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ABSTRACT

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I. INTRODUCTION

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China (hereafter: China), in October 1949, the country-maintained ties with the State of Israel at various levels and in various ways, including periods of total estrangement. Since the early 2000s, especially in the recent decade, the relations have been blossoming. Economic ties are the basis of the increasingly warming relations,

especially when it comes to technological innovation. This focus stems from the Chinese perception of Israel as a global innovation and technology hub, as well as their need for Israel's innovation capabilities to successfully meet their challenges. The fact that the word "innovation" was mentioned 47 times in a speech given by Hu Jintao, who served as Chinese President from 2003-2013, at a Chinese Communist Party (hereafter: CCP) assembly, demonstrates the importance of innovation to the strategy adopted by China's central leadership (Urio, 2020).

The examples below illustrate the Israeli capability in question: In the report of the World Economic Forum on Global Competitiveness for 2016-2017, Israel ranked second in the list of most innovative nations in the world. In the 2015 Compass Global Startup Ecosystems report, the Tel Aviv (hereafter: TLV) ecosystem ranked fifth in the world and first outside the US. According to ASGARD Human Venture Capital, Israel ranks third in the world in artificial intelligence solutions and holds a market share of 11 percent (Welchler, 2019) In the last decade, China's economy has been undergoing a slow and gradual transition from one that absorbs knowledge and innovation to one that develops them for itself, as well as for the international tech market. In 2014, a year after being appointed, Chinese President Xi Jinping said: "China must rely on innovation to achieve sustained and healthy economic growth" (Xinhua, 2014). Accordingly, many Chinese programs aimed at studying and absorbing innovation were introduced, many forums that discuss how to acquire innovation were launched, and new national goals were set in the field of innovation.¹

The Chinese believe that Israeli innovation derives from the local educational system and the historical-cultural characteristics of the Jewish people. They mention this on many occasions (The Innovation Authority, n.d.). As a result, and as the Chinese need for these Israeli capabilities increased, they began to exert their influence on Israel through SPPD, to deepen and strengthen their position among Israeli policymakers and other relevant entities, such as the local high-tech community. SPPD is a new theoretical term used in this article to enrich the discourse on Chinese Soft Power in Israel, and include the Confucius Institutes, the China Radio International (hereafter: CRI), the sports cooperation, Sinologist and Translators in Israel, China Cultural Centre, etc. These insights are from the discipline of policy communities, which widely used terms such as “policy diffusion” and “policy injection”. These terms are broadly used to examine how various ideas have penetrated the process of policy formation while emphasizing the methods of implementation serving the efficacy of their transformation from abstract ideas into a policy dictated via governmental pipelines, in this case from China towards Israel (Guerra & Sancho, 2011), (Stone, 2004).²

II. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This article aims to examine the SPPD that China has employed in Israel from 1949 to 2020. This is done through a comprehensive historical-chronological overview of the various Chinese SPPD that emerged in Israel since the inception of modern China until 2020. Although formal diplomatic ties between Israel and China were established only in 1992, various interfaces had nevertheless existed between the nations before. And even the lack of interfaces or SPPD can shed light on the policies and interests of both sides.

III. STRUCTURE OF THE ARTICLE

The article starts with a brief discussion on Soft Power and the Chinese case, followed by a breakdown into three main periods: The First Period is 1949-1989. During this time, the interface was maintained mainly by the Israeli Communist Party (Maki) and in the later years

also through business deals the countries made indirectly. The Second Period began in 1989, when the two countries agreed to establish mutual trade offices, which led to a warming of the relations until the early 2000s, when the scope of economic ties skyrocketed. The Third Period, which is the focus of this essay, spans from when the economic ties began to expand and until today. The spotlight is on this period because the sharp increase in the scope of relations, alongside regional and international events are what led to the dramatic shift from active Chinese resistance to Israel’s right to exist in the beginning to the exertion of multifaceted Chinese SPPD in Israel, out of mutual interests.

3.1 *The State of Research in the Field*

Many studies have been written about China-Israel relations: how they developed, the various stages of the relations, economics and politics, and even the implications of these ties on the parties involved or the regional and international arena. These includes the extensive writings of Yitzhak Shichor (1992)³, Aron Shai (2019)⁴, P. R. Kumaraswamy (2013)⁵, Yonatan Goldstein (1999)⁶, Yoram Evron (2013)⁷ and more. However, little has been written about a parallel and complementary process to the economic and political one, which is the exertion of Chinese Soft Power in Israel, or in other words, the use of SPPD to shape a positive view of China among the Israeli public.

The studies that did explore the social and cultural aspects focused mainly on the fact that both peoples are ancient and other folkloristic aspects. The socio-cultural aspect of the relations has not yet been studied from a critical standpoint that seeks to understand what SPPD the Chinese are using in Israel, what motivates their actions and what are their consequences. This article seeks to fill this gap in the discussion on China’s Soft Power efforts in Israel. Also, this article could serve as a theoretical basis for examining Chinese efforts in other countries, using the same research method.

3.2 Soft Power and the Chinese Case

Soft Power is a term first coined by Joseph Nye (1990). He defined it as “the ability of a country to achieve the political outcomes it seeks in the international arena, by the willingness of other countries to follow its lead or partake in a system that may create the same effect”. This concept is based, *inter alia*, on the works of Edward Hallett Carr (1954), whose main theory is “Power over Opinion” which speaks about the attractiveness of the culture, ideals and political values of countries. It’s also based on the writings of Steven Lukes (1974) which examine the third dimension of soft power, which includes culture, education and diplomacy through which other countries can be persuaded to willingly adopt the same goals rather than being coerced.

According to Nye (2004), who continued to discuss and develop this concept, a country's Soft Power is comprised of three key components: culture, political values and foreign policy. This article will focus on the cultural aspect of this concept, since the Chinese do not make much use of these two aspects towards Israel (henceforth, when the article mentions Soft Power it’s referring to the cultural aspect of the concept). A country’s culture, including the language, is essentially its identity card and the basis for all other Soft Power activities and efforts it conducts. Soft Power is exerted by a country, in this case China, to shape the preferences of a society, in this case Israeli society. This is done by highlighting the country’s positive and attractive sides to achieve political or other gain.

According to Nye (2003), the counterpart to Soft Power is hard power, which is “the ability to use carrots and sticks” through economic and military power to get others to do as you please.” This power stems from the active state's ability to use direct force against the passive state, primarily through economic incentives or threats, military force or the threat of using it, and the use of political pressure leveraged in part by the above two capabilities. In other words, while hard power forces the passive party to act the way the active party wants, when it comes to Soft Power the active state tries to persuade the passive state to

act as it wishes. There are many instances where soft and hard power are intertwined and serve one another to achieve the goal set by the active state.

Soft Power is achieved by highlighting the positive sides of the active state (China) to the passive state (Israel) and doing so by using variety of SPPD mentioned in the introduction. This is done to project towards the passive state and create or strengthen their positive view of the active state. The tools available to the active state are quite diverse and include the various activities in the fields of education, culture, society and the arts. The scope of possibilities for implementation is unlimited and depends on the state’s economic ability, its character and the purpose for which it seeks to use this mechanism. The audiences to which this mechanism is directed are also varied, and the choice of the target audience depends on the purpose for which the active state needs to use its Soft Power. According to Chinese scholar Men Honghua, culture alone cannot change the views of every citizen in the passive state towards the active state, but cultural activities, when conducted in the passive state, can affect a select group of people from that state who in turn will influence the views of the general public (Men, 2007).

The statements of the last two Chinese presidents indicate how modern-day Chinese leaders have perceived the need to use Soft Power. Hu Jintao, President of China from 2002 to 2013, said in the keynote address to the 17th Congress of the CCP on October 14, 2007, that the Communist Party of China should “expand the use of culture in the Soft Power of our country, which is becoming a force of growing importance in the overall competition between the nations of the world” (Nye & Jisi, 2009). At the 19th Congress held on October 18, 2017, the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, said: “We must increase China's Soft Power, build a positive and strong Chinese narrative, and better market China's messages to the world” (Wilson Center, n.d.). In the following lines, the article discusses the three-time periods indicted in Israel and China relationship.

3.3 Probing, Disregard and Resistance, 1949-1989

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in October 1949, there had been some probing between China and Israel on various levels, in an attempt to establish relations. As early as January 1950, Israel recognized the People's Republic of China as the official and only representative of the Chinese people and was the first state in the Middle East (hereafter: ME) and the seventh of the non-communist countries to do so. The Chinese, on the other hand, officially recognized Israel's right to exist only when the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1992. In the early years, the interactions between the two sides were rather limited and focused mainly on the ties between Maki and its Chinese counterpart.

In those years, Chinese diplomacy followed the “people-to-people” policy approach whereby, to support ideological-revolutionary movements around the world, relations between people should be promoted rather than between leaders. The rationale behind this policy is that it allows China to appeal to more countries, even those with whom China has no official ties, as well as bypass international sanctions and embargos, which are usually imposed at the state level, not by individual people. That is how China acted concerning Israel (Evron, 2008).

Most of the ties between the CCP and its counterparts around the world did not involve a physical presence, soft or hard. They mainly included reciprocal invitations to various conferences and summits held by those directly related to the Communist or Maoist ideology and not to the general public. For example, in January 1950, Rut Lovich, a member of Maki's Central Committee, was invited to attend the Asian Women's Conference held in Beijing that month and got a reception she deemed “impressive” from the local government officials. Four years later, a Maki delegation was invited to take part in the founding conference of the Workers of All Asia organization.

However, most of these encounters ended in disappointment because the CCP saw Israel as a Western colonialist power and preferred to give

its support and blessing to the Arab side and to ignore the differing socio-political outlooks of the various groups comprising the Israeli population (Shai, 2016). These examples indicate that the efforts on the part of China were largely ideological, with no particular emphasis on Israel, and included mostly extending invitations to political representatives to visit its territory without any willingness or intention to maintain any kind of presence on Israeli soil.

The Korean War, which began in 1950 and lasted about three years between the two parts of the Korean peninsula, with the South supported by the US and the North by China and to a lesser extent by the USSR; the Bandung Conference; “Great Leap Forward”; and the Soviet-Chinese split resulted in the complete severing of ties between China and Israel. This because the latter was identified as a Western colonialist force or as closer to the USSR. Moreover, at this stage, the CCP had already adopted an approach that completely negates Israel's existence.

Thus, in 1964, with the establishment of the Palestine Liberation Organization (hereafter: PLO), the organization enlisted the support of China, which was the first non-Arab state to recognize it. China even allowed the PLO to set up a liaison office in Beijing (Cooley, 1972). Zhou Enlai, who served as the first Premier of the People's Republic of China since its inception and until his death in 1976, said that China was ready to give aid to the great Arab nation so that they can retake Palestine (Wilson Center, 1965). Many articles that appeared in the Chinese press, which is controlled by the government, stated frequently that China will help the Palestinians take over the entire territory of Israel (Shai, 2016).

Following the death of Communist China's first leader, Mao Zedong, in 1976, and the beginning of the Chinese economic reform pushed by his successor, Deng Xiaoping, which led to more liberal economic policies, the hostile tone against Israel was moderated. However, pro-Arab policies were maintained. From those years and until the establishment of a Chinese tourism office in Israel and an Israeli academic liaison office in China in 1989, several meetings and dialogues were held

between the two sides. The ties focused mainly on business, which was usually done under the condition that they remain secret. Considering all this, it is understandable why the Chinese chose not to use SPPD in Israel during this period, which would have required that they step out of the veil of secrecy that shrouded the ties up to this stage.

3.4 The Shift and the Beginning of Chinese Presence in Israel, 1989-2006

Two major factors helped establish a Chinese tourism office in Israel in 1989 and a liaison office of the Israel Academy of Sciences in China the same year. These offices were the first sign of proper relations between the two nations and served a diplomatic function for all intents and purposes, but without the official title of embassy (Evron, 2008). The first factor that upgraded the relations was the activities of Reuven Merhav, a diplomat who served in a number of positions in the Israeli Foreign Ministry. In 1985 he was appointed as Israel's Consul General in Hong Kong (then part of the United Kingdom). From his post in Hong Kong, Merhav studied the situation in China and acted to expand relations between the two countries (Evron, 2008).

The second factor was the activities of American Jewish figures, who met with Chinese delegations and groups and raised the Chinese's awareness of Judaism as a religion and subsequently as a nation, namely the State of Israel. As a result of these efforts, in 1988, then Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres met with his Chinese counterpart, Qian Qichen on the sidelines of the United Nations assembly in New York. In 1991, representatives of these two ministries held many meetings along with other figures from both countries. Eventually Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy was invited to a signing ceremony marking the establishment of diplomatic relations in the Chinese capital on January 24, 1992 (Evron, 2008). In October of the following year, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin visited China. He was the first Israeli prime minister to do so (Shavit, 2018).

Geopolitical factors in the three arenas - the Chinese domestic arena, the ME and the international scene, have also enabled and fostered the change in the overall Chinese approach, which led to the expansion of relations between China and Israel. In the Chinese domestic arena, the country began opening up, mainly due to the need to expand cooperation with outside forces for two main reasons: first, the need to import raw materials and technologies; and second, the need to export the finished Chinese products. These needs became an imperative for the Chinese economy, as it turned from an inward-looking economy to the world's factory, not just its own (Zhang, 2006).

This process was further bolstered by the Chinese president's statement on innovation, cited earlier in the essay, and established China's official position in the international stage as driven by economic priorities rather than its previous ideological motives. At the same time, the fact that in the ME arena the Arab struggle against Israel's existence subsided to a certain extent, enabled the Chinese to expand their relations with Israel without hindering their relations with the Arab states.

The first Gulf War that occurred in 1991 marked a turning point in the Chinese understanding of the ME region insofar as they realized that the other conflicts in the region are wider and deeper than the Arab-Israeli conflict (Shichor, 1994). In the international arena, China grew increasingly stronger until it became an economic powerhouse second only to the US (Barboza, 2010). China's economic rise has instilled an internal understanding that they must invest resources in building and strengthening their positive image around the world as well as act to dispel the notions that China is a threatening force.

However, even though diplomatic ties between China and Israel had already been established by then, and despite the other reasons mentioned above, the Chinese barely used any SPPD in Israel and there was almost no Chinese cultural-educational activity in Israel in the years that this study defines as the Second Period in the relations. In fact, in those years the Chinese had

no need for the goods and services that Israel had to offer and no need to promote Chinese interests in Israel.

One of the few instances in which the Chinese used SPPD during this period was in 2001 when the Israel Museum presented a first exhibit of its kind. It was titled "Treasures from the Land of China" and was unprecedented in its scope and the quality of the items on display, brought especially from eight different museums and cultural institutions across China. In addition to the exhibit, a Chinese cultural festival was held, featuring a variety of Chinese art. The exhibit was presented in collaboration with the National Museum of Chinese History and a Chinese Foundation called "China Art Exhibitions" and with the support and assistance of the Chinese Embassy in Israel (Bitterman, 2001).

Zhang Wenbin, director of the National Cultural Heritage Administration in China, wrote a letter to those who attended the exhibit. Among other things, he wrote: "Throughout history, China's relations with the rest of world promoted China's culture and spread its brilliance to many (Bitterman, 2001). In doing so, the Chinese director stressed the exhibit's emphasis on spreading the beauty and quality of Chinese culture around the world, without stating the purpose of this effort. Zhang Geum, a Chinese cultural figure, emphasized another message that runs as a recurring theme in the China-Israel relations, which is that the Chinese and Jewish cultures both have a long history and are some of the most ancient civilizations in the world (Bitterman, 2001).

The Chinese have used similar messaging when building their Soft Power relations with other countries as well. For example, when it comes to China's ties with Syria, China emphasizes that the two peoples are ancient. For example, Zhang's message was repeated almost verbatim by an official Chinese representative in the Syrian context (Xinhua, 2019). When it comes to their relations with the Gulf States, the name of Chinese mariner Zhang He, who visited the area in the 6th century AD, is often mentioned (Hassan, 2013). Indeed, historical references appear to be a

conduit of influence through which the Chinese try to link themselves with other countries to lay the foundation for the other types of relations.

3.5 Expanding the Use of SPPD, 2006-2019

Soft Presence is a new concept that this article seeks to add to the discourse on international relations. It refers to the way Soft Power is viewed, experienced, and exerted in the target country. For example, China exerts its Soft Power in Israel through Soft Presence. This term will allow us to focus and delve deeper into the passive side of the Soft Power and relations equation. The Third Period discussed in this article ushered in a sharp change from the First Period mentioned above (1949-1989) when China denied Israel's sovereignty and right to exist, to a situation where China exerts many SPPD to gain a significant Soft Presence in Israel and thereby influencing public discourse and public opinion.

The main reason for the above is the steady rise in trade between the two countries since the beginning of the Second Period (1989-2006). In 1992, when the two nations established their official relations, bilateral trade was estimated at fifty million dollars. A decade later, it reached nearly \$1.4 billion. The most significant upturn in trade between the countries occurred between 2004 and 2007, when the trade volume jumped from \$2.4 billion to over \$5.3 billion, respectively (Trading Economics, n.d.), (WITS, 2007).

This increase in trade, which occurred during the transition from the second to the third period and naturally led to an expansion of Chinese economic interests in Israel and private Israeli entities, also resulted in the increase of China's use of SPPD, in addition to the increasing economic presence. Below will be discussing what Chinese SPPD looked like in Israel, while analyzing the ventures the Chinese pursued in Israel during this period in education and cultural contexts to build and bolster their positive image among the Israeli public. Their activities will be presented in chronological order.

Confucius Institute at TLV University

Confucius Institutes around the world operate under the auspices of Hanban, a non-profit public

organization run by the Chinese Ministry of Education and headquartered in the Chinese capital. In 2006, the cultural attaché at the Chinese Embassy in Israel approached the then Rector of Tel Aviv University (TAU), Aron Shai, and proposed to establish a Confucius Institute at the University. According to Shai, the Chinese “came and begged us to open it. At first, we refused, but the more we refused or seemed uninterested, the more they wanted it” (Levinter, 2017). On May 28, 2007, the then TAU’s President Itamar Rabinovich and the Chinese Ambassador to Israel, Zhao Jun, signed an agreement to establish the Confucius Institute at TAU (Yogev, 2007).

A few months later, on November 11, 2007, the Institute was dedicated (Tel Aviv University, n.d.), becoming the first one in Israel and the second in the ME (following the one established a year earlier at St. Joseph University in Beirut) (University of Beirut, n.d.). Each university where a Confucius Institute operates is coupled with a twin university in China, to strengthen the partnership between both sides and encourage student exchange programs. TAU’s twin Chinese university is Renmin University in Beijing, one of the top universities in China. The link between TAU and one of the elite universities in China indicates how the Chinese view their relationship with the Israeli university⁸.

The Institute’s website describes its goals as follows: “The purpose of the various Confucius Institutes is to disseminate the Chinese language and culture to the general public, as well as increasing academic research of Chinese history and culture. True to these goals, the Confucius Institute at TAU offers a variety of courses in Chinese and cultural activities related to China - films, concerts, exhibits, and lectures, all open to the public. At the same time, it is working to expand academic research on China at the university through academic conferences, scholarships and awards for outstanding students.” The site then notes that the Institute operates in two main arenas, the public sphere and the internal academic sphere, catering to the students and the university faculty⁹. The two universities, TLV and Renmin, also set up a joint

book publishing venture with the aim of “exposing the Israeli audience to a variety of the best contemporary Chinese research literature, and disseminating the various Israeli research literature in China” (The Confucius Institute’s web page, n.d.).

Following a similar trend throughout the Western world, some in Israel urged to reevaluate the need for the Chinese institutes and the effect of their presence in the heart of the local academia (later the article will present details on the second Institute established at the Hebrew University. The following sources refer to both Institutes together)¹⁰. The Epoch Times magazine, affiliated with the Falun Gong movement, published an article titled “The Chinese Arm at the Heart of Israeli Academia”, in which they report “suspicion of espionage and an emerging climate that promotes student and faculty censorship” (Levinter, 2017). Another article, published in Haaretz and titled “Chinese Institutes at Universities Are Under Fire, but Israeli Scholars Insist There’s No Undue Influence”, presents the challenges these institutes pose to some researchers in the field, as well as comments by other scholars who claim these Institutes have no negative impact on the content taught and imparted at the university and do not promote any form of censorship (Stayrou, 2019).

The Hebrew language website of CRI, an SSPD that will elaborate on later, posted an article in response to these protests and the sentiment they represent, under the headline ‘Confucius Institute: Silencing Voices or Intercultural Dialogue?’ The article lists the common objections around the world to the presence of institutes within universities, and replies that “critics are plagued with prejudice when confronting this issue, since they desire to isolate the Communist Party”, and that “those [who criticize the Institute’s activities] exhibit intolerance of foreign cultures and are plagued by cultural racism” (Xinhua, 2014).

Shai, TAU’s rector at the time the institute was established, who was involved in the discussions within the university’s administration as to whether or not the Confucius Institute should be

allowed on campus, says that there were quite a few colleagues within the university who objected the idea and even though it was ultimately established, this move was preceded by lengthy, in-depth discussions. He writes that what tipped the scale was the financial need of the East Asian Studies Department and the drafting of a contract between Hanban and the university whereby the university would maintain its independence in research and teaching. In retrospect, he writes: "There was a problem here... We had second thoughts regarding our ties with Beijing". For the Institute's day-to-day operations, he added that the Chinese twin university Renmin University hindered the partnership after TAU officials refused to appoint a Chinese director to the Institute alongside the Israeli director. This almost led to the shutting down of the Institute at the beginning of the 2012-2011 school year (Shai, 2016).

The Chinese proposal to the university administration to establish the Institute occurred in parallel to the surge in China-Israel relations. Even if this concurrence is not viewed as the sole or central motive for establishing the institute, the timing cannot be ignored. The increasingly warming relations prompted China's need to establish and deepen its familiarity and influence on Israel. An institute located at the heart of one of the most important universities in Israel would certainly serve that goal. The public debate that began over a decade after the establishment of the Institute indicates the shifting mindset within Israeli society during this period, and may reflect the change in the way the Israeli public is starting to view China's presence in Israel.

The CRI in Hebrew

CRI Station was established in 1941, even before the Communist Party seized power in the country. According to its website, the station was launched to promote mutual understanding and friendship between the Chinese people and the peoples of the world". On September 23, 2009, the station's Hebrew language website was first launched. The site self-proclaims that it is "the first and only Hebrew website run by an official entity in China" and therefore "it offers [the Israeli reader] a

glimpse into the Chinese perspective on the various issues on the agenda" (CRI Hebrew, n.d.). Interestingly, the site also runs a Facebook page in Hebrew to address the Israeli public through additional channels, even though this social network is blocked to the Chinese user by what is known as the "Great Firewall of China" erected by the Chinese government, which, as stated, operates the site (Facebook, n.d.).

Wang Zhigang, who served as the Chinese Minister of Science at the time, came to Israel for the launch of the Hebrew language website. At the event held for the occasion, he said: "In recent years, relations between Israel and China have been tightening, with considerable progress in Israeli-Chinese cooperation in the economic, political and cultural domains. As we launch the Hebrew website, we seek to promote social cooperation between the governments and the peoples" (Kam, 2009). Jixuan Xia, Vice President of CRI, also came to Israel to attend the event and said: "I believe the launch of the Hebrew website will play a positive role in helping Israelis better understand China and I hope that this website will become the first source of information for Israelis to learn about what's happening in China" (Kam, 2009).

Shimon Peres, the President of Israel at the time, congratulated the official launch of the CRI Hebrew website, noting that Israel and China have a long history, and that the launch of the website is great news for Israel. President Peres thanked the Chinese government for establishing a new line of communication between the two countries and wished success to the operators of the new site. Eden Bar Tal, who served as director of the Israeli Ministry of Communications, described this launch as a "dramatic and symbolic event". Bar Tal added that "this is an important start in the effort to convey the story of modern-day China to the Israeli public." On the sidelines of the launch event where these speeches were made, there was a rather limited protest against the platform that Israel was giving to the official Chinese representative attending the event (Parsico, 2009).

Xi Xiaoqi, or Chinese Itzik as he is more widely known in Israeli media, is one of the well-known writers and creators on the website. He conveys the same messages in additional media platforms with his fluent Hebrew. For example, he has appeared many times in the “Zinor Layla” TV program on Israeli Channel 13, as a representative of the Hebrew Department of CRI and has provided his commentary on various local issues that concern China (Zinor Layla, 2013). On “Kan”, the Israeli Public Broadcasting Corporation, Chinese Itzik and other representatives of the station’s Hebrew Department who speak Hebrew appeared alongside Israeli employees of the corporation and presented a variety of segments and short videos on China-related issues (Kan 2-minutes, 2018)¹¹. On the Israeli TV network “Keshet”, Chinese Itzik served as a pundit on Chinese culture for the Israeli public in a series of articles presented by two of the channel’s news anchors (Kushmaru & Duek, 2002).

There is no precedent of a foreign state representative employed by his country’s state-run media gaining so much attention in Israeli media. And while the radio station’s website is expected to be associated with China’s goals, objectives and interests, the constant presence of a Chinese representative in the Israeli mainstream media is a completely different story. When an official mouthpiece appears in such media outlets, his remarks and commentary are given authority and therefore when representatives of CRI appear most frequently in the local media, the Chinese move to establish the Hebrew website can be deemed successful in promoting China’s goal to gain a positive reputation among Israeli citizens (Yellinek, 2020).

Confucius Institute at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem

In May 2013, during Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s visit to China, he attended a ceremony to mark the signing of the agreement to establish a second Confucius Institute in Israel, this time at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. At the time, the president of Hebrew University, Menachem Ben Sasson, who accompanied the Prime Minister’s visit, said that “Cooperation with China and developing ties with Asian countries is

a top priority for the Hebrew University. These relations will mutually benefit everyone involved” (Viva Sarah Press, 2013). The institute was officially dedicated on May 19, 2014, at a large ceremony attended by Chinese Vice Premier Liu Yandong, who said at the event: “The Confucius Institute opens a new chapter in the cultural dialogue between the two countries” (HUJI, 2014).

The Chinese university chosen as the “twin” was Peking University, ranked as the third best university in Asia in 2018 and the first in China (Bothwell, 2018). The fact that two Confucius Institutes in Israel were coupled with elite universities from China suggests the great importance that China attributes to the Israeli system. As mentioned, each Institute is associated with its host university and a Chinese university. As yet, no comprehensive research has been done on the mechanism of inter-institutional coupling, but one can assume that as far as the Chinese are concerned, the two most crucial factors are the international ranking of the host university and the way China’s leadership views the host country.

The Institute’s website details its objectives as follows: “To promote knowledge of China in Israel, in recognition that exposure to its rich culture will enhance the cultural ties and mutual understanding between Chinese and Israelis” (HUJI, 2020). The Institute’s activities, which run in tandem with the Asian Studies Department, “aim to expand and deepen the exposure of all Hebrew University students to the Chinese language and culture; to provide opportunities to experience Chinese arts such as martial arts, calligraphy, Chinese medicine; and at the same time to engage as many audiences as possible outside the university in activities that portray China’s character”.

According to its website, the Institute is entrusted with five tasks: to impart Chinese culture to university students and the general public; to reveal the experience of life in China to the students of the Department through participation in the “Chinese Bridge” summer course; to promote the study of the Chinese language among the general public in Israel; to create a

developed knowledge center on China at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; and to establish a cultural center for the community of Chinese students at the Hebrew University (HUJI, 2020).

On January 24, 2017, the University and the Institute celebrated the 25th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and China. This event was attended by China's ambassador to Israel, Zhan Yongxin. Speaking at the ceremony, the ambassador discussed the relations between the two countries and the role of the university, saying: "Many of its graduates are engaged in deepening relations between Israel and China and I hope that everyone here today will continue to contribute to the friendship and cooperation between the countries" (Ganon, 2017).

In doing so, the Chinese ambassador highlighted the Institute's role in promoting "Friendship and Cooperation", a legitimate goal in itself, but given the host institution, this goal may be considered a problem. Since the Confucius Institute operates within the university, there is an inherent difficulty in separating the activities of the Institute from the activities of the university. For this reason, the criticism mentioned above in the context of the Confucius Institute at TAU regarding foreign involvement in academic content applied to this case too. After all, the main role of a university is education and research, not "friendship and cooperation". If there is a conflict between the main goal and the goal declared by the Chinese ambassador, it may be difficult to decide how to act.

The Intention of Signing an Agreement between CMEC and the Hapoel TLV

In November 2016, representatives of the Hapoel TLV soccer team signed an agreement with the China Machinery Engineering Corporation, under which the latter would sponsor the team and transfer 50 million NIS over five years. At a ceremony held in TLV that month, the deal was presented along with fourteen other deals signed the same year between China and Israel and described by the Chinese government as China's "most strategic deals" in Israel. One of the motives of the China Machinery Engineering Corporation

to sponsor and invest the money in the TLV sports club may have been their desire to gain an advantage and secure a contract for building the team's new stadium. At the time, Chinese infrastructure companies had not yet penetrated the local market in Israel and the region.

Another possible explanation of the Chinese intention is their desire to create a positive image of China in Israel, even though it is not as extensive or economically significant as the other SPPD mentioned above. This theory is supported by the fact that this was presented as one of China's strategic deals in Israel. The Chinese seek to gain influence by purchasing or endorsing soccer clubs in many parts of the world, such as Inter Milan, Atletico Madrid, Nice and Sochaux, for the same purpose of creating a positive image through this SPPD.

Wang Hong, vice president of the Chinese corporation, said: "We appreciate the glorious history of the Hapoel TLV club and its impact on the community. We have no doubt that the partnership between Hapoel TLV and CMEC will serve as a platform to enter into the Israeli market... And we welcome the opportunity to join forces with Hapoel TLV in its outreach to the community". In her remarks, the Vice-President clarified and emphasized the main Chinese motive behind the move, which is, as stated, to create a positive image of China among the Israeli public by sponsoring a soccer club. On the part of the soccer team, the motivation to sign the agreement was mainly the financial need to stabilize the club to ensure future professional development (Calcalist, 2016), (Zanzifer, 2016). As of now, the deal did not come to fruition due to financial difficulties, but that does not negate the interest of a Chinese commercial company in influencing Israeli society by supporting a soccer club (Zafir, 2017).

The Chinese intention, even if ultimately not carried out, to support this specific soccer club, which is a long-standing and well-known team but not considered one of the largest and strongest in Israel like Maccabi TLV or Beitar Jerusalem, illustrates one of the following: Either the Chinese sought to gain an advantage and secure a contract

to build the stadium, or they planned to target the select Israeli population group associated with the club. Hapoel TLV is an elitist sports club established in 1920 by the Organization of Workers in Israel and has been referenced many times in Israeli culture, such as several songs by one of the club's best-known fans, iconic Israeli singer Arik Einstein. The Chinese decision to target this club specifically may indicate their desire to influence this Israeli elite group in particular.

Establishment of the China Cultural Center in Tel Aviv

In November 2017, the Chinese government opened the China Cultural Center in TLV with an investment of about NIS 20 million (Tzur, 2017). When asked why he thought there is a need for a Chinese cultural center in such a small country like Israel while most other nations don't have one, the cultural attaché at the Chinese Embassy in Israel, Wan Ting, explained: "The decision is part of an overall strategy of the Republic whereby Chinese culture should be made accessible in all countries with which it maintains strategic, diplomatic, economic and cultural ties. Although there are larger countries in terms of population size, Israel gets a special status in our view, and the decision to establish a cultural center here indicates our desire to invest in our cultural ties with Israel" (Azulay, 2017).

He added, "The Israelis and the Chinese are similar in their strong devotion to the family, the great love they have for festivals and holidays and the old cultural tradition they carry with them. Israeli culture is more open and infuses western and eastern values, while Chinese culture is more uniform and insulated. In my view, we show a little more modesty and consideration of our cultural origins. However, the gap is not too large and can be bridged" (Azulay, 2017). This center also offers courses, exhibits and workshops in a variety of Chinese cultural fields, similar to a Confucius Institute, but with a major difference in that, it mainly addresses the general public rather than students. It is the 32nd center, and the second overall in the ME, to be established by the Chinese in what appears to be a complementary endeavor

to the more academic Confucius Institutes (Gilad, 2017), (China Cultural Center, n.d.).

The Chinese decision to locate the cultural center in north Tel Aviv, a relatively affluent area, instead of central TLV or downtown Jerusalem like the cultural centers in other foreign countries, begs the question: why there exactly? One can argue that the property in that location was the most suitable for the needs of the center, especially because the new Chinese embassy building is also planned to be built in the same area in the future (Tzur, 2017). However, the chosen location can also indicate a Chinese desire to influence this particular group, and therefore the center was placed in an area that is accessible to it. The Chinese may wish to directly influence this elitist group, hoping that it will convey their influence to the broader Israeli population, perhaps because it may pose the greater opposition to Chinese presence in Israel or that objectively speaking communities of higher socioeconomic status have more time to devote to the new experiences offered by the center.

In June 2018, the Center held the first Dragon Boat Festival ever in Israel. This is a Chinese holiday celebrated at the peak of summer (Time Out Magazine TLV, 2018). In April 2019, the Cultural Center, in collaboration with the Brooklyn Public Library, presented exhibits on Jewish life in China during World War II. China's ambassador to Israel, Zhan Yongxin, published an article in Israel Hayom in which he commented on the exhibit, stressing that "even in the most challenging times, Chinese and Jews lived together in friendship." The ambassador also mentioned two people of that era who performed extraordinary acts for the other people. One is the Consul General of China in Vienna, Ho Feng-Shan, who issued thousands of visas to local Jews who were fleeing the Nazis (Yad-Vashem, 2020).

The other was Jacob Rosenfeld, an Austrian Jew who joined the Chinese people's war against the Japanese occupation and saved the lives of thousands. Citing these stories, the Ambassador asserts that there is a wide potential for relations between the two nations, based on deeper aspects

of mutual support and not just interests, and concludes that he is “hopeful that this courageous friendship will continue to be well maintained and nurtured by the peoples of Israel and China” (Yongxin, 2020). The center also runs a library that lends Chinese language textbooks and Chinese reading books tailored to beginners (China Cultural Center Tel Aviv, n.d.).

The Cultural Center is also active in encouraging Israeli tourism to China by posting videos online, including on websites that are blocked to the Chinese public (Facebook, n.d.). In addition, the center launched a campaign, in conjunction with Lametayel, an Israeli travel shop that also operates a travel web portal, which included an advertising campaign across the country that appeared on buses and transport terminals. The campaign also included raffles and prizes and some local TV stars who were invited to China for a publicized visit (Lametayel, n.d.), (Facebook, n.d.).

This investment of resources and attention from China to Israel raises the question of whether this is a campaign to expand tourism from Israel to China, a Chinese interest in creating a positive image in Israel, or perhaps a combination of the two. In 2018, approximately 141.2 foreign tourists visited China, in addition to extensive domestic tourism (Travel China Guide, n.d.). The potential Israeli contribution to the influx of tourism into China is minimal. This may suggest that the Chinese intention in launching the campaign is indeed to create a positive image of China among the Israeli public, especially since this was done by the Cultural Center. But this claim cannot be determined with certainty.

Founding Conference of the Association of Chinese Sinologists and Translators in Israel

On December 27, 2018, the China Cultural Center convened the founding conference of the Association of Chinese Sinologists and Translators in Israel, which was initiated by the Chinese Embassy in Israel. China's ambassador to Israel, scholars and other figures involved in the ties between the two countries spoke at the conference. In addition, the Embassy presented a lifetime achievement award in the field of Chinese

cultural studies to four of the top China scholars in Israel: Aaron Shai, Yoav Ariel, Yitzhak Shichor and Andrew Plaks (Pevzner, 2018). The conference was criticized by another China scholar, Noam Orbach, who said he was invited to the event but chose not to attend. This because he finds it academically unacceptable that a country establishes and manages a local organization that assembles researchers and enthusiasts in a particular field, and that this move by the embassy can be seen as a Chinese attempt to control the academic discourse on the subject matter.

According to Orbach, the two heads of the main Asian studies departments in Israel, one from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the other from TAU, where said Confucius Institutes were operating, also chose not to attend the founding conference, even though they were personally invited by the embassy. Furthermore, the elusive announcement before and after the conference itself raised many questions, since the conference was not announced in advance among those involved in the field, and even after the conference, not a single word appeared in Hebrew or English about the establishment of the association or the prize awarded. In contrast, many news items about the event were published in the Chinese language. This could indicate the focus and the central need that this body addresses, namely, to show internally in China that the discourse about China in Israel is being monitored and controlled (Orbach, 2019). As of now, no announcement or news report regarding the Association's activities has been published.

Individual Invitations - People to People

Another Soft Power approach that relates to the Chinese modus operandi in the past (during the time referred to in this article as the First Period) is the invitation of various Israeli figures to China and the exertion of Soft Power on them during their visit. Current Chinese President Xi Jinping even talked about this strategy extensively in one of his first speeches when he took office in 2013 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2013). This action is advantageous due to the relatively minor investment it requires, since it involves

individuals and activities within China itself, while the potential return is relatively high. For example, the Chinese often invite scholars and senior Israeli officials to give lectures in China, to provide consultation and sometimes they invite professors to stay for longer periods.

The invitees are usually influential people of public importance, so the expected return from this Soft Power investment is to turn these guests into ambassadors of China's goodwill. In doing so, the Chinese hope to gain widespread influence, by directing limited resources at one key individual, similar to the previously mentioned notion of appealing to the elite to channel the messages through them and control their discourse.

Each year, the Chinese invite guests from many countries to international conferences it hosts, including many Israelis. For example, Dr. Yossi Dashti (2017) says he was often invited to lectures in various places in China and received a particularly warm welcome. It is important to note that these guests haven't necessarily lost their judgment due to the hospitality, but the impression created by such a relationship, which is probably China's main interest, is that of affection and a positive attitude towards the host country. As mentioned at the outset, innovation is at the core of the relations and is China's main incentive to cultivate these ties and exert SPPD. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Chinese also approached key figures in this area with a dual purpose - to learn from their experience and to influence Israeli public opinion through them. For example, Dan Senor and Saul Singer, authors of the book *Start-Up Nation*, have become rising stars and quite sought-after professors in China, receiving much respect from their Chinese hosts¹².

IV. CONCLUSION

This article highlights and chronicles the process that led to the dramatic shift in China-Israel relations, from opposition to Israel's right to exist to the exertion of multi-faceted Chinese SPPD in Israel. This shift occurred due to many factors mentioned in the essay, some directly related to the countries themselves and some influenced by wider global and geopolitical processes. But one

could posit that the main motive that led to the era described in this article as the Third Period is the Chinese need to work with and learn from Israeli innovation. Since Xi took office in 2013, there has been a marked increase in the use of SPPD, seemingly in service of his directive to promote innovation in the Chinese economy. The article concludes that China have invested in and established a wide range of SPPD in Israel to create a positive reputation and exert influence on Israeli society.

It appears that China seeks to influence Israel in these ways because to them Israel is a source of knowledge and innovation. From the Chinese perspective, this innovation is largely credited to Israeli culture, its history and its education system and therefore they must gain access to this system. To be clear, the Chinese approach to the Gulf states rich in national resources is different because, unlike Israel, where education and innovation are at the core of China's interests, their relations with the Gulf states revolve around the energy sector. Therefore, it is clear that China's widespread use of Soft Power tools within the Israeli system differs from their approach to the Gulf system or any other system in the ME.

And the fact that the second cultural center in the ME was established in Israel and that two Confucius Institutes were established in a small country and both coupled to top universities in China indicates the uniqueness of the Chinese use of SPPD in Israel, compared to the other countries of the region. Men's theory, mentioned earlier in this essay, whereby appealing to a select group in the passive country is sufficient since they will channel the influence further, is consistent with the Chinese Israeli case and with Xi's directive to promote people-to-people diplomacy (P2P). The location of the Cultural Center and the endorsement of the Israeli soccer team may indicate an appeal to an elite group that in turn will influence the entire population.

These SPPD have stirred some criticism within Israel, but as of now, no measures have been taken to limit Chinese activity as a result. The criticisms leveled against China came mostly from the margins of Israeli society. These claims

usually boil down to the assertion that all of the aforementioned institutions and activities serve as an espionage apparatus or as a means of "mining information". This in contrast to the SPPD used by other countries, which are usually aimed at controlling the narrative or discourse. Despite this criticism, a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center and published on September 30, 2019 shows that nearly 66% of Israelis view China as a positive force in general, compared to 25% who view China as a negative force. These numbers reflect an 11% increase in favor of those who view China positively compared to 2018. Of the 32 countries surveyed, only in Russia and Nigeria do people hold a more positive view of China (Silver, Delvin & Huang, 2019). Therefore, it is evident that the use of China's SPPD is successfully influencing Israeli public opinion, and that the Chinese are cleverly managing to persuade Israel to act in their interest, without the need to exert hard power.

These Chinese efforts or SPPD towards and in Israel while Israeli biggest strategic ally, the US, and China maintaining an ongoing rivalry, shows the biggest context of China actions. China uses the SPPD towards and in Israel, not only because of its will to build an impact over the Israeli people as suggested along this article, but also because it wants to counter the American impact in one of their most important strategic allies. That is to say, we should expect to see this phenomenon growing as long as the rivalry between the two Superpowers keeps moving on. The findings of the article herald that China-Israel relations will continue to occupy China both because of the special interest that China finds in Israel as well as a component in the Superpowers competition.

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Notes

1. More about it can be found at: "Chinese Innovation China's Technology Future and What It Means for Silicon Valley", Bay Area Council Economic Institute, <http://www.bayareaeconomy.org/report/chinese-innovation/>, last modified February 1, 2020; "China-Israel Industrial R&D Cooperation Framework", *Israel Innovation Authority*, <https://innovationisrael.org.il/en/geography/china>, last modified February 1, 2020.
2. More about Soft Power Pipelines can be found at Roie Yellinek, Yossi Mann, Udi Lebel, 'Chinese SPPD Diffusion (SPPDD) in the Middle East 2000-2018', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2020.1732870>.
3. Such as: Yitzhak Shichor, "China and the Middle East since Tiananmen", *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 1992;519(1):86-100.doi:10.1177/0002716292519001007.
4. Such as: Aron Shai, *Sino-Israel Relations: 1890-2016* (Academic Studies Press, Boston, 2019).
5. Such as: P. R. Kumaraswamy, "China, Israel and the US: The Problematic Triangle", *China Report* 49 (1), 2013, pp. 143-159.
6. Such as: Yonatan Goldstein, *China and Israel, 1948-1998: A Fifty-Year Retrospective* (Praeger, Westport 1999).
7. Such as: Yoram Evron, "Between Beijing and Washington: Israel's technology transfers to China" *Journal of East Asian Studies* 13 (3), 2013, pp. 503-528.
8. More about Confucius Institutes throughout the region can be found at Roie Yellinek, Yossi Mann, Udi Lebel, "Chinese Soft-Power in the Arab World –China's Confucius Institutes as a Central Tool of Influence", *Comparative Strategy*, 2020 39:6, 517-534, DOI: 10.1080/01495933.2020.1826843; "Educational cooperation: Fostering a greater understanding of our peoples", *Jerusalem Post*, October 22, 2018, <https://www.jpost.com/Special-Content/Educational-cooperation-Fostering-a-greater-understanding-of-our-peoples-569942>, last modified February 1, 2020.
9. About, the Confucius Institute website of Tel Aviv University:<https://humanities.tau.ac.il/confucius/about>, last modified February 1, 2020.
10. This trend includes, for example: the movie "In the Name of Confucius", the UK Conservative Party's report on Confucius Institutes, February, 2019, http://www.conservativehumanrights.com/news/2019/18.02.19_Confucius.html); And the article about the closing of the Institute in Hawaii, July 30, 2019, https://hawaiiantel.net/news/read/category/news/article/the_honolulu_staradv-university_of_hawaiiis_confucius_institute_closes_a-tca, last modified February 1, 2020.

11. Page featuring articles on China on *Kan*: <https://www.kan.org.il/program/?catid=1408>, last modified February 1, 2020.
12. For example: The Israel-Asia Center Website Dedicates a Full Page to Saul Singer, who serves as a member of their Advisory Council: <https://israelasiacenter.org/staff/saul-singer/>, last modified May 21, 2020.
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