

## China's Interaction with Israel and the Jewish People

### *Interview with Shalom Salomon Wald*

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- There are five or six main Chinese academics who teach Jewish religion, history, and culture at various universities. It is very important that there are such people who educate, in a positive way, thousands of young Chinese in the knowledge of Judaism and Jewish history. In twenty years some of these students will be in senior positions and are likely to advise their country's leaders on Jewish and Middle Eastern issues.
- China is one of the largest exporters to Israel. It is also quickly becoming the main economic partner of all Muslim states in the Middle East. Middle Eastern stability and Israel's role in it are increasingly important for China. For the first time in history, China will directly influence the fate of the Jews, and particularly Israel. Since this influence will grow very quickly, it is important to have China well disposed toward Israel.
- Israel and the Jewish people should build bridges of friendship with China and develop a strategic concept on how to further their interests there. The Jewish people are hampered by the fact that they are not a coherent unit. The major Jewish organizations should, however, try to develop a coordinated policy toward China.

"China is largely uncharted territory for Israel and the Jewish people. Jews have lived in China since a remote past and there is proof of some Jews having lived or traveled there as much as a thousand years ago. Before the Second World War there was a Jewish community in Harbin and twenty thousand European Jews found refuge in Shanghai shortly before the war, fleeing Russia and Germany respectively. They left China in the years after the war. Even when Mao Zedong was already in power, the Chinese communists never stopped any Jew from emigrating wherever he wanted, in contrast to all communist countries in Europe. At present there are thousands of Jewish and Israeli businessmen in various Chinese cities, mainly in Shanghai and Beijing.

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Dr. Shalom Salomon Wald worked with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in Paris from 1964 to 2001. He joined the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute (JPPPI) in [Jerusalem](#) at its foundation in 2002. In 2004 he published there a book titled *China and the Jewish People: Old Civilizations in a New Era*.

### What the Chinese Know about the Jews

Wald observes: "How can we know what 'the Chinese' think about Israel and Jews? The country has 1.4 billion citizens and offers very contradictory experiences. I remember a rough, bumpy ride on a public bus through the countryside of Shandong province. My Chinese friend and interpreter told the peasants sitting around us that I was Jewish. One or two said, 'Ah, Jews very clever people, Kissinger, Einstein.' Other well-known names of Jews are Marx and Freud.

"But I also remember talking to an approximately twenty-year-old female student in Urumchi, the capital of Xinjiang province. The city has perhaps five million inhabitants. She studied English and spoke it perfectly. Her dream was to work one day for Chinese TV. She followed the English news, but had never heard the words Jew or Judaism. I then gave her the Chinese words for these terms, which also didn't mean anything to her.

"My impression is that a large number of Chinese know that there is a state called Israel, */s/ele*, in the Middle East. Chinese Central Television Channel 1, which is watched by hundreds of millions of people, mentioned Israel

frequently during the Second Intifada. It showed Israeli tanks regularly, as well as screaming Arab children. It also showed several positive sides of Israel.

"Since then this major television channel has considerably reduced its coverage of foreign affairs. Little news from the Middle East is being broadcast. This gives the impression that the Chinese authorities want to keep the chaos of the world away from the public as much as possible.

"Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert visited China in 2006. The TV showed him petting cows that Israel had given to China for a farm where Israelis teach dairy production. The Chinese officials who accompanied him were laughing their heads off. They thought Israel was a country of important generals and Nobel Prize winners, and here was its prime minister petting cows.

"In the cultural field, the Israeli Amos Oz is currently the most popular Jewish or Israeli writer in China. His book *A Tale of Love and Darkness* is in its second Chinese edition. Several of his earlier books have sold five to ten thousand copies. This is a huge number for China where foreign books usually sell two to three thousand copies at most. The book is ranked as one of the ten most important translated into Chinese. Tens of Chinese papers reviewed it positively saying they had learned things about Israel they hadn't known."

Wald says that even though information on what Chinese know about Israel and the Jews remains impressionistic, important conclusions can be drawn. "There are Chinese intellectuals who have studied Israel and the Jewish people and Chinese policymakers who are interested in us. For the Chinese, Jews and Israel are the same. They see the Jews as an old people with a long history, and view Israel as its center. One often hears from Chinese that theirs and the Jewish civilization are the oldest surviving ones. This expresses respect for the continuity of the Jewish people."

## Scholarship

"In 2008 Zhang Qianhong, a renowned woman scholar published a book titled *History of Israel*. It starts with the patriarch Abraham and its title page shows the Temple in Jerusalem. The millenary history of the Jewish people takes up perhaps one-fifth of its pages. The other four-fifths tell the history of Israel from its creation till 2006 when Ariel Sharon was prime minister.

"Zhang is one of five or six main Chinese academics who teach Jewish history and culture at various universities. It is very important that there are such people who educate, in a positive way, thousands of young Chinese in the knowledge of Judaism and Jewish history. The scholars' influence also derives from workshops, hundreds of books and articles, as well as exhibitions.

"Those who will rule China twenty years from now are presently studying in elite universities. If someone teaches them about Judaism, this will be good for the Jewish people. When eventually some of these students are in important positions, they are likely to advise their country's leaders on Jewish and Middle Eastern issues."

## Scholars' Trajectories

"The individual trajectories of these scholars are very varied. Collectively their life is a mirror of China's turbulent and often tragic history in the twentieth century. For example, one of them was a young Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. Another one was, as he bitterly remembered, being 'reeducated' in a mountain labor camp to which he had been deported.

"Yet another is from a cosmopolitan family of Chinese diplomats and still loves French cuisine. Another's parents were illiterate hill peasants in one of China's poor internal provinces. One heard of Jews for the first time when studying the history of the Second World War in a provincial university and, shocked to learn of the extermination of the Jewish people in Europe, decided to become a student and now a professor of Jewish history.

"Another one played as a little boy in his street in Shanghai with other boys. They were white, and told him they were Jewish children who had been persecuted by the Germans in Europe. Thus he discovered Judaism while running around in the streets. Another one began in the late 1970s to study American literature because this was virtually the only foreign subject one could study. Then two American novelists received Nobel prizes for literature. They had strange names: Saul Bellow and Isaac Bashevis Singer. Who were these two? Jews? He found that interesting and became one of the main Judaic scholars of China. One was a student of philosophy and specialized in Spinoza, and this inspired his interest in Judaism. Today he heads an important institute of Judaic studies.

"Each of these scholars thus discovered Judaism on his own and more or less by chance. Against very heavy odds, they insisted on studying and teaching about it; no one pushed any of them to do so. It is thanks to them that Judaism is known in certain circles and has intellectual power in China.

"During the late 1970s the Chinese authorities-despite their vicious anti-Zionist propaganda-began to regard Jews and Israel as important. The government established the first Hebrew program at the prestigious University of Beijing. The first teacher there was an officer in the Chinese intelligence service who had learned Hebrew. I gave a short lecture there a few years ago in my poor Hebrew. At that time there were about twelve students, two Chinese teachers and one Israeli. I am told that the institute has since folded because there was no more Israeli or Jewish money to support Israeli teachers there."

## The Political System

"The Chinese Foreign Ministry has a research department. In it there are probably Hebrew-speaking experts, among many more Arabists and [Iran](#) experts. An assistant to the foreign minister spent several years studying in Israel and speaks Hebrew quite well. The official Chinese press agency Xinhua has several journalists stationed in Israel and I was told that soon two of them will be fluent in Hebrew.

"The previous Chinese president, Jiang Zemin, has read books about the Jews and was favorably disposed toward Israel. He felt, however, that Israel slapped him in the face when it was forced by massive American pressure to break in 2000 the contract with China for the delivery of Falcon intelligence planes.

"The Chinese government knows that their country is feared and not popular in the West. They hope that Jews in the United States will have some understanding for them and may put in a good word here and there. They greatly admire Henry Kissinger, who helped establish U.S.-Chinese relations. Kissinger visits China once a year and is probably the country's most respected living foreigner.

"Economic relations between Israel and China are developing quickly. As a single country China is now one of the largest exporters to Israel after the United States. In recent years several thousand Chinese industrialists have visited Israel, which is another sign of the rapid growth of economic relations. There is much respect in China for Israeli technology. Economic relations between American Jews and China are also developing very fast.

"Even though the evidence is mixed, I would venture to say that a substantial portion of the political and intellectual elites have superficial good feelings toward the Jewish people and Israel. This can change rapidly, however, if prominent Jews make anti-Chinese statements. Like the Jews, the Chinese are very sensitive people.

"A few years ago a book came out by a not very well-known Chinese author that discussed international currency problems and international attacks against the Chinese policy in the field. These were attributed to Jewish financial power. Whenever and wherever the subject is money and Jews are linked to it, they come out negatively. How much impact the book had we don't know. One wonders whether, with China's increasing openness toward the external world, foreign anti-Semitism will also creep in gradually.

"There are a number of blogs on the Middle East by young Chinese. So far these have been overwhelmingly pro-Israeli and less sympathetic to the Arabs. One has to understand that China is not a country where everybody can put on the web whatever he wants, as is the case in Israel. It is interesting that the Chinese authorities, who are usually very sensitive about political issues, do not censor the pro-Israeli blogs."

## The Muslim World and China

"The Muslim world is watching China attentively. From the time of Muhammad it has considered it a great civilization. Medieval Arab historians such as Ibn Battuta wrote with great regard for the Chinese, even if they were idol worshippers. Muslims thus had very different attitudes toward China than toward 'barbarian' Westerners.

"Arabs, Iranians, and Pakistanis are all aware that China, which is a relatively short distance away, is a great power. The country has common borders with Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The Muslim world is convinced of China's durability; it has been there for three thousand years and will be there for another three thousand.

"The Muslim countries watch China's attitude toward Israel carefully. They are not too happy about the country's good relations with Israel but they do not protest. When China established diplomatic ties with Israel in 1991, the Arab world beseeched it not to do so. The Chinese explained that this was not an expression of hostility toward them, and that they wanted good relations with everyone. They will not let the Arabs interfere with their relations with Israel and vice versa.

"China sends a strong and interesting message to the Muslim world. Its multiple relations with Israel show that it considers it a permanent fixture in the Middle East. China is making long-term 'investments' in a country that has an important civilization and history.

"China is also, however, quickly becoming the main economic partner of all Muslim states in the Middle East. Its voice will thus be heard more and more and cannot be ignored. Middle Eastern stability and Israel's role in it are increasingly important for China. Since China's influence on Israel's fate will grow very quickly, it is important to have it well disposed toward Israel.

"One internal problem that may affect external relations is that the relationship between China's Muslim population and the majority of Han Chinese could become more tense. There have been several terrorist attacks in 2008 against Chinese in the Xinjiang region, which is in the western part of the country and mainly populated by Muslims. Some Muslims feel increasingly close to other parts of the Muslim world, and the Chinese view this negatively."

## The Criticism of the Olympics

"Before the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, Steven Spielberg resigned as their artistic director. He denounced the Chinese for their attitude toward the Darfur genocide, as if the Chinese alone could change that situation. This made headlines in the Chinese media because Spielberg was highly regarded as the director of *Schindler's List*. Millions of people had seen the movie and felt sympathy for the Jews. They interpreted his criticism as 'Here comes this famous Jew whom we respected and considered a friend and slams the Chinese.'

"When Elie Wiesel expressed criticism of China for its Tibet policy, this also made headlines and many Chinese took it badly. Far worse were the close to two hundred American rabbis, many of them liberals, who issued in spring 2008 a violent statement comparing the Beijing Olympics with the Berlin ones in Nazi Germany in 1936. They also mentioned China's support for Sudan and asserted that it was providing missiles to Iran and [Syria](#), which is false—they did not even check this with the Israeli embassy in Washington.

"There were many Jewish reactions condemning the rabbis. Major Jewish organizations distanced themselves from their statement. The Anti-Defamation League criticized the comparison between the Beijing and Berlin Olympics. The rabbis' call led to a flurry of anti-Semitic internet statements by young Chinese. No foreigner who wants to improve human rights can do so by attacking China frontally. Chinese people turn hostile when they feel that their culture, country, and history are being maligned. This may seem exaggerated to us, but are we Jews so different? One hundred fifty years of humiliation and occupation, starting with the despicable Opium Wars, have left deep wounds in Chinese memory.

"The angry blogs were a shock to the Chinese Judaic scholars. One of them wrote to a friend of mine that he felt trapped. His students were asking why he was teaching the culture and history of a people so hostile to China. Many of those in power study Chinese blogs in order to understand what young people think. Anti-Jewish reactions on the internet are a signal to them. Fortunately Xinhua wrote that Israel's president Shimon Peres, who was an official guest of the government for the Olympics, was very happy with his visit."

## Human Rights Are Equal for All

Wald remarks: "American Jews who care about human rights as all Jews should, have to study each case very carefully before they make strong statements against a country. The relations between China and Tibet have been complex over the past centuries. Tibetan Lamaism and Buddhism have much more freedom in China than Islam or Christianity. There are millions of Tibetans living all over China. When I visited Tibet the monasteries and temples were full of monks and worshippers. There are also Tibetan monasteries in China.

"It is a basic Jewish value that people should be treated equally. Many in the Jewish world, including in the United States, will laud any Arab or Muslim country that says it is ready to accept Israel's right to exist. These Jews will hardly criticize the human rights record of Syria or the new [Iraq](#), provided they want to make peace with Israel.

"There are many other reasons why the rabbis' attack on China was hypocritical. Proportionately to the population, the number of citizens executed, tortured, arrested and disappearing in jail in Tunisia is much larger than in China. Probably not a single rabbi has ever attacked the Tunisian dictatorship because it is careful to show pro-Western policies, has low-grade economic relations with Israel, and allows Israelis—not only those of Tunisian origin—to visit.

"There are also many human rights violations in India, for example. The number of people tortured to death in Indian jails over the past ten years, according to local sources, is in the thousands. Not even the most severe critics have offered figures anywhere close to that for China. I do not think India should be attacked specifically, but the reason nobody attacks India is because it is pro-Western, and not yet a real economic rival.

"Many American Jews are very critical of China because the American government is very critical of a country that it considers a competitor. The question then is: if Jews want to criticize such a country, why do they have to stress their

Jewishness? If they do so, then they have to follow the Jewish rule that everyone must receive equal treatment. If they don't like this, then let them criticize China as Americans, not as Jews. After all, during the First World War, French rabbis prayed for the defeat and destruction of Germany and German rabbis for the defeat and destruction of France. We can't prevent American rabbis from imitating this model.

"Furthermore, is harming the interests of Israel, or other Jews-for instance, those presently in China-something that merits no consideration at all? Do everyone else's rights always come before Jewish rights and interests?"

## Jews in China

"There are a few people in the town for Kaifeng who claim to be descendants of Jews who lived there many hundreds of years ago. This town was the capital of the Northern Song dynasty (960-1126) and the Jewish community flourished there from the twelfth to the nineteenth century. According to the Orthodox *halakhah* [Jewish law], their current progeny are not Jewish.

"There are now several thousand foreign Jews residing in China, mainly businessmen. As foreigners they can practice their religion freely. The Jewish community is growing fast. There are Chabad houses in Shanghai and Beijing, where a large *mikveh* [ritual bath] has been built as well.

"Chabad has established very cordial relations with the authorities. When these want to know something about Judaism, they may ask the rabbis. Chabad is protected by the Chinese police because the authorities are very concerned about the dangers of terrorism, whether in Muslim provinces or in the big cities.

"There has been a first Orthodox Jewish wedding in the synagogue in Shanghai. There was also a bar mitzvah. All kosher food and the *mashgiach* [religious supervisor] were flown in from New York. There is also *shechitah* [ritual slaughter] in China with the *shochet* [slaughterer] coming in from abroad. And, increasingly, kosher food under the Orthodox Union supervision is being produced in China for export."

## What Should Israel and the Jews Do?

When asked what Israel and the Jewish people should do to promote their interests, Wald replies: "They should support all activities that make Jewish history and culture better known to the Chinese. One should not stress political aspects but explain that Jews have a continuity of presence and rights in the Holy Land and that the state of Israel is the renewal of four thousand years of history. Activities should better be called cultural as religion is not a positive word in China.

"One should also explain to the Chinese that one of the reasons Jews have been influential in world history is because they attach so much importance to social ethics, the sanctity of human life, and the rights of individuals. Moreover, old Jewish law does everything to prevent the execution of criminals. If you say these things without ever mentioning China, the Chinese have fine-enough perception to read between the lines what you mean and are interested.

"Jews and Israel should support the Chinese scholars who teach Judaism. Although they get some help from their universities, Jewish organizations abroad, and individual Jews, there is no systematic and sufficient support mechanism. This must be improved. I have developed more detailed ideas about it in my book.

"It should be discussed how, on a relatively modest basis, a support mechanism can be developed. It should help fund TV movies on Jewish history, and assist in translating books about Judaism-preferably easy ones-into Chinese. It is still relatively cheap to do this. A few years ago the translation and printing of a book in an edition of four thousand copies cost between \$4-5,000. There is demand for information on Jews, Judaism, Israel, and the Middle East.

"When I interviewed in China for my book, among young Chinese the most frequent recommendation was to establish a Chinese website on Jewish history and culture. In view of the rapidly growing number of internet users, this might be very cost effective."

## Israeli Policies

"The first Israeli leader who had a major interest in China both as an ancient, distinguished civilization and an upcoming great power was Ben-Gurion. In recent decades Israel has pursued an effective policy toward China. Israel continues to invite Chinese scholars to visit and study in Israel and occasionally helps in translating texts into

Chinese. Still this is very little compared to what other countries are doing. Every major country and even some minor ones have a cultural policy in China. This includes smaller nations such as Switzerland and Finland. Germany, for instance, is creating institutes all over China to teach German culture.

"The Israeli Foreign Ministry is understaffed as far as China relations are concerned. They have two or three very dedicated experts who follow Chinese affairs, but that is far too little for a country with which Israel has such important ties.

"A problem I have encountered is the reluctance and even hostility of a variety of non-religious Israelis to consider themselves part of the Jewish people. There were even Israeli diplomats in China who had no interest in Judaism and did not want to respond to the Chinese interest in it. Instead they wanted to bring, for instance, Israeli abstract paintings to China. The country has many thousands of unemployed abstract painters and doesn't need Israeli art in this field."

Wald sums up by saying that China, for the first time in history, will directly influence the fate of the Jews and particularly Israel. "The many challenges China is confronting will affect Israel too. It is therefore crucial for Israel and the Jewish people to develop a strategic concept on how to further their friendship with and interests in this emerging great power."

Interview by Manfred Gerstenfeld

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Dr. Shalom Salomon Wald has a PhD in economics, sociology and the history of religions. He worked with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in Paris from 1964 to 2001. He joined the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute (JPPPI) in Jerusalem at its foundation in 2002. In 2004 he published there a book titled *China and the Jewish People: Old Civilizations in a New Era*.