



המכון לתכנון מדיניות עם יהודי THE JEWISH PEOPLE POLICY PLANNING INSTITUTE
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China and the Jewish People

Old Civilizations in a New Era

STRATEGY PAPER

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. THE EMERGENCE OF CHINA

Why China?

China is re-emerging as a great power. This has global impacts in many areas. China's domestic policies and foreign alignments are in flux. Its elites are avidly absorbing new knowledge and are open to many influences. The time to link up with China is now.

Jewish history of the last two centuries was dominated by the fact that until 1939, up to 90 percent of all Jews lived in Europe and America, the two continents that determined the fate of the world. But the *Shoah* and the establishment of Israel have radically altered the geographic distribution of the Jews, and a gradual geopolitical power shift towards Asia is underway. These changes constitute a watershed in Jewish history and open up new opportunities that must not be missed.

Why will China's policies affect the future of the Jewish people?

For the first time, China will directly influence the fate of the Jews. The main challenges that China is facing are not created by Jews but will affect them. Jewish policy makers must put relations with China into a grand strategic frame. Four Chinese policy issues are of great relevance for the Jewish people:

- First, the fast-growing dependence of China on Middle Eastern oil, and that of the main oil producers (Saudi Arabia, Iran) on the Chinese market. Within ten years this trend will overturn the current global strategic equations based on oil. Middle East stability will become a national priority for China.
- Second, the relationship between Chinese Moslems and the Chinese majority (the Han Chinese) that is likely to become more difficult in the coming years. A new militancy can be found among some Chinese Moslems, who feel increasingly close to other parts of the Moslem world. Will China respond to troubles with appeasement, force, or a mixture of both?
- Third, the growing, but potentially tense and unstable economic and strategic interdependence between China and the United States. What role will the American Jewish community play in this complex relationship?
- Fourth, China's relations with Israel, where almost half of the world's Jews live. These relations are important in their own right; they are also affected by each of the first three factors and in turn, will influence them.

2. CHINA AND THE JEWS: ASSESSING THE CURRENT STATE

What is a “Jew” for the Chinese?

In China, the Jews are meeting a great civilization not shaped by Biblical religion or its offsprings — Christianity and Islam. The Chinese can look at Jews with a mindset not conditioned by Christian or Moslem mental baggage: in Chinese, the word for Jew (*youtai*), and its earlier equivalents, has no negative connotation anchored in holy books. This is why a Jewish community could flourish in Kaifeng, the capital of the Northern Song dynasty (960-1126), from the twelfth to the nineteenth century, without encountering religious or political discrimination, and why in the twentieth century, Harbin and Shanghai became havens for tens of thousands of Jews fleeing Russia and Nazi Germany.

When did the Chinese and Jews become aware of each other?

Modern Chinese awareness of the existence of a Jewish people across the world emerged in the 1830s, in the wake of Protestant missionary teachings and Bible translations. Various stereotypes then took form, including that Jews were victims of the “white man” like the Chinese themselves. In the early 1920s, the founder and first president of the Chinese Republic, Sun Yatsen, justified his public support for Zionism with this perceived affinity between the two peoples.

In the twentieth century, Jewish scholars contributed to a broader appreciation of China in the West, but Jewish leaders paid little attention to China, with the major exception of David Ben-Gurion, who alerted Jews to the importance of relations with the great civilizations of Asia, particularly China.

Who teaches the Chinese today about Jews and Judaism?

After the Cultural Revolution (1976), a new generation of Chinese Judaic scholars began to satisfy growing Chinese curiosity about Jews and Israel. They are few in number, and active in less than a dozen universities and academic centers. Their outreach is vast, through teaching, workshops, hundreds of books and articles, and exhibitions. Scholars are also likely to play an important advisory role on Jewish and Middle Eastern issues for China’s leaders, most of whom are today university graduates themselves. However, academic work is constrained by financial limits, lack of internal and external cooperation, and some political restrictions. The broader Chinese public gets its information on Jews and Israel from television, movies, and increasingly, the Chinese Internet. Many appreciate the latter as an alternative source of

information that, although it can be censored, is less uniform and controlled than the official media.

What are the main Chinese perceptions of Jews and Judaism?

What the Chinese see in the Jews has often been a mirror of their own history, their fears, dreams, and desires. First, many Chinese have an image of great Jewish wealth and success that they admire and would like to emulate, although this image may be partly unrealistic. Second, they note the great contributions Jews have made to Western civilization — Einstein, Marx and Freud are often quoted names. Third, a regular comment is that the Chinese and Jews represent the “two oldest living civilizations,” a comparison that indicates respect for the Jewish people’s historic continuity. And fourth, the *Shoah* has become the most widely known episode of Jewish history. Millions of Chinese have seen *Schindler’s List* or related movies.

3. NEW CHALLENGES

The first years of the twenty-first century have seen new areas of interest emerge in China, particularly the relationship between Judaism and its two “daughter” religions, Christianity and Islam. The popularity of Bible stories and Christian beliefs seems to be growing; some young Chinese ask questions about Jesus and why the Jews don’t recognize him. In parallel, and spurred by current events, there is a new interest in the historic relationship between Judaism and Islam and the origins of the current antagonism.

Another challenge might arise from China’s opening to the world, which will allow foreign anti-Semitism, in its various old and new disguises, to seep into the country. Trade tensions with the West, or Middle East hostilities, might raise the old canard of a “Jewish world conspiracy” in China, as occurred in Japan in the 1980s.

The growing shadow of the Intifada

The Palestinian Intifada has begun to affect the positive image of the Jews — or the Israelis — in the eyes of the Chinese. For the first time, questions are being asked: Are Jews and Israelis the same people? The official, public position of the Chinese government is sympathetic to the Arab cause, and the media reflect this. State-controlled television shows the Middle East conflict in a prominent, often one-sided fashion. The daily images of violence are upsetting to many Chinese, particularly Chinese Moslems. Experts have begun to report a fundamental change, a radicalization of Chinese Moslem attitudes to events in the Moslem world. This has added to internal tensions in China, as it has in some European countries.

Chinese policy dilemmas

Like many countries, China grapples with conflicting policy objectives. It needs to accommodate the Arabs and the Jews, Third World countries, and the United States, and at home, the rich and the poor provinces. Policy dilemmas explain some of the Chinese hesitations and censorship with regard to Jews, Israel, and the Middle East. Some officials and advisors want better relations with the Jews or Israel, others are cautious or hostile. But there is undoubtedly great public interest in these issues, and an unsatisfied need for more and better information.

What do the Chinese expect from the Jews?

There is no formal Chinese “wish list,” but many Chinese seem to believe that Jews could do something for them, because of their perceived global influence and their long historic experience:

- The most often expressed hope is that the Jews will help China manage and improve its difficult relationship with the United States.
- There is continuing respect and demand for Israeli technology.
- Middle East stability or instability, and Israel’s role in it, is a source of nagging concern.
- Some Chinese would like to understand and emulate the perceived business success of the Jews, and their international connections and performance in science, technology, and innovation.
- More Jewish support for Judaic studies and publications in China is expected.
- Some think that the modernization of the Jews, and their role in the modernization of the Western world, might provide some useful lessons for China as well.

4. JEWISH POLICY RESPONSES

Why has the Jewish response been insufficient?

Jewish policy responses to Chinese opportunities and interest have been insufficient. There has been a shortage of vision, information, coordination and money. It is true that Jews have had many short-term problems that were much more urgent. But it is also true that the Jewish people have lacked long-term strategic perspectives and in general have had no long-term policies. Also, Jews are not a coherent unit, but a complex, multinational, self-organizing people with many cooperating but also competing branches and bodies.

Like the Chinese, the Jews will face policy conflicts: strengthening relations with China

might clash with the policies of the United States, as has occurred in the past. For some Jews, human rights concerns and the Chinese reluctance to grant minority status to the Jewish descendants in Kaifeng, might become other bones of contention.

What should be the Jewish policy goals?

None of these potential problems should impede efforts to pursue key Jewish policy goals, which are:

- Strengthening the links between China and the Jewish people and broadening China's knowledge of Jewish culture and history, to facilitate a better understanding of current events;
- Responding to false stereotypes imported from abroad;
- Emphasizing common interests and perspectives between the Chinese and Jewish peoples, including shared geopolitical and other global concerns.

Policy recommendations

No single policy can respond to all these goals, but a mix of policies might. This mix should include approaches to decision makers and communication with scholars and students-members of future elites — as well as with a broader public. The consent of Chinese authorities and experts will obviously be essential. It must also be understood that this is a long-term endeavor; not everything can be implemented quickly. But it is important to make a start now, taking up at least some of the following recommendations:

1) A permanent delegation of main Jewish organizations speaking for large parts of the Jewish people

Because there is no indigenous Jewish community, no Chinese citizen can speak on behalf of Judaism or the Jewish people, in contrast to Chinese Moslems and Christians. The State of Israel cannot and should not represent the entire Jewish people. A permanent delegation of World Jewry, maintaining relations with the appropriate Chinese government authorities and institutions, should help improve information flow between China and the wider Jewish world, as well as mutual understanding and cooperation. Such relations do exist between Jewish organizations and other countries and continents.

2) A high-level symposium for Chinese policy makers on shared global issues and mutual relations

Visits between Chinese and Jewish leaders have in the last three years been less frequent than before. There is a need for high-level discussions and analysis of the changing world situation,

and of shared concerns and mutual interests. This need should be met by more high-level visits, but also by an initial joint symposium of policy makers, advisors, and experts. If this is successful, more regular symposia could follow, focusing on other emerging global issues and additional subjects of interest to China and the Jewish people.

3) A symposium for Chinese business leaders on entrepreneurship and innovation

Beyond the technological cooperation and trade between Israel and China, the international connections of the Jews of the world, and their experience in research, innovation, and the development of a “knowledge-based” economy might be of interest to China.

4) Training courses for university teachers

Courses on Judaism for university teachers and authors of history textbooks have helped improve the knowledge of Judaism among students. Efforts to familiarize university teachers with the basic facts of Jewish culture and history must be strengthened.

5) An academic Judaism center in Beijing

China is the only one of the “Five Big Powers” of the United Nations that has no academic institute on Judaism in its capital. The main institutes are all in the provinces. A Judaic institute near the political centers of power seems increasingly necessary.

6) Support for scholars, students, and joint academic seminars

The most common forms of academic cooperation are support for scholars and students, including short- or long-term study visits, and support for seminars. These must be strengthened, with particular attention to the need to help a small number of young Chinese to reach an international level of Judaic scholarship, e.g., in ancient or modern Hebrew.

7) Publications, books, translations

There is considerable Chinese demand for written information on Jews, Judaism, Israel, and the Middle East. The writing and translation of books should be better funded, and the availability of publications made more widely known. A list of five hundred essential Jewish books to be translated into Chinese should be drawn up. Additionally, China’s popular magazines could be encouraged to publish articles on Jewish themes.

8) A Web site on Jewish history and culture

A Chinese Web site on Jewish history and culture, maintained on the index page of one of the main Chinese search engines, might have great success with the fast-growing number of Internet users. Among young Chinese, this was the most popular of all recommendations. Another computer-related recommendation is to produce or help distribute DVDs with Jewish themes.

9) Television documentaries

TV documentaries are watched by hundreds of millions of Chinese. More on Jewish themes should be shown, and new ones produced in a form that is adapted to Chinese audiences. One very popular topic, for example, is new agricultural technologies from Israel.

10) Jewish film festivals

The successful annual Jewish Film Festival in Hong Kong should be brought to Beijing and other cities as well.

11) Public exhibitions

A recent (2004) Chinese proposal to have an exhibition on Jewish culture, held in one of Beijing's main museums, should receive a positive response.

12) Jewish donations

A brochure summarizing memorial events, and donations made by Jews to the Chinese people, might show a measure of Jewish gratitude for the safe haven many of them received in China in the twentieth century.

13) Improving the Jewish people's understanding of China

Strengthening the links between two peoples is a two-way street. This report examines one of these ways: how to strengthen the Chinese understanding of the Jews. The other direction — how to improve Jewish understanding of China — is no less important and must be explored further.