

Book Reviews

China and Israel: From Discord to Concord

by Jonathan Goldstein and Yitzhak Shichor Reviewed by Gustavo D. Perednik

Not only is the title of this book reminiscent of Agnon's story *From Foe to Friend* (1941), its topic also seems to be similar: the attempts of the Jewish state to befriend a huge and powerful enemy. The struggle bears fruit only towards the end of the story, as the permanence of the protagonist's presence is acknowledged.

Relations between China and Israel have improved greatly over the last two decades, to such an extent that even this recent and updated collection of essays inevitably fails to cover some cardinal events.

China and Israel: From *Discord to Concord* was edited by two fellow members of the SJI International Advisory Board-Yitzhak Shichor and Jonathan Goldstein- who also contribute to this anthology with illuminating articles on security oriented issues.

Other contributors include Israeli diplomats who were pivotal in the knitting of the China-Israel bond. Among them are Isai Magid (consul in Shanghai 1949-1951), Reuven Merhav (consul in Hong Kong 1985-1988, subsequently director-general of the Foreign Ministry), Zev Sufott (first ambassador to China) and Moshe Yegar (head of the Ministry's Asia-Africa Department.) The rest of these thirteen essays were penned by scholars from Israel, the USA, China and India. Jonathan Goldstein, a historian at the University of West Georgia, wrote both the introduction and the epilogue.

The book encompasses several

aspects of the evolving relations between Israel and China. In their essay, Shichor and Merhav divide these relations into four stages: Drought (1949-1978), Tillage (1979-1984), Seedtime (1985-1991) and Harvest (1992.)

In actual fact, the optimistic picture described in the book has been surpassed by reality, with many economists forecasting that China will soon outdo the US as Israel's largest trading partner. Thus recent years are a fifth phase that might be called "The Boom".

Suffice to say that during the first half of last year, China invested more than \$2 billion in Israel, compared to just \$300 million throughout the previous year. In parallel, in March 2015, Israel became a founding member of China's AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank,) reflecting the role of the Jewish state as a major economic partner. Examples abound. The Horizons Ventures capital fund, founded by Hong Kong magnate Li Ka-shing, is leading a US\$10 million strategic investment in Windward, an Israeli maritime data and analytics company. The Israeli Trade Authority signed an Authorized Economic Operator (AEO) agreement, which simplifies customs and approval procedures for Chinese exporters to Israel. The privately-held Chinese conglomerate Fosun International bought the majority of shares of Israel's Delek Group, and has agreed to purchase the Ahava cosmetics firm. For the

history of this partnership, see Yoram Evron's essay *Economics, Science and Technology in the Israel-China Relations*.

Economic aspects are just one of many areas covered by *From Discord to Concord*. Other essays, such as *1991: A Decisive Year*, written by Zeev Sufott (who passed away in 2014), describe the development of diplomatic relations between the two countries. Sufott details the titanic efforts that took place throughout 1991, culminating in the establishment of relations between Israel and both China and India during one momentous week in 1992. The two Asian giants together comprise more than one third of the world's population and their relations with Israel are currently excellent in both cases.

Previously, China and India had both adopted an anti-Israel position as part of their strategy to befriend Muslim countries, the Third World and the Non-Aligned. As described by Goldstein, Shai, Sufott and others, the Conference of Bandung, which took place in Indonesia in April 1955, was the first international expression of world discrimination against Israel – a forerunner of today's BDS.

In those days, China lumped Israel and Taiwan together as the two Asian countries to be systematically boycotted. Although its rationale purported to be "anti-colonialism," China was very selective in the type of "colonialism" it opposed, never

criticizing intrusive actions in Kashmir, Tibet, East Timor or Afghanistan. Indeed, as Sufott well explains, China stood out as "the only non-Muslim and non-Arab country that avoided all official contact with Israel" since the 1950s.

Lilian Craig Harris's article *China and the Arab Middle East 1948-1996: Arab Viewpoints* ably describes the Chinese position vis-à-vis the Arab world: Even though the People's Republic of China sided with the Arab world against Israel for forty years, the Arab regimes distrusted the PRC for its supply of weapons to local revolutionaries in Yemen, Sudan and Oman. Later on the PRC sold weapons to both sides in the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), as part of a pragmatic foreign policy called "friendly to everyone."

On this topic, of special interest is the article by Anthony Alexander Loh, which apologetically describes the anti-hegemonic motif in Chinese policy since the days of Confucius. (Loh is a Chinese scholar who completed his PhD in Political Science at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.)

Other articles deal with the network of small organizations set up in China to assist Jews. Thus, Magid describes how two institutions were

set up in Shanghai to help the migration to Israel of several hundred Jews, including personalities such as Sinologue Ellis Joffe (1942-2010).

Aharon Shai, a historian of South-East Asia and former rector of Tel Aviv University, writes about a relatively marginal issue - the policy of the Israel Communist Party towards China during the second half of the last century. Having interviewed a number of Israeli Communist leaders, including Meir Vilner and David "Sasha" Hanin, Shai describes how Israeli Communists distanced themselves from China in 1969 - indeed, the chaos brought about by Mao's Leap Forward was despised even by their mentors in the Kremlin. Less convincing is the supposition that the rapprochement between Israeli and Chinese Communist parties in 1987 strengthened mutual understanding between the two nations, considering the anti-Zionist rhetoric that Israeli Communists voiced in Beijing.

One remarkable point is that, during Deng Xiao Ping's reforms, interest in Israel was prompted by Israel's success in defeating Soviet weaponry.

Reuven Merhav and Yitzhak Shichor deal with the place of Hong Kong in China-Israel relations, noting that the path to the establishment of

relations was paved in Hong Kong, which hosted meetings between the two countries on science, agriculture and security issues. Moshe Yegar and P. R. Kumaraswamy (a research fellow at the Harry S. Truman Institute of the Hebrew University) discuss the implications of China-Israel relations for South and South-east Asia.

The anthology is focused more on history than on the future. Thus, an interesting topic not included is the possibility that Israel will become a bridge between the US and China, equidistant as it is between them as it was between previous world empires -- Egypt and Babylonia, the Greeks and the Persians, the Romans and Asia.

From Discord to Concord was published in a previous version in English (1999); this Hebrew version includes some new articles and updated versions of the others.

Gustavo Perednik, an Israeli educator and author, has been a member of the SJI International Advisory Board for a decade. He has lectured on Sino-Judaic topics in several Chinese universities, as well as in the US and Israel. His twentieth book, *Chinese and Jews*, will be released in Spanish by the end of this year.

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