BRIDGING THE GAP

WORLD JEWISH CONGRESS MISSION TO BEIJING

OCTOBER
1991

FOREWORD

This publication documents a landmark event in Jewish international affairs — the official visit to Beijing in October 1991 by a World Jewish Congress delegation.

Not only was this the first time a representative Jewish body had been officially invited to visit China, but the delegation held high level talks with two of China's top leaders Foreign Minister Qian Qichen and the Chairman of the National Peoples' Congress Wan Li and concluded an historic agreement to convene a major international Sino-Jewish Colloquium in Beijing in April 1992.

Although it was somewhat overshadowed by the political significance of our unprecedented talks with Foreign Minister Qian Qichen and Chairman Wan Li (the third-ranking figure in China's formal political hierarchy), during which some major statements were made on relations with Israel and China's position on the infamous 'Zionism=racism' resolution in the UN, the agreement on the colloquium was particularly gratifying for me personally as it marked the culmination of almost a decade of intensive effort to break through the many barriers inhibiting any open formal Chinese relationship with Jews.

As a leader of by far the largest Jewish community in the Asia-Pacific, Australia, I have long had a special interest in fostering ties with the countries of the region and most particularly with China, the regional superpower, whose lack of contact with the Jewish people and open hostility towards Israel has been a source of deep concern to me. And the agreement to hold a Sino-Jewish Colloquium in the Chinese capital Beijing next April, I believe, marks the first significant step to redress this historic anomaly and will help pave the way towards a full rapprochement between two ancient peoples who have much in common and much to gain from a mutually friendly relationship.

This report outlines the background leading up to the WJC delegation's historic visit, documents the negotiations it held in Beijing - including a verbatim report of the ground-breaking meeting with Foreign Minister Qian Qichen - and ends with my own personal conclusions and assessment of the current state of Sino-Jewish relations.

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I would like to take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude to Sol Kanee, who as my senior colleague on the delegation provided me with invaluable support and some sage advice throughout the visit, and to our Research Director Dr David Bernstein who compiled and edited this report.

ISILEIBLER,A.O.,C.B.E.
Co-Chairman
Governing Board
World Jewish Congress

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
Foreword	
Synopsis	1
Background	3
The WJC Mission to Beijing, 7-11 October 1991	9
Meeting with Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, 11 October 1991	19
Conclusions and Assessments	23
Appendices	27

i. Agreement between World Jewish Congress and China International Culture Exchange Centre on holding a Sino-Jewish academic colloquium in Beijing, 6-8 April 1992

ii. List of books on Jewish subjects translated into Chinese

SYNOPSIS

(i) The Asia-Pacific, acknowledged to be the most important and fastest-growing economic region on earth, has until recently been *terra incognita* for the Jewish people. In addition to the almost complete physical absence of Jews in much of the region, there is also a near total absence in present-day Asian cultures of any awareness of Jewish culture or civilisation. To the extent that Jews are present at all in modern Asian consciousness, it has been by negative association with Israel - which until recently has been viewed with almost universal hostility throughout Asia.

(ii) In an attempt to redress this undesirable situation, which had strong negative implications both for the Jewish people and for Israel, the World Jewish Congress has been actively involved since the early 1980s in trying to promote a dialogue between the Asia-Pacific and the Jews. These resulted in two important Asian-Jewish Colloquia, the first in Singapore in 1984 and the second in Hong Kong in 1987, which began the slow process of raising mutual awareness among Jews and the people of the Asia-Pacific.

(iii) Apart from its agreement to send a single representative to the 1987 Colloquium in Hong Kong, China the largest and most important power in the region has been extremely reluctant to enter into an open dialogue with the Jews, and until recently has maintained a virulently hostile approach towards Israel.

(iv) But persistent efforts by then WJC Vice President, Isi Leibler (now Co-Chairman of the WJC Governing Board) resulted in a series of ongoing contacts with China over the past decade which culminated in an official invitation to visit Beijing in October 1991 at the head of a WJC delegation, to negotiate the holding of a Chinese-Jewish Colloquium in the Chinese capital.

(v) Agreement was reached to hold the historic colloquium in Beijing from 6-8 April 1992, under the joint auspices of the WJC and the China International Culture Exchange Centre (CICEC). It was to be attended by leading Chinese and Jewish academicians from around the world, including Israel. Agreement was also reached to mount a parallel Jewish cultural exhibition in Beijing, as well as on WJC-sponsored Jewish tours of China aimed to coincide with the colloquium.

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(vi) Perhaps even overshadowing the remarkable achievement of the colloquium were the two unprecedented top level political meetings in Beijing between the WJC delegation and the Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, and the Chairman of the National People's Congress Wan Li, the third-ranking figure in China's formal political hierarchy. The meetings were openly publicised and were widely viewed as a major breakthrough in Chinese-Jewish relations. Foreign Minister Qian took the opportunity to signal a significant shift in China's attitude to the infamous 7ionism=racism' resolution in the UN, and gave reason for optimism that Chinese-Israeli relations were moving towards normalisation.

(vii) There can be little doubt that China's concern over its deteriorating economic relationship with the United States and its perception of the Jewish lobby in Washington as a potential ally in its fight to maintain MFN was a major factor in Beijing's remarkable responsiveness to the WJC delegation. But there can be equally little doubt that, despite the overtones of self-interest and even opportunism, China is undergoing a major review of its foreign policy options in the post-Cold War era, and that it views improved relations with the Jews and with Israel as a potential long-term strategic interest. There was, moreover, ample proof of a genuine goodwill towards both the Jews and the Jewish state, which might perhaps transcend *Realpolitik* and gives hope for an abiding improvement in relations between the two peoples.

BACKGROUND

1. Asia-Pacific is today the most important and fastest developing economic region on earth. Its dramatically growing economic strength has greatly enhanced the region's political importance as well, and this is likely to increase further in the years ahead. For World Jewry, and especially for Israel, the emergence of this new centre of global economic and political power could have the most profound implications.

2. It is an historic paradox that while Judaism has its origins in Asia, there is no significant Jewish presence on that continent. This is especially true of those countries on the Asia-Pacific rim, where apart from small residual communities in India and Singapore and a handful of expatriate communities in countries such as Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines, the region is effectively Judenrein. Even the once significant community of Kaifeng Jews in China is now, for all practical purposes, extinct.

3. In addition to the physical absence of Jews in the Asia-Pacific region, there is a near total absence in present day Asian cultures of any awareness of Jewish culture or civilisation. Professor Zwi Werblowsky of the Hebrew University has used the phrase cultural metabolism to describe the network of ideas and awareness from which the Jews and Judaism are almost entirely absent in the Asian experience. The Chinese, for example, have no concept of the term "Jew" other than the notion of belonging to the (Christian) Western world.

4. To the extent that Jews are present at all in modern Asian consciousness, it is usually by negative association with Israel - which until recently was almost universally viewed with hostility in a region where most governments were politically orientated, like other Third World regimes, towards the Arab/Muslim bloc.

5. With the growing political and economic significance of Asia, especially those countries on the Asia-Pacific rim, it had been apparent since the early 1980s that the state of Asian-Jewish relations was unsatisfactory and mutually detrimental to both sides. This was recognised both by Jewish leaders in the Diaspora, and by a growing number of Israeli academics who were concerned about the low level of

exchange between Jewish intellectuals and their counterparts in Asia - a major factor in creating the distorted perceptions of Israel that prevailed in this part of the world.

6. Because of its substantial Jewish population (approximately 100,000) and relative proximity, Australia emerged during the 1980s as the prime base for Jewish activities in the Asia-Pacific region. The Melbourne-based Asia-Pacific Jewish Association (APJA), an affiliate of the World Jewish Congress, founded in 1980 to provide educational, religious and support services to the small Jewish communities scattered throughout the Asia-Pacific in a bid to enhance the quality of Jewish communal life and to strengthen Jewish ties of identification in the region - has been the key agency in pursuing these activities.

Professor Yoram Dinstein,
President,
Tel Aviv University

7. In September 1984, the First Asian-Jewish Colloquium was held in Singapore. Convened jointly by Isi Leibler in his capacity as President of APJA and Chairman of the WJC's Asia-Pacific Section, and Professor Yoram Dinstein, then Professor of International Law at Tel Aviv University, the colloquium brought together a group of distinguished Asian and Jewish (including Israeli) intellectuals for two days of discussion on a variety of topics of mutual interest. The event was seen as a modest but encouraging step in the right direction, and it was unanimously agreed to repeat the experiment in two years time.

8. The search for a venue for the Second Asian Jewish Colloquium proved long and frustrating, graphically illustrating the many difficulties and obstacles that lay in the path of any meaningful Asian-Jewish dialogue. The first two options - Japan and India proved to be impossible for political reasons, the Japanese displaying a general attitude of non-cooperation and the Indians making it plain that they could not guarantee that Israeli participants would be permitted to attend. A third option, Manila, was dropped after a negative response from several potential

participants, who viewed it as problematic for security reasons. Singapore was also rejected because it was too soon after President Herzog's visit the year before. In the end, last-minute arrangements were made to hold the colloquium in Hong Kong in March 1987.

9. One of the glaring omissions at the First Colloquium in Singapore had been the absence of any representation from China, the largest and politically most significant power in the region. In addition to its political importance China has deep emotional associations for Jews, both because of the ancient Jewish presence in Kaifeng and, more recently, because of the thousands of European Jews who found refuge in Shanghai from Hitler's Holocaust. Chinese participation in the Second Colloquium was thus a major objective, and was first explored during a visit to Beijing in October 1985.

10. That visit, undertaken by Leibler in his official WJC capacity, was a significant step in the ongoing Jewish-Asian dialogue. For the first time, senior representatives of Chinese government agencies met, albeit unofficially, with the official representatives of an international Jewish organisation in Beijing. These included Dr. Li Shenzhi, who as Vice President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and Director of the prestigious Institute of American Studies was one of Deng Xiaoping's most influential advisers particularly in the crucial area of relations with the United States. A close associate of the late Chinese Foreign Minister, Chou En Lai, for whom he worked at one stage as chief speech writer, Dr. Li was a major casualty of the cultural revolution and spent 21 years in "internal exile", working in the most menial tasks in China's rural outback before being rehabilitated by Deng Xiaoping in 1979.

11. Leibler was also permitted to meet and speak freely on a range of issues with a wide cross section of highly placed Chinese officials. It was in the course of these discussions that agreement was reached, in principle, that Chinese scholars would be able to attend appropriate academic conferences on themes of Jewish interest. Even more ambitiously, Chinese officials in both formal and informal talks intimated that they would consider a request to hold a non-political scholarly conference in Beijing on Chinese-Jewish subjects.

12. One concrete result of that visit to Beijing was the reciprocal visit by Dr. Li Shenzhi to Australia in March 1987, when he gave a series of lectures and seminars on Sino-American relations at Melbourne's Latrobe University.

13. While Dr. Li was in Melbourne, he held informal talks with Reuven Merhav, Israel's Consul-General in Hong Kong and later Director-General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, who was "coincidentally" visiting Australia at that time. It is likely that these talks may have contributed towards Merhav's subsequent success in developing a wide range of economic and non-official ties between Jerusalem and Beijing.

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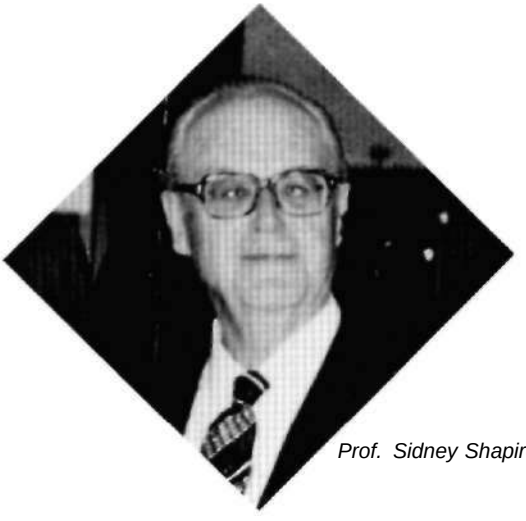
Dr. Li Shenzhi.
Vice President, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS)

14. In private discussions with Merhav and Leibler, Dr. Li provided some valuable insights into Chinese perceptions both of Israel and of the Jews in general. He noted that Israel had been perceived from the start as being of low political priority to Beijing, which placed greater emphasis on good relations with the far more numerous Arabs - a policy which, he said, remained basically unchanged. He did not foresee any early change of direction, and gave the impression that any efforts to encourage China to establish formal diplomatic relations with Israel would be futile and probably counterproductive - although there was ample scope for low profile commercial contacts between the two countries provided these did not cause political waves. In a surprising move, Dr. Li said that he would be extremely interested in Chinese scholars studying Hebrew and Judaism in the West, reflecting China's anxiety and perhaps even embarrassment about its ignorance of much of the outside world.

15. As far as World Jewry was concerned, Dr. Li indicated that the Chinese were aware of the political importance of American Jewry and the capacity they might have to influence Washington's policy towards China - a theme that came increasingly to the fore in subsequent meetings with Dr. Li and other Chinese officials.

16. The Second Asian Jewish Colloquium opened in Hong Kong, as planned, in March 1987. Again convened jointly by Leibler and Professor Dinstein, the colloquium this time attracted a much larger contingent of high calibre academics and intellectuals - including two of Australia's most distinguished public figures, former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, and former Governor-General of Australia Sir Zelman Cowen.

17. But the most significant participant was undoubtedly Professor Sidney Shapiro, a New York born Jew who settled in China over 40 years ago and is today one of China's most distinguished translators. Known by his Chinese name, Sha Boli, Professor Shapiro has lived in China since 1949 and has been a Chinese citizen since 1963. He has translated over 20 volumes of Chinese literature into English, and is married to a prominent Chinese writer. Professor Shapiro is totally committed to



Prof. Sidney Shapiro (Sha Boli)

his adopted country and is held in high regard by the present regime in Beijing. His attendance at the Hong Kong Colloauium and his agreement to serve on the International Steering Committee set up to plan for future such conferences were clearly major developments and augured well for future Sino-Jewish contacts.

18. The Hong Kong Colloquium was an outstanding success, both in terms of the level of discussion and in terms of its international impact. If handled carefully, it was concluded, these gatherings had the capacity to generate important changes in the perception of Jews and Israel throughout the Asia-Pacific - first and foremost by increasing intellectual awareness among academics in the region which, over time, would inevitably seep through to and influence the politically aware and decision making elites.

19. If Chinese participation had been one of the main goals of the Second Colloquium in Hong Kong, the next challenge was to hold a future colloquium in Beijing itself. As noted, the idea was first mooted in Leibler's talks with Chinese officials in Beijing in October 1985. It was raised again when he revisited China in April 1990. In talks with Dr. Li Shenzhi, the idea of holding an international colloquium in Beijing was raised, to be sponsored by the World Jewish Congress and some official Chinese body (such as CASS). This would be attended by Chinese and Jewish scholars who would compare the parallels and differences in history, culture and the diasporas of the Chinese and Jewish people.

20. The April 1990 visit to China came shortly after the Tiananmen Square episode, when the mood in Beijing was extremely sombre. In particular, there was deep concern that the American Congress would revoke China's Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status, resulting in the loss of 3 billion dollars of trade. In this context, the influence of the Jewish lobby in the US gained added importance, and the subject was raised by Chinese officials on several occasions. They also put out feelers about a possible role the WJC might play in promoting China's case in Washington. The point was taken that a change in Chinese policy vis-a-vis Israel could have a profound impact on liberal, including Jewish, opinion in the United States. (There

had by this time been a low key but perceptible improvement in relations with Israel, and an Israeli Liaison Office was functioning in Beijing headed by Dr. Yossi Shalhevet, a scientist, and Yoel Guilla, a career diplomat; there was also a reciprocal Chinese presence in Israel.) There appeared to be agreement, however, that the objective was not simply to concentrate on the MFN issue, but to look to the long-term improvement of Sino-Jewish relations overall.

Ambassador Han Xu, President of the Chinese People's Association of Friendship with Foreign Countries

21. The next significant step was taken in March 1991, when a Chinese delegation headed by Ambassador Han Xu, the President of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries and Beijing's former Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the United States, met with Leibler in Melbourne. Ambassador Han Xu was briefed on the nature of the WJC and its role in promoting Sino-Jewlsh relations. He was particularly interested in the relationship between the WJC and the State of Israel, and was told that it was extremely close. The Ambassador spoke at length about the effectiveness of the Jewish lobby in Washington, and acknowledged that it could be of great assistance in promoting China's interests in the US. The proposed Sino-Jewish Colloquium in Beijing was discussed at length, and it was made clear to the Chinese delegation that this would have a major impact on improving China's image among Jewish and liberal opinion makers in the United States. Ambassador Han Xu remained noncommittal and cautious, but left an overall impression that there was a good chance the colloquium would eventually be given the go-ahead.

22. In August 1991, Leibler was officially invited by the China International Culture Exchange Centre (CICEC), the Chinese organisation charged with cultural contacts with Non Governmental Agencies to visit Beijing at the head of a World Jewish Congress delegation. The understanding was that the Chinese were finally ready to conclude an agreement on the Beijing Colloquium and the goal first set six years earlier now seemed about to be achieved.

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THE WJC MISSION TO BEIJING 7-11 OCTOBER 1991

On Monday 7 October 1991, a World Jewish Congress Delegation headed by Isi Leibler, Co-Chairman of the Governing Board of the WJC, arrived in Beijing on an official visit as the guests of the CICEC. Accompanying Leibler were Sol Kanee, Chairman of the WJC Advisory Committee, and Dr David Bernstein, Director of Research at the Australian Institute of Jewish Affairs. The delegation was met at Beijing International Airport by a CICEC team headed by Deputy Director-General Cao Dapeng, and was accommodated at the Tianping Lee Gardens Hotel in central Beijing.

1. Briefings with Australian and US Ambassadors - Monday 7 October

The delegation was briefed on its first afternoon in Beijing by the Australian Ambassador, Michael Lightowler, and the American Ambassador, Stapleton Roy.

Both envoys painted a relatively optimistic picture of the current economic situation in China. The large state enterprises were still a major drain on the economy (accounting for a budgetary deficit equal to 6% of GDP), but inflation was under control and food was plentiful.

Politically, the situation was somewhat less positive. In particular, Chinese-American relations were at a low ebb and there was considerable concern in Beijing over MFN. The general feeling was that, under the present geriatric leadership, there was a certain political paralysis in China and officials were reluctant to make policy decisions on a wide range of issues.

There was, nevertheless, an increasing openness to discuss human rights issues, and the recent Australian report on the subject was surprisingly well received in Beijing as a basis for constructive dialogue. It was also pointed out that, contrary to preconceptions in the West, China has few of the trappings associated with totalitarian regimes - 'there are no troops with jackboots at every comer'. The main challenge in dealing with China, it was suggested, was to determine just how far it could be pushed in the direction of reform without causing a backlash that would damage those forces in favour of change.

On relations with Israel, both ambassadors indicated that the situation was improving slowly but steadily. China had come to realise that it could not play a hand in the Middle East unless it had ties with both Israel and the Arabs - so the political environment was promising. Both also agreed it would be appropriate to push the Chinese on the United Nations 'Zionism=racism' resolution.

2. Banquet at Bai Hai Gardens hosted by CICEC - Monday 7 October

This was the delegation's first official contact with CICEC. The banquet, in what was once a favourite recreation palace of the Chinese emperors, was hosted by Wu Lengxi - a former member of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, President of the All-China Journalists Association, President of the China Radio and Television Society, former head of the official Chinese News Agency and Vice-Chairman of the CICEC Council.

In a series of toasts and formal pleasantries, Wu Lengxi - who is considered to be a conservative hard-liner - reflected the marked change that has occurred in China's official attitude to the Jews and to Israel. He spoke of his deep distress at what had happened to the Jews during the Holocaust, and recalled that China had been one of the first states to recognise the newly established State of Israel in 1948. He also spoke openly and unequivocally of the Jews' right to statehood and security - but balanced this with stringent criticism of the Shamir Government and a call on Israel to recognise Palestinian rights and deal with the PLO. Any normalisation of relations between Israel and China, he implied, would depend on progress towards a peaceful resolution of the Israel/Palestine issue. He spoke at length of the great political influence world Jewry is understood to wield.

Wu Lengxi, Sidney Shapiro, Sol Kanee.

Leibler responded by stressing the importance of improved relations between two of the world's oldest and richest cultures. He pointed out that these would be greatly advanced by cultural contacts such as those envisioned in the proposed Chinese-Jewish Colloquium in Beijing. Ultimately, however, the 'true litmus test' of Chinese goodwill towards the Jewish people would be China's repudiation of the infamous 'Zionism=racism' resolution in the UN, and normalisation of relations with Israel. Leibler noted that in the present international environment China would be effectively isolated from influencing events in the Middle East if it did not enter into bilateral relations with all parties to the conflict.

The issue of human rights was also raised, and Leibler suggested that Beijing's international image, including among Jews, was negatively affected by perceived abuses in China.

In practical terms, Wu Lengxi indicated that a decision had already been taken to give the go-ahead to the holding of a Chinese-Jewish Colloquium in Beijing early in 1992, with the details to be worked out in the scheduled formal working sessions with CICEC officials over the next few days.

3. Meeting with Israeli Diplomats in Beijing - Jianguo Hotel, Monday 7 October

Immediately following the CICEC banquet, the delegation met informally with Moshe Yegar, Deputy Director-General of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, who was in Beijing on an official visit at the time. The meeting took place in the Jianguo Hotel, where the temporary premises of the Israeli Liaison Office in Beijing were located. Zev Sufott, a senior Foreign Office official and former Ambassador who serves as Special Adviser to the Liaison Office, and Deputy Director of the Office Ruth Kahanoff, also attended. Views were exchanged on the current state of Israel-China relations, and the rapid improvements that had taken place in recent months. Leibler outlined the objectives of the WJC delegation, and these were fully endorsed by Yegar and his colleagues.

4. First Formal Working Session with CICEC Officials -Tianping Lee Gardens Hotel, Tuesday 8 October

This took place in the conference room of the hotel where the WJC delegation was staying. The Chinese side was led by Cao Dapeng and included two officials from CICEC's Department of Academic Affairs, Zhang Gui Lai and Zeng Pin. The WJC delegation was joined by Ms May Tang, a senior travel executive from Hong Kong who was to arrange the travel and ground arrangements for the proposed colloquium.

Cao Dapeng opened the session with a brief account of CICEC and its work. Established in 1984 with the direct authorisation of Deng Xiaoping, CICEC was charged with carrying out all cultural exchanges outside the framework of official

government-to-government agreements. It has a permanent staff of 190, and is headed by a Council made up of senior political appointees who - like Wu Lengxi, a former Minister who retains his ministerial rank - have direct access to the inner sanctum of power in Beijing. 'Culture' is very broadly defined, and includes such areas as science and technology, as well as the performing and other arts. Some 1,000 academics and artists from China and abroad are involved in CICEC's activities each year.

Leibler then briefly outlined the work of the WJC and its role as the roof body representing Jewish communities throughout the world, including in Israel. He expressed his concern at the almost total absence of knowledge about Jews in China. Hence the importance of setting in train a constructive dialogue between the two peoples, such as that envisaged in the proposed colloquium.

Zhang Gui Lai confirmed that there was near total ignorance about the Jews in China, but said the situation was improving and a number of Chinese scholars were now studying Jewish-related subjects. He also said that several books on Jewish themes had been translated into Chinese in recent years, including Abba Eban's *My People* (see Appendix II).

Getting down to details, agreement in principle was reached that the colloquium would be held in early April 1992 in Beijing, under the joint auspices of the WJC and CICEC. It was also agreed that it would be formally announced in the Chinese press, and that it would be opened by a prominent Chinese personality.

There was some debate on the size and scope of the colloquium, which the Chinese were anxious to limit to a small gathering of scholars with little or no audience. Leibler, however, held out for a compromise that would leave scope for an invited audience and possible participation by visiting tourists. There was also some disagreement on the mounting of an exhibition on Jewish culture open to participants in the colloquium as well as to the broader public. Leibler stressed the importance of giving the colloquium a high profile, to avoid creating the perception that it was taking place 'under the table'.

The question of funding was raised, and Cao Dapeng said he would prepare a detailed budget for further discussion.

The meeting ended with an undertaking by the Chinese to take up the issues still outstanding with the appropriate authorities. A second session was scheduled for the following day, to fine-tune some of the details. Cao cautioned that while there remained an element of unpredictability, 'we should be sure basically that the seminar will be convenea'.

5. Meeting with Officials of the China International Travel Service (CITS)-CITS Central Office, Tuesday 8 October

In a meeting with Madame Lu Fenyan, the head of CITS - the major Chinese

organisation involved in international tourism and the formal representative of China in Israel - and other senior CITS officials, the possibility was explored of arranging a series of WJC-sponsored tours to China to coincide with the colloquium in April 1992. The response was positive, and Madame Lu and her fellow CITS officials displayed great enthusiasm for any initiative that would boost tourism. They were responsive to the possibility of increased tourism from Israel, and Madame Lu - a dynamic and highly influential woman, with extensive contacts at the highest political level in Beijing - expressed her readiness to accept an invitation to visit the Jewish state. She also undertook to arrange for a meeting between El Al President Raphael Harlev and the head of CAAC, the Chinese Civil Aviation Authority.

These were dramatic indications of the changing attitude to Israel in China, and the general mood of goodwill and cooperation on the part of the CITS officials was further augmented by Leibler's offer to help the organisation upgrade its computer system and link it into a world-wide network of travel agents - which would vastly increase the potential of foreign tourism to China.

6. Banquet hosted by CITS - The Great Hall of the People, Tuesday 8 October

This was the first of two impressive banquets held for the delegation in the monumental Great Hall of the People on Tiananmen Square in central Beijing, the venue of major occasions of State and official receptions for visiting dignitaries. It was hosted by Madame Lu and other senior CITS officials.

A major theme of the banquet was the widespread Chinese perception of Jewish commercial acumen - something that Madame Lu referred to repeatedly and frankly in a spirit of genuine admiration. She made no secret of her own deep respect for money-making - even though, she was quick to add, this was not out of self-interest but purely in the interest of the State.

Madame Lu openly volunteered to use her very considerable political influence to help advance the delegation's mission in China. She promised to help set up a meeting with Wan Li - Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National Peoples' Assembly, a veteran member of the Politburo and generally regarded to be the third-ranking figure in China's formal political hierarchy. This was an astounding and quite unexpected offer, and her ability to deliver on the pledge (see page 16) came as a major surprise to the WJC delegation.

7. Briefing with Dr Li Shenzhi and Cao Dapeng - Tianping Lee Gardens Hotel, Wednesday 9 October

This was a frank and open exchange with Dr Li Shenzhi, one of China's most knowledgeable foreign policy experts whom Leibler had met several times before both in China and Australia (see page 5), and Cao Dapeng, who like Dr Li is an authority on Sino-American relations. They provided a useful, if sometimes bleak,

assessment of the political situation in China and of the limitations as well as the possibilities for change.

The general picture that emerged was that while China is aware of the need to reorientate itself in the new post-Cold War world order, it could take some time before this realisation resulted in any operative changes in Chinese policy. This applied to China's Middle East policy as well, it was suggested, where there was some scepticism expressed as to any rapid movement either on the 'Zionism=racism' resolution or on normalisation of relations with Israel. While low-key, unpublicised relations between Israel and China were likely to continue to develop, the bottom line in dealing with China was to stress the pragmatic rather than the symbolic.

In the event, this assessment turned out to be overly conservative, and Dr Li had clearly not been informed about the major shift in thinking that had taken place - or was in the process of taking place - at the highest political level in Beijing.

Turning to the proposed colloquium, Dr Li recalled that Beijing had recently had its fingers burnt by a similar, over-publicised symposium organised by the South Koreans.

It was mentioned at the meeting that the PLO had formally complained to Beijing about Leibler's previous visit to China in 1990, indicating just how concerned the Arabs and particularly the PLO were about Jewish/Israeli contacts with the Chinese. But the fact that this had not deterred the Chinese from officially inviting the WJC delegation to make the present high-profile visit was dramatic proof of just how far the PLO had fallen politically - even in the eyes of a regime that until very recently had been one of its most enthusiastic backers.

8. Lunch with the Israeli Liaison Office in Beijing - Wednesday 9 October.

The delegation attended a formal luncheon in its honour given by the Israeli Liaison Office in Beijing. Also invited were two senior CICEC officials - Cao Dapeng and Mao Guoha, the organisation's Executive Secretary-General. In the absence of the Director of the Office, Dr Yossi Shalhevet, the luncheon was hosted by Special Advisor Zev Sufott and Deputy-Director Ruth Kahanoff.

Although little of major substance was discussed, the presence of the two Chinese officials at an official luncheon hosted by the Israeli mission was yet another indication of the rapidly improving climate in Chinese-Israeli relations.

9. Second Formal Working Session with CICEC -Tianping Lee Gardens Hotel, Wednesday 9 October.

The purpose of this session was to fine-tune and finalise the details of the 1992 Chinese-Jewish Colloquium in Beijing.

Final agreement was reached on the date (6-8 April 1992), the sponsoring bodies

(WJC and CICEC), the number of participants (10 Jewish and 10 Chinese academicians, with an invited audience of 50) and a number of technical details including the publication of programs in Chinese and English, publication of the proceedings in both languages, and local and international press coverage. (See Appendix I.)

The question of the precise topics for discussion was left open, to be settled in consultations between the Chinese and Jewish organisers over the coming months.

It was agreed that the WJC would cover the cost of bringing the Jewish participants to Beijing, and that CICEC would cover the bulk of the local costs. It was understood that the WJC might contribute towards some of the local costs if appropriate, and the Chinese promised to prepare a detailed costing.

It was also agreed that a cultural exhibit depicting the Jewish life cycle and themes from Jewish history would be mounted as part of the colloquium, and that WJC sponsored Jewish tours would take place to coincide with the colloquium. The question of whether participants in the tour would be able to attend the colloquium was left open, but it was agreed that the venue would be sufficiently flexible to accommodate several hundred tourists should circumstances permit.

Finally, the Chinese repeated their pledge to look into the possibility of screening Abba Eban's *Heritage* series on Chinese TV, and took delivery of the video-cassettes which had been brought to China by the delegation.

10. Banquet Hosted by CICEC - The Great Hall of the People, Thursday 10 October.

This was to have been the climax of the visit, and it had all the trappings of a grand occasion. Hosted by the octogenarian Director-General of CICEC, Cheng Siyuan, the banquet was held in the sumptuous Tibet Room of the Great Hall of the People. In addition to the senior CICEC officials there were several other guests including Dr Li Shenzhi and Professor Sidney Shapiro (Sha Boli), the Jewish New York-born writer who has lived in China since 1947 (see above, page 6).

Banquet for WJC hosted in the Tibet Hall of the Great Hall of the People by China International Culture Exchange. L-R Cao Dapeng, Isi Leibler, Cheng Siyuan, Sol Kanee, Li Shenzhi.

The banquet followed the usual pattern of polite and complimentary toasts and counter-toasts, with repeated expressions of mutual Chinese-Jewish admiration. The theme of Jewish influence was touched on, and Leibler stressed the desirability of China lending its weight to the growing international campaign to repeal the 'Zionism=racism' resolution.

The real drama took place behind the scenes, however, when Cao Dapeng quietly informed Leibler that he had arranged a meeting with Foreign Minister Qian Qichen at 9 a.m. the following day. This was totally unexpected and unprecedented, as no Jewish leader had ever been received by a Chinese official of this rank in Beijing. It also revealed Cao, a deceptively mild person, as a man of real influence.

On returning to the hotel, Leibler learned that Madame Lu, too, had managed to deliver on her pledge, and that the delegation would be seeing Chairman Wan Li at the Great Hall of the People after the meeting with Foreign Minister Qian.

The fact that the delegation would be meeting with two of China's most senior leaders was the clearest indication to date that a major policy change had taken place in Beijing, and that open contacts with Jews now had official sanction at the highest level.

11. Meetings with Foreign Minister Qian Qichen and Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National Peoples' Congress, Wan Li - Friday 11 October.

The meeting with Foreign Minister and State Councillor Qian Qichen - undoubtedly the most significant achievement of the visit politically - took place in his office at the Foreign Ministry. Despite earlier indications that it would be a strictly private briefing, the delegation was informed before it commenced that photographs could be taken and the meeting could be publicised.

In a remarkably frank and uninhibited exchange lasting more than half an hour, Qian and Leibler raised a host of highly sensitive political issues - including China's relations with Israel and its stand on 'Zionism=racism', areas where the Foreign Minister indicated a fundamental ideological shift had taken place in Chinese official thinking.

(For a full report on this landmark meeting, with Qian Qichen see next section).

The meeting with Wan Li which followed came as something of an anti-climax after the remarkable session with Foreign Minister Qian. It was much more ritualistic, and was limited to an exchange of the usual pleasantries without touching on any concrete issues of political significance. The brief meeting concluded with Chairman Wan accepting a gift of a silver *tzedaka* box.

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Wan Li, Chairman of the Peoples' National Congress, being presented with a silver tzedaka box by Isi Leibler in his chambers in the Great Hall of the People, Beijing. (Madam Lu Fenyan in background.)

Nevertheless, the formal meeting at the Great Hall of the People with the third-ranking figure in China's political hierarchy, complete with an official group photograph, was clearly an event of great symbolic significance and marked a fitting end to an historic visit.

The VIP treatment extended to the last moment, and the delegation was driven to Beijing Airport in a convoy of official limousines headed by a police-car escort for its departure to Hong Kong.