area studies: reflections on Israel studies in China, *Journal of Israeli History*, DOI: 10.1080/13531042.2023.2297588

Although Israel studies hardly existed in China before its diplomatic relations with the State of Israel were normalized in 1992, the field is now well-established among Chinese universities...From 2014 through 2019, roughly 32 scholarly monographs and edited volumes, 31 Chinese translations of scholarly books, and 172 journal articles on Israel studies were published in China, on a range of topics that are almost all-encompassing: from diplomatic relations to military affairs, from political parties to the education system, from agriculture in Yishuv to the start-up economy in Tel Aviv, from migrant laborers to the national heritage conservation, from Etgar Keret to Sinology in Israel, from the diamond industry to banking regulations.¹ Right now, about 17 universities across China offer courses in modern Hebrew and/or Israel studies.² In tracing the field's ascent toward its booming status quo, this essay will focus on three aspects: the beginnings of Israel studies, certain Chinese perceptions of Israel that have exerted a significant impact on Israel studies in China, and the challenges for future growth.

The beginnings

In China, Israel studies has historically been regarded as a component of Jewish studies. This appears so self-evident that many in China believe that Jewish studies scholars pioneered Israel studies in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and that the Chinese interest in Western civilization has naturally led to an interest in Jewish contributions thereto and consequently to Israel studies. This trajectory is tenable for the growth of most Jewish studies scholars, who usually have a background in hu-

manities. Yet it makes up at most half of the story.

The other half should be viewed in connection with two developments: that of Communist China's study of foreign affairs in general and that of Chinese policy toward the Middle East during the Cold War in particular. At the end of 1963, when China had already established – and intended to establish more – diplomatic relationships with several African and Middle Eastern countries, a report was submitted to Mao Zedong, pointing out the deficiencies in international studies in China at the time and proposing eight improvement measures that included the founding of specialized research institutes. Mao not only endorsed the report but also added in his reply that it “did not mention religious studies” and that “without criticizing theology we cannot learn the history of philosophy well, nor can we write well the history of literature and the world history.” Mao's sanction led to the formation of the first institutes for foreign studies, including African and Middle Eastern studies, in China. However, the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 abruptly suspended the activities of these newly emerged institutes. It was not until 1973 that these institutes in the universities were revived.

Meanwhile, before and during the Cultural Revolution, as She Gangzheng's meticulous research shows, Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated, and Third World countries became one of the main battlefields in the Sino-Soviet rivalry to lead a world revolution. China foresaw the vitality of Palestinian nationalism well before Moscow and Washington first grasped the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO)'s increasing impact, becoming the first non-Arab major power to substantially aid the Palestinian national movement while simultaneously stepping up its rhetoric against Israel. With the waning of Beijing's zeal for world revolution and the growing Sino-American rapprochement of the early 1970s came diminished Chinese assistance to the Palestin-

ians and recalibration of Chinese policy: thenceforth, anti-Israel rhetoric would be associated with the struggle against Soviet hegemony. Given that China's foreign studies were in the service of diplomacy and thus highly politicized, Chinese policy toward the Middle East left an indelible imprint on the first fruits of Chinese research on Israel, which consisted of translations before China re-opened its door to the world in 1978.³

In the beginning, Chinese knowledge about Israel was derived from Russian sources. This is not surprising, as from the mid-1950s the Middle East began to play a significant role in Sino-Soviet relations, and China, until the early 1960s, tried to maintain the unity of the Soviet bloc at all costs by publicly aligning with Moscow's policies and attitudes, even though it disagreed with many of them. The early 1960s witnessed the publication of two Chinese booklets written by Soviet writers: *The Situation and Policies of Israel* (1960) and *Behind the Scenes of Israeli Politics* (1962). The first depicted Israel as an outpost of Western imperialism and colonialism in the Middle East, while the second investigated Israel's economic foundation, making explicit the involvement of Western capital in Israel's nation-building. Polemical in nature, these booklets questioned the legitimacy of modern Zionism, and their translation into Chinese not only evinced China's apparent solidarity with the Soviet Union in their shared commitment to combatting Western imperialism but lined up with China's view of Israel as a "tool" of imperialist aggression since 1956 as well. Despite their politicized shell, these translations are not outdated even by current standards. Some of their diatribes against Israel and its treatment of the Arab refugees are now trademarks of contemporary anti-Zionist discourse, and the topic of the second booklet has never been discussed again in Chinese writings on the Israeli economy.

In late 1973, the first truly comprehensive Chinese book on Israel appeared: a translation of Nadav Safran's *The United States and Isra-*

el, re-titled in Chinese *The History and Overview of Israel*.⁴ Its publication must have been shocking at the time: in diametrical contrast with the two booklets, it is pro-Zionist, arguing that "the strength of Zionism lies precisely in its capability to combine the traditional yearning for Return with consideration of the practical needs of the Jews"; it does not deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict; and the author is a Harvard scholar, that is, from an enemy country. As if to forestall any possible criticism, the publisher explains that Safran "wrote this book from the standpoint of Zionism and tried his best to beautify Israel, which was aided and bred by American imperialism. He did not hesitate to use the clumsy techniques of fabricating and falsifying history, in order to vigorously defend the crimes committed by the Israeli Zionists in their persecution of the Palestinian Arab people and their invasion of the neighboring Arab countries." However, neither Safran's Jewishness nor Richard Nixon's visit to China in 1972 are mentioned...

The first batch of Chinese books on Israel, though small in quantity and intertwined with China's ultra-leftist political policies, indicates that Chinese scholars were quite well-informed for those few in China who were concerned with Israel at the time. To a large extent, these translations are still worthy of reference because their nuanced insights and intimate grasp of primary sources have rarely been equaled in later Chinese works. Israel studies were hardly "a suspended subject" prior to 1978, as many have claimed. Instead, these early translations remind us of the context in which Israel studies emerged in China: that of "enemy studies"...

The enduring legacy of the "enemy studies" context is first and foremost reflected in three recurrent themes, or even paradigms, in Chinese writings and teaching on Israel up until today: Israel's military intelligence and security situation, its international relations with a particular focus on Israel-US relations, and, above all, the Arab-Israeli conflict. The contin-

uous Chinese preoccupation with these topics is remarkable indeed. Already during the Cold War, the "aggression" and "militarism" of the Israeli army spawned a large number of popular works and translations on Israeli intelligence and espionage, especially on the Mossad. This trend has never abated, and it continues sprouting offshoots...The image of Israel as a "tool," "running dog," or "lackey" of "Western imperialist powers" has metamorphosed into "the US-Israel special relationship" (*mei-yi teshu guanxi*) in Chinese academic writings, a relationship that is now widely regarded as fraught with implications for China under the shadow of its trade war and escalating confrontation with the United States. As for the Arab-Israeli conflict, it is no exaggeration to say that Israel has been examined in China largely through the prism of the conflict. Although the conflict has been somewhat marginalized both in the foreign affairs of today's Middle East and in Israel's domestic concerns, it remains pivotal in China, notably in President Xi Jinping's policy that "the Palestine question has always been the core issue in the Middle East region, and China supports the 'two-state solution' as the right direction." This official policy, which was first put forward in 2013, has been reiterated time and time again. Its importance for Chinese scholars of Israel studies cannot be overestimated.

The conflict tends to polarize Chinese practitioners of Middle Eastern studies into pro-Israel and pro-Palestine groups, and the former is mainly composed of scholars with backgrounds in Jewish studies. What is often neglected, however, is that the pro-Zionist seeds were actually sown in the context of enemy studies and that some Arabists and Middle Eastern studies scholars played a crucial role in initiating the pro-Zionist discourse. It was only in the mid-1980s, when the ultra-leftist ideology had begun to ebb away, that Chinese scholars started to argue openly, following Nadav Safran, that Zionism should be viewed not as a "tool" manipulated by Western imperialists but rather as the

product of antisemitism and the denial of the Jewish people's right to exist. In fact, by the early 1980s, a group of pro-Israel scholars had been formed in the universities and political advisory bodies. Impressed by Israel's economic, technological, and military strength, they felt a diminished sense of obligation toward the Arabs. They drafted a secret report on how Israel could help China update its military and agricultural technologies and submitted it to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 1984, proposing that China should gradually normalize its diplomatic relations with Israel.

Most of these scholars are former Arabists. The most distinguished is arguably Xu Xiangqun, who served in the intelligence branch of the Chinese army and was involved in translating Arabic sources into Chinese for many years. In order to decipher the IDF codes, he studied Biblical Hebrew for one year with a Chinese Christian theologian trained in the US; later, through self-teaching, he became the military's first Hebrew-language instructor in the 1970s. One of the first students in his Hebrew training class became the head of the BA program in Hebrew at Peking University, the first such program in China. This legendary career was crystalized in a monograph of truly *sui generis* qualities on Hebrew grammar. He also coauthored one of the first comprehensive academic studies on Israel, in which he emphasized the superiority of Israeli political system in comparison with those of other Middle Eastern countries...

Middle Eastern studies scholars usually perceive Israel synchronically through the lens of the Arab-Israeli conflict and within the framework of international relations or politics; for this reason, Israel is seldom a major part of their *œuvre*. In contrast, Jewish studies scholars, usually affiliated with history, foreign languages, philosophy, and religious studies departments, tend to write more on the historical, social, cultural, and religious dimensions of Israel, and are likely to understand Israel and the Zionist project diachronically as a

modern realization of the biblical return to the Promised Land.

Perceptions of Israel

No matter how different their approaches to Israel, both types of scholars share a deep-seated assumption that the rise of modern Israel should be traced to the biblical past. Almost all books on Israel written in Chinese, whether scholarly or popular, start with the Bible. This is perhaps the most singular characteristic of Chinese perceptions of Israel...It conveys a conviction that the whole Jewish history has culminated in the establishment of the State of Israel – unmistakably both a Zionist historiographical stance and a nationalist view of history. While it is true that the Chinese version of Abba Eban's *My People: The Story of the Jews* (1968) is extremely influential among the first Chinese Jewish and Israel studies scholars and may have helped shape this perception, its overwhelming appeal can only be understood as a consequence of the indigenous tradition, not as a foreign implant... Therefore, the Jewish past constitutes an authentic and inalienable prelude to the establishment of Israel, the only "Jewish state" in the world. This entrenched perception has far-reaching consequences.

First, it presupposes that the Jewish people are homogenous, and this essentialist understanding makes the terms "Israel" and "Jew" almost interchangeable and synonymous in the Chinese-speaking world. Israel, as a result, is widely regarded as the center of the Jewish world, a kind of spokesperson for world Jewry. In today's mainstream Chinese scholarship, the Zionist project is construed as a movement aiming at not only the restoration of the Jewish political sovereignty but also "the revitalization of the Jewish people." Chinese practitioners in the field never bother to engage with the tension between Israel studies and Jewish studies, unlike their counterparts in the West.

Second, it dovetails with the Zionist discourse of negation of the diaspora. The history of the Jewish dias-

pora in Chinese academic writings has been presented basically as a history of suffering, plagued by political powerlessness, humiliating antisemitism, endless massacres, and the delusion of assimilation – what the Chinese scholars perceive as a logical justification for the Jewish longing for return to the ancestral land. However, the lachrymose depiction of the diaspora is intended... to compare Jewish suffering with the trials and tribulations of modern China that have resulted from its colonization by Western imperialism. The purpose of this kind of hidden comparison is to affirm the Chinese conviction that only a sovereign nation-state can wash away national shame...In any event, the Zionist discourse, when conflated with this nationalist view of history, readily resonates among Chinese scholars.

This orientation is also reinforced by a widespread Chinese propensity to equate Judaism with the religion of the Hebrew Bible. The significance of the Talmud and other rabbinic literature within today's Judaism has been underestimated in China...

Interestingly, what began as an anti-Zionist project has resulted in a vicarious approbation of the Israeli political system, even though Israel still does not have a constitution. In addition to the political system, Chinese scholars also respect what they see as Israel's "soft power." On the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of Israel, Ying Gang, an influential commentator on Middle Eastern affairs, observed, "There are many reasons for Israel's survival and prosperity. A strong military force and the full support of the United States are crucial, but the key reason is its soft power, which is prominently reflected in its millennium-old sense of national identity, an indefatigable sense of crisis, a high degree of national cohesion, and a well-implemented legal system." The nationalist character of the soft power, however, as Ying admitted, is "hard to replicate"...

By contrast, Israel's technological expertise has always been deemed

eminently reproducible and imitable...Israel was trying to break through its diplomatic isolation with arms sales and agricultural technology exports, while China since the mid-70s has regarded the military, the economy, and technology as neutral, classless, and non-ideological spheres. Not surprisingly, the lion's share of Chinese publications on Israel were, perhaps still are, works on Israeli military affairs and agriculture. Israel studies scholars in China often neglect this phenomenon, obviously because the two fields are far removed from their own background, and because these publications are usually either purely technical or catered to the mass market. New trends do emerge in this aspect. Mainly after the Chinese publication of Dan Senor and Saul Singer's bestseller *Start-Up Nation*, which enjoyed a devoted following in certain sectors of China, Israel as a start-up nation increasingly dominates Chinese popular perceptions of Israel. Many people view Israel as a role model or incubator, one that is conducive to high-tech innovation by Chinese entrepreneurs. This perception, which culminated in Beijing's definition of China-Israel relationship as a "Comprehensive Innovation Partnership" (quan-mian chuangxin huo-ban guanxi) in 2017, has since resulted in numerous publications exploring the reasons for Jewish/Israeli innovation and China-Israel economic ties...

Israeli soft power also benefits from the flourishing of contemporary Jewish/Israeli culture in general. The sensational sales of Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* and Simon Sebag Montefiore's *Jerusalem: The Biography* in China have led to the publication of other Jewish/Israeli-themed books in Chinese. In addition, modern Hebrew literature has attracted widespread attention, both among the reading public and among contemporary Chinese writers and scholars. The most influential Israeli authors in the Chinese-speaking world by far are Amos Oz, Yehuda Amichai, and Etgar Keret...

One aspect of Israeli soft power in China, *hasbarah* ("explaining"), was first noticed by a distinguished senior journalist covering the Middle East who had been stationed in Gaza for three years. In his article discussing how to enhance the image of Saudi Arabia in the Chinese media, he wrote...that Arab countries...should recognize the importance of this public relations campaign in China and learn from Israel's experience and skills. He further observed, "Most Chinese media men take a sympathetic and pro-Arab stance in their coverage and public statements, but privately, they increasingly express understanding and even appreciation for Israel"...

In the past decade, *hasbarah* in Chinese academic circles has been keenly pursued through SIGNAL, "a think-tank and academic organization based in Israel focusing on China and China-Israel relations." Through a series of tailored courses, seminars, special virtual or in-person lectures, and customized training, SIGNAL not merely helped develop the Israel Studies Programs, especially the newly created ones, in universities in China but also arranged strategic dialogs with Chinese think tanks and government organizations. Meanwhile, more and more Chinese are now accustomed to obtaining information from social media platforms such as WeChat, TikTok, popular blogs in which Israel is covered from multiple perspectives and both philosemitic and anti-Israeli discourses are quite eye-catching...

The most influential history of modern Israel in Chinese is arguably Daniel Gordis' *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn*. Since its publication in 2018, it has sold over 180,000 copies. In 2020, it was noticed by Fan Deng, who is tremendously popular for his e-reading app which is "dedicated to developing reading habits for 300 million people in China" in general and to giving tips on parenting and on workplace relationships in particular. Fan made a 50-minute video interpreting the book in his own way. It was played 5 million times within the

first month after it went online. How can we assess the impact of this unmistakable trend on the Chinese perception of Israel and its implications for Chinese Israel studies? Perhaps it is too early to tell.

The challenges

Nevertheless, it is certain that Israel studies in China will develop within the framework of area studies as a result of the so-called Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)...Israel, whose technology has long been valued in China, is regarded as a key state in the strategy of the BRI...To meet this challenge, China has begun to develop think tanks since 2015, with a focus on building a number of research centers for the study of global and regional issues in universities. As the BRI transitioned from plan to cooperative undertaking, nearly 400 programs of area studies covering the world's major countries and some BRI countries were established in Chinese universities by 2017.

If the first fruits of Israel Studies in Chinese, out of the enemy studies context as discussed above, betray an ideological and strategic outlook related to China's inability and unwillingness to seek direct involvement and presence in the Middle East, what the BRI represents is widely construed as Beijing's intention to flex muscles in areas along the traditional Silk Road and beyond.

The rapid rise of area studies calls for, first, the study of the target country through sources in its native language(s). Hence the importance of Hebrew has been stressed. By far the majority of Chinese studies on Israel rely on English sources. Measures have been taken to enhance language training, including joint programs with Israeli universities to train undergraduates in modern Hebrew and graduate students in area studies or Jewish/ Israel studies. Program participants usually stay in Israel for more than one year. Second, prospective practitioners in the field are expected to em-

ploy interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary methods, especially those borrowed from social sciences such as politics, economics, and sociology. Third, think-tank-oriented research is urgently and unabashedly encouraged. As a result, new topics of study have emerged: Israel's anti-terrorism legislation, its cyber security system, its environmental management, its immigration policies with respect to Africa, the reception of the Chinese language and literature in Israel, the implications of Sino-Iranian relations for Sino-Israel relations, etc. The relevance of these topics to the problems currently facing China is self-evident.

In general, the booming of areas studies, thanks to the input of the Chinese government, will certainly attract more talents into the field of Israel studies. In fact, not a few Jewish studies scholars in China are increasingly focusing on Israel. On the other hand, think-tank-oriented study will inevitably prioritize contemporary issues. Israeli history and the Jewish past, in which certain segments of Israeli society—the Haredim for example—are deeply rooted, may receive even less attention among Chinese scholars...

In terms of the number of practitioners and the extent of scholarly output, Israel studies, like Middle Eastern studies and Jewish studies, is still on the periphery of Chinese academia. How to broaden the impact of Chinese Israel studies remains a challenge. The current tendency to seek out relevance to or affinity with current Chinese concerns will surely be reinforced in the foreseeable future. Perhaps the way to achieve a real breakthrough is to consciously conduct theory-guided research in order to enrich the understanding of subjects other than Israel and to healthily neutralize the two competing narratives—that is, pro-Israel or pro-Palestine—that have long dominated the field.

Finally, the scholarly output of Chinese Israel studies is mainly consumed by an academic audience, yet Jewish/Israeli themes have a wide appeal in popular culture. The Chinese reading public

prefers to read translated books about Israel written by Israelis or Jews, although Chinese readers are not those authors' intended audience. The question for Chinese scholars is: In addition to satisfying academic colleagues, how is it possible to engage the reading public in a more accessible, more articulate, and more relevant way? Modern Hebrew literature, especially nonfiction imbued with personal emotion and introspection (such as *A Tale of Love and Darkness* and *My Promised Land*), frequently hits the bestseller list in China. In contrast, skimming over the scholarly papers on Israel...that have been published over the past decade, one cannot help but think of them as "Israel studies without Israelis"...In these papers, Israelis are essentially a blank screen onto which abstract concepts or social theories are projected...Thirty years ago, one of the first books on Israel written by Chinese scholars was titled *Israel: An Enigmatic State*. Since then, the word "enigmatic" (*mi yi ban de*) has often been used to refer to Israel and to the Jews. If sufficient attention is not paid to flesh-and-blood Israelis, perhaps the image of Israel as an enigmatic state in China is here to abide.

Song Lihong is a Professor in the Department of History, Tsinghua University, Beijing. His recent English publications include two co-edited volumes: with Kathryn Hellerstein, China and Ashkenazic Jewry: Transcultural Encounters (De Gruyter, 2022) and, with James Ross, The Image of Jews in Contemporary China (Academic Studies Press, 2016).

Notes

1. These statistics, with emendations by this author, are based on Zhang, Yiselie *fazhan baogao*, 2015–2020. This foremost ongoing annual report, made up of a collection of papers, contains a bibliographical survey of Israel studies in China from 2016 onward, but it does not distinguish Israel studies from Jewish studies. The statistics given here are exclusively those relating to Israel studies.

2. These universities are: Beijing Foreign Studies University*, Beijing International Studies University*, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies*, Henan University, Nanjing University, Northwest University, Peking University*, PLA Information Engineering University*, Shaanxi Normal University, Shandong University, Shanghai International Studies University*, Sichuan International Studies University*, Tsinghua University, University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, University of International Business and Economics, Yunnan University, Zhengzhou University. Those with asterisk award undergraduate degree in modern Hebrew. Apart from the courses in modern Hebrew and Israel studies, Israel also features in courses in the Middle East or "West Asia and Africa" (*xiya feizhou*) or Jewish studies to varying degrees in these or many other universities in China.

3. She, "The Cold War and Chinese Policy," 125–74. See also this still indispensable study: Shichor, *The Middle East in China's Foreign Policy*, *passim*.

4. Safran, Yiselie *de lishi he gaikuang* (originally published by Harvard University Press in 1963). In 1975, the same press published another translated (from German) book on the Yom Kippur War by Gerhard Konzelmann, *Di si ci zhongdong zhanzheng*. These books published in the 1970s were all labeled as "neibu duwu/faxing" [Inner Reading/Circulation], which means that their circulation was limited to the privileged, but their large print runs—the first printing of Safran's book was 33,000 copies, a number that later Chinese publications on Israel can hardly surpass—makes them still easily available through the secondhand market, not to mention university libraries.

BOOK NOOK

Between Mumbai and Manila: Judaism in Asia since the Founding of the State of Israel (Proceedings of the International Conference, held at the Department of Comparative Religion of the University of Bonn. May 30, to June 1, 2012) Manfred Hutter (ed.)

V&R unipress & Bonn University Press, 2013

ISBN 978-3-8471-0158-1; ISBN 978-3-8470-0158-4 (E-book)

Contents

Manfred Hutter & Ulrich Vollmer: Introductory Notes: The Context of the Conference in the History of Jewish Studies in Bonn

Part 1: Jewish Communities in Asia

Gabriele Shenar: Bene Israel Transnational Spaces and the Aesthetics of Community Identity
 Edith Franke: Searching for Traces of Judaism in Indonesia
 Vera Leininger: Jews in Singapore: Tradition and Transformation
 Manfred Hutter: The Tiny Jewish Communities in Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia
 Alina Pătru: Judaism in the PR China and in Hong Kong Today: Its Presence and Perception
 Suzanne Rutland: The Asia-Pacific Region and Australian Jewry

Part 2: Religion and Politics

Meron Medzini: Zionist Federations and Zionist Diplomacy in Asia to Ensure United Nations Support for the 1947 Partition Plan
 Jonathan Goldstein & Dean Kotlowski: The Jews of Manila: Manuel Quezon, Paul McNutt, and the Politics and Consequences of Holocaust Rescue
 Malte Gaier: Jews in Pakistan in the Context of Estranged Pakistani-Israeli Relations
 Pingan Liang & Zheng Liang: The Bilateral Relations between Israel and Modern China (1948 – 2010)
 Theo Kamsma: The Artful Deletion of Israeli / Jewish Presence in the Straits

Part 3: Judaism in Everyday Life and Society

Heinz Werner Wessler: “My Backward Place is Where I am”: Jewish Identity and Jewish Authorship in India
 Yudit Kornberg Greenberg: Hindu-Jewish Dialogue: A New Tradition in the Making
 Annette Wilke: The Hindu-Jewish Leadership Summits: New “Ground-breaking Strides” of Global Interfaith Cooperation?
 Ping Zhang: When Chokhmah met Zhi: Perception and Misperception of Jewish Wisdom in China since the 1990s
 Gilya Gerda Schmidt: Why the Chinese People are Interested in Judaism, the Holocaust, and Israel

Bequest Request

Please consider putting the
Sino-Judaic Institute in your will.

www.sinojudaic.org

In Memoriam:



Dennis 'Den' Leventhal

26 January 1941 – 7 December 2024

Den loved music, Judaism, world history, his family, and all things maritime. Born in Philadelphia, Den moved to Bucks County, Pennsylvania, at 10 years of age and lived there seven years until he could embark on world travel. Admitted into the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy at 17 years old, he then served nine years in the U.S. Merchant Marine and 13 years in the U.S. Naval Reserve. In 1966, he sailed to Vietnam as the 2d Officer, Navigator, aboard a U.S. Victory Ship bringing supplies to American soldiers.

When sailing with the Merchant Marine, Den became fascinated with Asian culture and China in particular. That stimulated him to pursue a graduate studies program in Chinese history, language, and philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania and the Stanford Center at the National Taiwan University. Moving to Taiwan in 1970 with his wife Mary Ward Wilson, he perfected his spoken Chinese and studied Chinese philosophy in depth. He became fascinated with Confucianism and saw parallels with Judaism. Both aligned with his world view that embraced a love of learning, family love and devotion, and civic duty.

Den and Mary enjoyed Taiwan so much that they lived there from 1971-1978, growing their family with the adoption of two wonderful children as infants, Dana Marett and David William. They lived locally, spoke Mandarin, and travelled extensively throughout the Republic of China with their children.

When political changes occurred upon the deaths of Chairman Mao on the mainland and Premier Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan, Den and Mary realized that it was important to ensure their adopted children would be able to obtain U.S. citizenship, so the family repatriated to the American east coast in 1978. In 1980, after securing a position as China Business Development Director for American Cyanamid, Den moved his family to Hong Kong, where they resided until 1998. During those 18 years in Hong Kong, Den travelled widely throughout China.

Throughout his life, Den and Mary embraced tikkun olam, the Jewish concept of helping to repair/improve the world. As a family, they developed an abiding commitment to Hong Kong's Ohel Leah Synagogue. Den founded The Jewish Historical Society of Hong Kong and became active in the Sino-Judaic Institute, serving on its Board for many years. Working with his wife Mary, retired librarian Paula Sandfelder, Harvard graduate student Tamar Shay, and Hong Kong scholar S.J. Chan, Den led efforts to establish the well-respected Ohel Leah Judaic Library that continues to serve the Asia region today.

As he traveled around China, Den enjoyed learning more about Jewish history across the breadth of the country and frequently engaged in in-depth discussions with Chinese scholars and governmental figures about that history. Den often said that his many rich discussions comparing Chinese and Jewish values built positive relationships with his business development counterparts.

On one of several visits to Kaifeng while working for Société Générale de Surveillance, a Swiss multinational company, which provides inspection, verification, testing and certification services, he observed that the ancient Jewish steles were knocked over and in disrepair. With the support of the Sino-Judaic Institute, he saw to it that the ancient Jewish steles were restored and placed in the former Kaifeng Municipal Museum. This was one of his proudest projects.

The need for cancer treatment caused Den to return to the US in 1998. He continued working from home with a few China business trips yearly until he retired in 2006. Residing on the Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay,

Den was active in the Chestertown Havurah and, for several years, he and Mary hosted Sukkot on their riverside lawn with a sukkah built with the large reeds of their neighboring marshland. He served nearly 20 years as a reserve officer for the Maryland Department of Natural Resources where he taught boating safety and water safety courses, did vessel safety checks, and volunteered in maritime activities to support the Natural Resource Police. He also volunteered in the local elementary school and was a founding member of the Queen Anne's County Sister City International Council that established a sister county relationship with Suzhou, China.

Den was also an author throughout his life. His first book, *The Chess of China*, was published in 1978, followed by six others including: *The Jewish Community of Hong Kong: An Introduction* (1985), *Sino-Judaic studies: Whence and Whither: An Essay and Bibliography* (1985), and the entertaining and informative *How to Leap a Great Wall in China: The China Adventures of a Cross-Cultural Trouble-Shooter* (2014). He authored six short stories and more than 40 articles in diverse English and Chinese language publications. He also wrote two yet unpublished novels about 7th century adventures of the Khazars and Jews during the time of the Persians and the Bulgar uprising.

Den played a key role in the development of the Hong Kong Jewish community and in the founding of the Sino-Judaic Institute. As a business man with 30 years' experience in China under his belt, he was a source of practical wisdom to SJI and his garrulousness, his wit, and his humor helped ever so much to smooth over tensions and egos at our meetings.

If there is one story that captures the essence of the man, it is one from his business days when he sold tons of a specialty chemical product in Hebei Province by translating a twelve-hundred-year-old Chinese poem on a betting challenge during a twelve-course Chinese banquet.

Den is survived by his beloved wife, Mary, and their two children, Dana and David, and two grandchildren.

A Kaifeng Siddur Concert Premieres

On May 4th, the Museum at Eldridge Street, in New York City, held a special concert in honor of both Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month and Jewish American Heritage Month.

Composer David Serkin Ludwig's *A Kaifeng Siddur* explores the intersection of the two ancient cultures of China and the Jewish Diaspora, exemplified by the Jewish community of Kaifeng.

The work imagines the sounds of Jewish holy services in Northern Song Dynasty Kaifeng, using disparate instruments (both Chinese and Western) to create a vivid and rarely heard soundscape as divergent cultures meet and mingle.

Ludwig, btw, is Dean of Music at The Juilliard School. His uncle was pianist Peter Serkin, his grandfather was the pianist Rudolf Serkin.

A Kaifeng Siddur was commissioned by Music From China with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and made possible by the New York State Council on the Arts. Arranged for vocalist with dizi, alto flute, erhu, cello, pipa, and guitar, it consists of four parts:

- I. Mi Kamocha
- II. Interlude
- III. Adon Haselichot
- IV. A'ufa Eshkonah

David Ludwig writes that "For its 40th anniversary, Music from China commissioned me to write a work for an ensemble that included Chinese classical instruments. I have written for Chinese instruments and other instruments not typically found in Western orchestras before, but I wanted to explore how I could integrate my own cultural heritage into the mix. A visit to the synagogue on Eldridge Street at the edge of New York City's Chinatown secured the idea for me...

"My goal in this piece was to imagine some of the music heard in the Kaifeng synagogue, with one part a mix of ancient Mizrahi melodic devices and Chinese folk song, and another a fantasy of sounds and colors from a time and space that feels almost apocryphal today. Given the importance of music in Jewish religious ceremonies, my frame for the piece is the "Siddur"—a book that contained daily prayers much like the medieval European "Book of Hours".

"The piece is an acknowledgment of immigrant populations and the effects of assimilation. It is also a recognition of the multitude of possibilities that come from the "edge-effect", a term from biology describing how the greatest diversity of life emerges where two contrasting environments meet—something mirrored in human culture. In our time of entrenched and profound neo-tribalism, the idea of building bridges seems a far better option than separating ourselves with walls."

**Mail to: The Sino-Judaic Institute, Prof. Steve Hochstadt, Treasurer, Sino-Judaic Institute,
34 Colgate Rd., Unit 1, Roslindale, MA 02131, or sign up online at www.sinojudaic.org**

JOIN THE SINO-JUDAIC INSTITUTE

Regular Member \$60	Supporter \$100	Patron **\$1,000+	Benefactor ***\$5,000+
Senior 35	Sponsor 250	**Receive Chaim Simon's <i>Religious Observance by the Jews of Kaifeng China</i>	
Library 60	Corp/Org/Synagogue . . . 250	***Donors at the \$5,000 level and above also get their choice of a copy of a book by Hochstadt, Laytner, Paper Schwarcz, Tokayer or Weisz.	
Student/Academic 40	Sustainer 500		

Selection: _____

I wish to become a member of the Sino-Judaic Institute and to receive Points East three times a year. Enclosed is my check for \$_____

PLEASE PRINT

Name _____

Address _____ E-Mail _____

Home Phone # _____

Work # _____

Fax # _____