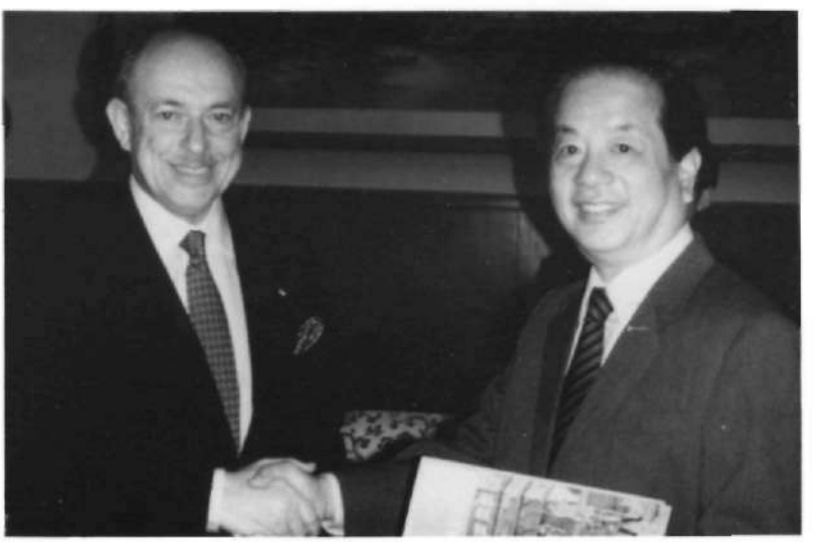
MEETING WITH QIAN QICHEN FOREIGN MINISTER

11 OCTOBER 1991

1. The meeting with Foreign Minister and State Councillor Qian Qichen was without doubt the politically most significant achievement of the visit. Despite earlier indications that it would be a strictly private briefing, the delegation was informed that the meeting could be publicised and photographs could be taken - the Chinese plainly did not intend to keep it under wraps and were clearly interested in putting out some kind of political signal. Among those attending were Cao Dapeng, who had been instrumental in arranging the meeting, and other CICEC officials.



I$l Leibler with Qian Qichen, Chinese Foreign Minister.

2. Leibler opened the meeting by briefly outlining the role of the WJC and its potential as the "parliament" of world Jewry to play a constructive and useful political role in several countries, especially the United States. He said he was concerned that China had little or no relationship with the Jewish people, and was delighted that 10 years of persistent effort had finally yielded a firm agreement to

hold a Chinese-Jewish Colloquium in Beijing next April. This would make a great impact on Jewish opinion, particularly as it appeared to have Mr Qian's approval "we would be delighted if you could open it personally", Leibler suggested. He mentioned China's good relationship with Australia, noting that the government in Canberra recognised and appreciated the constructive position Beijing had adopted on regional issues such as Cambodia and Vietnam. Leibler also praised the fact that China and Australia had found a basis to indulge in a dialogue on the question of human rights. But he expressed his concern at China's deterioration with the US, where the bulk of theworld's Jews live.

3. Apologising for speaking bluntly and without diplomatic equivocation, Leibler then turned directly to the sensitive issue of China's relations with Israel. He said he recognised that there was a general improvement in this area, and he was optimistic that formal diplomatic relations between the two countries would come in the near future. The growing commercial relationship between the two countries was a welcome development but this should become overt and not be kept under the table. It ill behoved a great trading nation like China to limit its trade with Israel to back door deals using third parties as intermediaries, he added.

4. The major litmus test would be China's position on the "Zionism is racism" resolution which Leibler pointed out is now high on the international political agenda. Most countries spearheaded by the United States and Western Europe, and now including the Soviet Union, the Eastern European countries and the whole of Latin America had committed themselves to work for the recision of this shameful slur on the Jewish people. China could generate tremendous goodwill in the Jewish world were it to join this majority and support recision of that infamous resolution which, Leibler suggested, it could do without damage to its own interests even given its ties with the Arab world. This would be a clear message to the Jewish world, particularly in the US, and would challenge those who were maliciously destroying China's international image. (Qian clearly took the point, and nodded perceptibly at several points during Leibler's delivery.)

5. Leibler apologised if he had offended Mr Qian by speaking out in "a primitive and direct manner" that might perhaps be inappropriate when addressing the Foreign Minister of a great country like China. But he had spoken "from the heart" and hoped that this direct and frank exchange would be seen as a positive signal by potential friends of China, both politically and economically, and that it would mark the start of a process that will continue in the future.

6. Qian thanked Leibler for his "friendly and sincere remarks". He paid tribute to the ancient Jewish and Chinese civilisations, and to the talents and achievements of the two peoples. He expressed his "very deep sympathy" for the sufferings of the Jews during World War 2. China too had suffered greatly during that period, but at the same time had provided a safe haven for many Jews escaping the Holocaust in Europe. So there was much mutual sympathy between the two peoples.

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7. Turning to Israel, Qian said he had in recent years met with three Israeli foreign ministers - Peres, Arens, and just the month before, with David Levy. He wished to record his appreciation of the fact that Israel had been one of the first countries to recognise the Peoples' Republic of China and had recognised the "One China" concept by failing to establish diplomatic ties with Taiwan. He regretted, however, that despite this there were no formal relations between the two countries. The reason for this, he said, was the difficulties caused by the many wars in the Middle East and the delay to finding a solution to the Palestinian problem. He pointed out, nevertheless, that China now has a "non-Government" office in Tel Aviv and Israel has a similar counterpart in Beijing; "so there is increasing contact between the two sides", He noted that China had never been opposed to the Jews, and Jews in China had always lived in harmony. And he recognised that the Jews, for their part, do not share the anti-China attitudes present in certain parts of the world "so there is no reason for the Chinese and Jewish people not to be friendly in the future". He welcomed the Chinese-Jewish symposium planned for Beijing next April, and said he hoped it would be a success.

8. China had now come to realise that the Middle East was now moving slowly towards peace, even though this was likely to be a long process and he noted that China "stands ready to play its role". The core issue, he said, is the Palestinian problem. China had no particular self-interest in the Middle East, he said, pointing out that the region was geographically remote from China. It's only interest was for real peace to prevail and for peaceful co-existence between the Jews and the Arabs, especially the Palestinians. (Significantly, at no point in the discussion did Qian refer to the PLC)

9. On "Zionism is racism", Qian said "we do not believe that the language of the resolution is consistent with the facts so, in a sense, there is no difficulty in the Chinese stand". The problem, he said, was "technical". He pointed out that the UN has passed thousands of resolutions, "some of them highly slanderous against China". But when it came to amending such resolutions, the procedures were "very complicated". He said that with the Middle East peace process now high on the political agenda, the time might not be ripe to raise this difficult issue and suggested that discussions on it be postponed to a later date. "Perhaps it is more important to assure the smooth progress of the peace conference". He reiterated, however, that China does not agree with the wording of the resolution as it now stands. (Leibler repeated what Qian had just said, and he confirmed.)

10. Qian concluded the meeting by saying he had heard the WJC delegation was going on to meet Wan Li, and described the visit as "a great success". He noted that the WJC, as the parliament of world Jewry, had "many connections", and said he hoped it would be able to contribute towards improving Jewish-Chinese relations. "The message we have is that the Chinese hold the Jewish people in respect, and want to maintain friendly relations". He asked Leibler to convey his best wishes to the Australian Foreign Minister, Senator Evans, who had

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Foreign Minister Qian Qichen with Sol Kanee.

recently visited Beijing. Qian then agreed to be photographed with the heads of the delegation, and said the meeting could be reported in broad terms.

11. The meeting with Qian coincided with the announcement in Washington that morning that an American delegation was about to visit Beijing to look into the huge imbalance in China's trade with the United States, signalling a worsening in the already extremely tense relationship between the two countries. It would seem that the Chinese leadership was interested in rallying all the support it could at a critical point in its relations with Washington - and Foreign Minister Qian's decision to meet openly with the WJC delegation was very probably influenced at least in part by this consideration. Mr. Qian himself made an excellent impression. Probably in his early fifties, he came across as an open-minded pragmatist who appeared to harbour no ideological hang-ups about the West in general, and to be extremely well disposed to the Jews in particular. He was viewed in China as very much a man of the future, which augurs well for Chinese-Jewish relations once the current generation of old men in Beijing pass from the scene.

CONCLUSIONS AND ASSESSMENTS

by Isi Leibler

1. Although it was overshadowed by the political significance of the meetings with Foreign Minister Qian and National Peoples Congress Chairman Wan Li, the agreement reached to hold a Chinese-Jewish Colloquium in Beijing in April 1992 was an achievement of undoubted historical importance.

2. The agreement marked the culmination of almost a decade of persistent effort (see Background) and set the scene for a quantum leap in Chinese-Jewish understanding which, in the past, had been severely restricted by Chinese reluctance to enter into any kind of dialogue with the Jews.

3. There can be little doubt that there is a growing interest in China in such a dialogue, and the number of scholars and institutions engaged in Jewish-related studies is clearly increasing. But the general level of knowledge about Jews and Judaism remains abysmal, and the Chinese made no secret of the fact that they hoped the colloquium would go some way towards improving the situation.

4. Part of China's evident interest in knowing more about the Jews would seem to derive from its perception that the international world order is changing rapidly, and that its future political interests in the Middle East might well necessitate a closer relationship with Israel. Should this eventuate, China would not like to be caught napping and would obviously see it as being in its own interest to have a cadre of people familiar with the language, culture and history both of the Jewish people and of the Jewish state.

5. It would also be disingenuous to deny that a good deal of China's openness to overtures from a Jewish organisation like the WJC derived from its perception of immense Jewish political influence, especially in the United States. In its current economic confrontation with the US, and its deep concern over its threatened Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status, there can be little doubt that Beijing has a vested interest in securing the goodwill of a potential political ally like the Jewish lobby in Washington. And its decision to sanction a Chinese-Jewish Colloquium at this point must be seen, at least partially, in this context.

6. There can be little doubt that several international factors had come together to make the political climate in Beijing more conducive than at any time in the past to Chinese-Jewish *rapprochement.* These included the demise of Communism in the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, which had resulted in an entirely new world order that demanded a fundamental review of entrenched Chinese policies - including its global rivalry with the Soviet Union in such areas as the Middle East. There was also the shattering of China's illusions that the oil-rich Arab states would play a major role in its global economic strategy, while the discrediting of the PLO as a major political player had also removed a significant barrier to improved relations with the Jews and with Israel. Israel's restored relations with many Third World states, particularly in Africa, had made it somewhat easier for China to review its own past hostile attitude towards the Jewish state. China, moreover, appeared to be in the process of reassessing its leadership aspirations in the Third World, a concept that had lost much of its political significance in the post-Cold War world.

7. But most significant, perhaps, was China's perception that its future political and economic well-being is now heavily dependent on good relations with the United States - where Beijing's policy vis-a-vis Israel and its general relationship with world Jewry could in their view be crucial in establishing the necessary climate of goodwill in Washington. This was the not-so-hidden Chinese agenda that was ever-present during all the WJC delegation's talks in China.

8. While there were clearly overtones of self-interest and even opportunism that could not be ignored, there was ample evidence of a genuine goodwill towards both the Jewish people and towards Israel which appeared to transcend *Realpolitik.* The WJC delegation received the overwhelming impression of a fundamentally positive attitude towards Jews, at every level. Even the frequently encountered stereotyped perception of Jewish financial acumen, which in a Western context would have had clear anti-semitic overtones, appeared to be a frank and open expression of genuine admiration.

9. This basically positive attitude towards Jews, at the grassroots level, was confirmed by Ruth Kahanoff of the Israeli Liaison Office in Beijing. A competent Chinese-speaker, Kahanoff travels extensively in China and has encountered widespread curiosity about both the Jews and Israel.

10. At the official level, China is gradually raising both the scope and the profile of its contacts with Israel. While its extensive commercial ties with the Jewish state are still kept under close wraps and are frequently conducted under the table or through third-parties, there is now a quasi-diplomatic Israeli mission functioning openly in Beijing, with a counterpart Chinese mission in Tel Aviv. Formally a branch of the Israeli Academy of Sciences and Humanities, the Liaison Office in Beijing is *de facto* answerable to the Foreign Ministry in Jerusalem. It has a staff of five and carries out a wide and expanding range of functions. Initially restricted to oversee-

ing scientific and technical exchanges, it is now branching out into cultural exchanges and some commercial activity. It is authorised to issue visas, technically functioning as an agent of the Israeli Embassy in Hong Kong. Its counterpart in Tel Aviv, formally a branch of the China International Travel Service (CITS), performs parallel functions in Israel.

11. A further indication that China may now be lifting some of the wraps from its dealings with Israel was the unprecedented official announcement by the Chinese Foreign Ministry, while the WJC delegation was in Beijing, that a high-level Israeli Foreign Ministry team headed by Deputy Director-General Moshe Yegar was concurrently visiting the country - an item that was widely carried in the local Chinese press.

12. All this would appear to suggest that China is moving rapidly towards an open relationship and full normalisation with Israel. Although some well-connected Chinese observers remain sceptical, this impression was strengthened during the WJC delegation's meeting with Foreign Minister Qian Qichen. The Foreign Minister made it quite clear that there was no intrinsic barrier to full normalisation - Israel was well regarded both as one of the first states to have recognised the People's Republic of China and for its entrenched 'One China' policy, while on the other hand China had no deep vested interests in the geographically remote Middle East that would disqualify it from having normal relations with the Jewish state. Moreover, China appeared to be aware that if it is to play a role in the Middle East, it will have to have normal relations with both Israel and the Arab states. The overall impression was that restored diplomatic relations between the two countries was just a matter of time, the main inhibiting factors being the political paralysis in Beijing under the present geriatric leadership and the pace of progress towards a peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israel conflict.

13. Perhaps the most encouraging political sign of the vast improvement in Chinese-Jewish relations was Foreign Minister Qian's attitude to 'Zionism=racism'. Qian made it quite plain that China does not consider the language of that infamous UN resolution to be consistent with the facts, and he left the clear impression that the moment this became politically feasible Beijing would like to end its morally embarrassing association with it.

14. The overall economic and political situation in China left considerable room for optimism. Economically, the country appeared to be in good shape and this was confirmed by both well-connected Chinese and Western diplomatic sources in Beijing. Politically, reform appeared to have suffered a setback since the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. However, well-placed observers in Beijing, including Chinese 'liberals', insisted that the forces for reform were still in place and would ultimately prevail. There were already signs that some of the reform-minded individuals who had been removed following Tiananmen Square were back in office.

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15. Considerable concern was expressed, however, by both Chinese and Western observers in Beijing, that the shrill calls for rapid and far-reaching reform coming from enthusiastic but often misguided liberal quarters in the West could be dangerously counter-productive, and could force the Chinese leadership into taking retrograde steps. The notion of 'peaceful evolution' is officially out of favour with the ruling clique in Beijing, which regards it as a form of internal 'subversion'. But as long as economic reform continues to take place and China is not forced into isolationism, it is generally felt that political liberalisation will eventually follow. There is an urgent need to closely monitor the situation in China and to keep up the pressure for change - but with due regard for the danger of provoking a counter-productive whiplash.

16. Relations with the United States were at a low ebb, with particular tension over the MFN issue, and some observers predicted a major breakdown in the relation - ship between the two countries. This could be disastrous, not only for the cause of reform in China, but also for China's slowly evolving constructive relationship with the rest of the world - the Jews and Israel included.

17. The human rights situation was difficult to assess and whenever it was raised in meetings with the Chinese the problem was usually dismissed as the product of Western misconstruction. But there was plainly considerable sensitivity about the issue and a growing awareness that it was important to allay Western concerns. Purely impressionistically, Beijing did not appear to be a city under siege; there was no overt sign of undue police or military presence, and people appeared ready to speak openly and freely on all subjects. There were indications, however, that in certain sensitive areas such as the universities, the situation might not be quite so benign.

18. Our overall impression of the future of Chinese-Jewish relations was one of great optimism, based both on the fundamental goodwill we encountered at all levels and on the rapidly changing international situation which is fast rendering Chinese political animosity towards Jews and Israel obsolete. Much work still needs to be done, however, to translate both this goodwill and the changing political realities into practical steps. China must be persuaded to bring its growing political and commercial relationship with Israel right out into the open. The kind of covert, under-the-table relationship that has evolved over the past three or four years is no longer acceptable, and we encountered a political climate in Beijing that would appear to be more conducive than at any time in the recent past to responding positively to such persuasion. One troubling questionmark hanging over Chinese-Jewish *rapprochement* is China's uneasy relationship with the United States. But barring a total breakdown in relations between the two countries, the future looks promising - and we can look forward to the April 1992 Chinese-Jewish Colloquium in Beijing as an historically significant step in this process.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I

Agreement between World Jewish Congress and China International Culture Centre (CICEC) on Sino-Jewish Colloquium in Beijing.

- The Colloquium will be titled *Cultures Old and New - A Chinese-Jewish Dialogue.*
- It will take place in Beijing trom Monday 6 April - Wednesday 8 April 1992.
- The venue will be a suitable centrally-located 5 star hotel with flexible conference facilities that will accommodate the invited participants and numerous tourists.
- The co-sponsors will be the World Jewish Congress and the China International Culture Exchange Centre.
- Co-convenors will be Cao Dapeng for CICEC and Isi Leibler for WJC.
- Academic co-chairmen will be Professor Yoram Dinstein of Tel Aviv University and a yet-to-be-named Chinese academician.
- The colloquium will be opened by a prominent Chinese personality (ideally a ranking political figure).
- Up to 10 Jewish and 10 Chinese academicians will be invited to take part with the emphasis on experts in various fields of common interest rather than Jewish experts on China and vice versa.
- There will be an invited audience of 25 Jews and 25 Chinese.
- Invitations will be sent out in the names of the co-convenors and the academic co-chairmen.
- Papers will be brief and the format will provide for extended discussion and

exchange between participants with the aid of simultaneous Chinese-English/ English-Chinese translation.

- Topics for discussion will be finalised in consultation between the co-convenors and the academic co-chairmen, and could include such areas as Jewish-Chinese encounters; the Chinese and Jewish diasporas; the impact of modernity on ancient cultures; the diaspora/homeland relationship; the impact of Chinese and Jewish culture on world civilisation; ancient languages in modern contexts, etc.
- A program, in English and Chinese, will be prepared and the proceedings will be published in both languages.
- The colloquium will be announced in the Chinese press and there will be local and international media coverage of the proceedings.
- A Jewish cultural exhibit depicting the Jewish life cycle and themes from Jewish history will be mounted as part of the colloquium.
- The possibility of screening Abba Eban's *Heritage* series on Chinese television to coincide with the colloquium will be taken up with the appropriate authorities.
- The colloquium will be jointly funded by the WJC and CICEC, with the WJC covering the cost of bringing the Jewish participants to Beijing and CICEC covering local costs with possible participation by the WJC.
- Simultaneously with the colloquium, the WJC will sponsor Jewish tours to China in conjunction with the China International Travel Service (CITS).

APPENDIX II

Books on Jewish Subjects Translated into Chinese

1. 《世界十大宗教》 黄心川主编 东方出版社 1988

THE TEN MAJOR RELIGIONS IN THE WORLD, edited by Huang Xingchuan, the East Publishing House, 1988

2、《各国宗教概况》 中国社会科学院宗教研究所编 中国社会科学院出版社 1984

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF THE RELIGIONS IN EVERY COUNTRY, compiled by the Institute of Religions of the Academy of Social Sciences, published by China Social Sciences Publishing House, 1984

3. 《陈垣史学论著选》 中国当代史学家丛书 上海人民出版社 1981

THE SELECTED WORKS OF HISTORY BY MR. CHEN HUAN, a series of books by the comternperary Chinese historians, published by Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1981

4. 《中国境内犹太人的若干历史问题—开封的中国犹太人》 潘光照著 北京大学出版社 1983 1991年再版

SOME HISTORICAL PROBLEMS CONCERNING THE

JEWS IN CHINA, by Pan Guangzhao, Peking University Publishing House, 1983; the second edition, 1991

5. 《中国古代基督教及开封犹太人》 江文汉著 知识出版社

THE CHRISTIANITY IN ANCIENT CHINA AND THE JEWS IN KAIFENG, by Jiang Hanwen, the Knowledge Publishing House, 1982

6. 《犹太教与中国开封犹太人》 张绥著 上海三联出版社 1990

THE JEWISM AND THE JEWS IN KAIFENG, by Zhang Sui, 1990

7. 《犹太史》 (以色列)阿巴·埃班著中国社会科学出版社 1986

THE HISTORY OF JEWS, 1986

8. 《犹太—充满“悖论”的文化》 顾晓鸣著 浙江人民出版社 1990

JUDAS———A CULTURE FULL OF PARADOX, by Gu Xiaoming, Zhejiang People's Publishing House, 1990

9. 《希伯来文化》 世界文化丛书 朱维之主编

浙江人民出版社 1988

THE HEBREW CULTURE, edited by Zhu Weizhi, Zhejiang People's Publishing House, 1988

10. 《中国人看以色列》 达洲等著 新华出版社 1990

ISRAEL IN THE EYES OF THE CHINESE, edited by Da Zhou, the New China Publishing House, 1990

11. "犹太文化丛书" 顾晓鸣主编 已出版 上海人民 1991

(1)《圣经中的犹太行迹》 J.B. 加百尔等著

(2)《犹太人和钱》

12. 《关于中国犹太人及其民族融合历史的调查》 王一沙、朱传一著《百科知识》1985年第1期

AN INVESTIGATION REPORT ON THE JEWS IN CHINA AND ITS ETHNIC ASSIMILATION, by Wang Yisha and Zhu Cuanyi, 1985

13. 《开封一赐乐业教钩沉》 孔宪易 载《世界宗教研究》1988年

14. 《开封犹太人的同化问题》 (美)LEO GABOW, 《当代宗教研究》1991年1期

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