In memory of Geoffrey Hudson and
Richard Storry, my mentors at Oxford

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Preface

My Road to China

This book, which has been many years in the making, is a collage composed of numerous and varied perspectives on the Israel–China saga.

In August 2007, I was due to fly to the United States to begin a semester sabbatical at New York University, but unfortunately, my long-awaited journey was briefly delayed by illness. I was hospitalized for several days at Sha'arei Zedek Hospital in Jerusalem, where for generations some members of my family had been healed while others, unfortunately, had drawn their final breaths. I felt that finally I had been granted a forced break that allowed for introspection and reflection or, to use Aristotle's term, contemplation. During my stay in the hospital, I reached some conclusions and made a number of decisions. Perhaps, I thought, there was a positive side to my situation. I recalled the story in the ancient Jewish texts about Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanos, whose brothers sent him to plow on the side of a mountain. When his cow fell down and was maimed, Rabbi Eliezer declared, "It was fortunate for me that my cow was maimed." Indeed, his misfortune resulted in a positive outcome, as he then immersed himself in the world of Torah learning, and the great men of the nation came to sit before him.[1] In a parallel Chinese legend, the saying *Sàiwēngshīmǎ*[2] also hints at how bad luck can be reversed. In this case, an old man's warhorse runs away across the Mongolian border,

1 In another version of this story, the hero is Abba Yudan, a wealthy man who fell on hard times. While he was plowing the reduced field that he had left, the earth split beneath him. His cow fell into the crevasse and broke her leg. When he bent down to lift the cow up, he discovered a huge treasure beneath her. "It proved fortunate for me that my cow's leg was broken," he declared, as his wealth was restored.

2 塞翁失马 Pinyin: Sàiwēngshīmǎ.

but the horse eventually returns with a rare and valuable colt at its side, and so the man is rewarded. In my case, the unexpected hospital stay pushed me to complete this book. My relationship with China began in the United States in 1963. After completing my military service in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), I had originally planned to return to Kibbutz Hatzerim, where I had intended to make my home. Instead, I went off to northern California, where I attended a small college in San Mateo. As part of the program, I heard a lecture by a veteran of the Japanese theater of the Second World War about American involvement in Asia. At the time, John F. Kennedy was president, and after the failure of his attack on the Bay of Pigs in Cuba, he plunged his country into disastrous intervention in Vietnam, initially by sending American "advisors" to the South Vietnamese Army. Thus, the United States returned to the Asian arena in full swing. Its large-scale involvement had begun with the Spanish–American war in the final years of the nineteenth century. During this conflict, the United States became entangled in the Philippines due to the misguided decisions made by American statesmen under the leadership of President William McKinley.

In the lectures I heard, I enjoyed learning about the faulty decision-making process that led the United States to sink unintentionally into the quagmire of East Asia. The chain of events intrigued me. Sometimes policy-makers, both American and other, are themselves shaped rather than shapers—they are dragged into whirlpools of disaster, rather than leading the way to a desirable solution. A thorough study of American involvement in the Philippines reveals that President McKinley was unable to navigate the developments that unfolded, and it was a group of jingoistic navy officials who caused the surprising, unplanned annexation of the Philippines by US imperial power. Following the acquisition of the Philippines, American interest in China grew, as did US obligations in Asia and the Pacific. Eventually, these became even more important than American obligations toward European nations. For this reason, during the Second World War, Asian considerations were stronger and more dominant than European issues. The need to defeat Japan was more urgent than the need to overthrow Germany. Due to Judeo-centric and Eurocentric attitudes, the Israeli (and European) reader will sometimes find it difficult to understand the full scope of Asian importance in World War II. But if we reflect on the wars that followed World War II, we find that throughout these conflicts as well, Asian issues were central factors in US policy. The Korean

and Vietnamese wars dragged the United States into the Asian imbroglio. Ever since, the United States has been forced to view the Asian factor as a crucial component of its foreign and defense policies. This is certainly true when we examine North Korean–American tensions almost seventy years after the 1950 to 1953 war.

The rise of the new China, and particularly the success of the Open Door Policy since the 1980s, have drawn much attention to Asia. China incontrovertibly proved its economic abilities, and therefore drew the United States back into the Asian arena and into harsh competition between the two countries.

In my student days, I deliberated the question of what was the best way for proper implementation of equality and justice, both on the local level in Israel and on the international level. In those days of the Cold War, Third World countries faced two models or ideals: the Soviet Communist model and the so-called "free" American model. Although these were early days, I had already concluded that neither of these models was appropriate for practical application to the Asian world, the Middle Eastern nations, or even to Africa and South America. A regime of dictatorship ruled in Russia, and despite the ideological and sociological lip service it paid to the principles of justice and equality, it was fundamentally harsh and unsympathetic to the desires and aspirations of individuals. On the international level, the Communist regime showed no consideration for the small countries in the bloc that it controlled, or for their citizens. But I also thought that the American model seemed hopeless, as its internal mechanisms were completely lacking in compassion. The US system demonstrated no sensitivity toward citizens who lacked financial means, and public health care was limited. In fact, as I saw it, the individual was left abandoned to his fate. At times, the minimal international assistance that the United States gave other countries seemed designed for the mere glorification of Washington and advancement of American consumer interests. By contrast, the nascent People's Republic of China appeared naïve and full of goodwill toward the Third World. In Africa, for example, China's envoys, like their Israeli colleagues, excelled in empathizing with the locals. As opposed to the Western emissaries, they did not isolate themselves in luxurious neighborhoods but rather went to live alongside the local populations that they were helping. Possibly, my attitude also shared this naïve optimism. Historian Ya'akov Talmon might have identified it as "that spark of political messianism that infects the Jews."

My relationship with China thus developed behind an ideological lens. As a socialist (today I can say old-school socialist with updates mandated by time), I believed that Beijing, not Moscow or Washington, would be the harbinger of a new and challenging vision for the Third World nations. My imagination was captured by leaders such as Zhou Enlai—an experienced diplomat, an intelligent man of action, refined and principled. I thought he seemed like a friendly man (recently published works, particularly the study by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday,[3] describe him as Mao's spineless puppet and a low-level opportunist). At any rate, this was before the Cultural Revolution in China, a time of sober national reflection after the failure of Mao's Great Leap Forward, that foolish attempt to achieve utopian, eschatological socialism in the here and now. China's behavior was moderate. At times, it seemed that China was finally joining the international community and positioning itself firmly on a pragmatic trajectory that was recognizable to all.

In retrospect, had I joined thinkers such as Gottfried Liebnitz, Louis Le Comte, Etienne Silhouette, Jean-Baptiste Duhold, and Voltaire—in other words, all those who followed Francois Quesnay, who promoted the "Chinese dream" of almost unchecked admiration for China?

To me, Israel before the Six Day War, or the "First Republic" as I usually call it, was not only my beloved homeland but also a nascent utopia, the fulfillment of Isaiah's vision of peace and harmony that would reign at the end of days. As I saw it, thorough knowledge of China could advance that dream. In 1964, when I was a young man visiting Belgrade, capital of the former Yugoslavia, I attempted to visit the Chinese embassy to obtain firsthand public relations material about current events there. I had also finally resolved to learn Chinese. But the visit was a failure—the authorities wouldn't permit me to enter the building or speak to anyone. In those days after the Great Leap Forward and before the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese were a locked box, a long way from the friendliness that I had naïvely imagined in my youth. At the Hebrew University at Givat Ram in Jerusalem, I continued my academic studies and began to learn Chinese in a small group with a handful of other students.

In those days I envisioned a rapprochement between China and Israel, as there were similar characteristics in their ethos, such as their attitudes toward tradition and to the family unit. To me, China and Israel were

3 Mao: The Unknown Story.

more than just another pair of nations about which academics could write dissertations that were far removed from the reality of international relations. The two countries bore important messages that I believed were worth promoting. Eventually, my research and teaching on the topic of China–Israel relations convinced me of the depth of historical and cultural similarity between them.

When the Six Day War broke out, I found myself facing a new dilemma. On one hand, many Israelis were swept up in patriotic fervor following the return to historic regions that we had studied from afar and that we longed for atavistically, in theory as the heritage of our ancient forefathers. I fought in Jerusalem, and I heard the cries of jubilation at the liberation of the Western Wall, where I was one of the first to visit, as well as Rachel's Tomb and other historical sites. The excitement conquered my imagination. Still, I realized all too quickly that over the long term, domination of the "New Territories," as they were called then, would drag the Zionist enterprise into dire straits.

How could I apply my thoughts about the new China, where the Great Cultural Revolution had begun a year earlier in 1966, to the new situation in Israel? Were there lessons from China's experience that Israel could adopt?

In contrast to my deliberations over these dilemmas, another student in my Chinese language class, a kibbutz member who was older than I was, expressed confidence in his views and saved himself the soul-searching. He was a radical who admired Mao, and he was certain that the Cultural Revolution would bring salvation to the entire world. In our conversations he always expressed himself unambiguously. Like me, he was also drafted into service in the IDF during the Six Day War. After the war was over, he told me that he had participated in the occupation of Gaza, but "I couldn't aim my gun at the so-called enemies, so I shot up at the sky." He told me that on the eve of the war, during the waiting period before attack, he had written a personal letter to Chinese leader Mao Zedong, warning against Israeli aggression and rising Israeli imperialism. He was deeply disappointed that he never received a reply, particularly since he had asked Mao to intervene and prevent Israel from entering the war. We had many discussions about the Cultural Revolution, which was then in its early days. Despite the evidence of extreme violence and intolerance, he remained firm to his position—this was the only way to achieve liberation of the proletariat and bring about revolution. Eventually he was disappointed and asserted,

"Mao isn't Maoist enough." This statement reminded me of an old story about Charlie Chaplin, who sneaked into a competition of Charlie Chaplin impersonators but never even reached the finals.

After completing my BA in history and philosophy at the Hebrew University, I continued for my master's degree. I took all the courses that were related to China, including courses by Professor Zvi Schiffrin, who later was awarded the Israel Prize. At the time there was no East Asian Studies Department anywhere in Israel, and the classes on the "Far East" were offered sporadically and in various departments. After completing my MA, I received a scholarship to Oxford University, where I continued to pursue my interest in China. Two professors made a particular impression on me and encouraged me throughout my studies. Richard Storry was an expert on Japan who had fought in World War II on the Burmese and Indian fronts, and who was investigating Japanese prisoners of war. Geoffrey Hudson focused on China, and was known for his work on Chinese and world politics before 1800. My doctorate was on Sino–British relations during the Sino–Japanese War in the 1930s. I focused on the Western powers' conciliatory attitude toward Japan, comparing it to a similar attitude adopted by other European countries toward Italy and Germany. My central argument was that the Western powers had sacrificed their principles and made concessions to Japan out of weakness and fear. Although there was no East Asian equivalent of the Munich Agreement, the Western powers appeased Japan in a roundabout manner, gradually, and despite a rising tide of principles that the Western powers professed to uphold.

While at Oxford, I received an offer of employment from Professor Zvi Yavetz, one of the founders of Tel Aviv University and mythological head of the Department of History, who was visiting England for several days for his academic work. His worldview was overwhelmingly Eurocentric, as was that of the other senior professors, as well as the younger members of the department. To them, Europe was the cradle of human civilization, and thus its history represented the history of the entire world. Of course, they were aware of Russia (mainly the Moscow aristocracy, Peter the Great and his ilk), the United States, and even Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East (for which our university set aside its own distinct, impressive department), but the feeling was that in the final analysis, Europe was the focal point of the world.

Undoubtedly, the history department at Tel Aviv University was worthy of admiration. Its reputation was widespread, not just in Israel but in

academic circles across the ocean. Six of its members were awarded the Israel Prize. It boasted a large number of tenured positions and offered a broad variety of courses, majors, and tracks. The ancient world, medieval period, and early modern history were perhaps the jewels in the crown, but modern history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were also points of pride. Yavetz was completely unwilling to adopt my suggestion that I teach the history of China and East Asia, not even as a fraction of my teaching hours. But at the time, in the early 1970s, I was one of the few people in Israel who had studied modern Chinese history, in addition to my focus on England and imperialism. Yavetz didn't believe in the importance of the non-European regions and insisted that I had to learn German and focus on Germany. Eventually I did manage to teach on China, practically underground, as part of a survey course entitled "China—From Empire to Republic." The course covered international events and internal developments in China from the Opium War until Mao's successors. It was not until the 1990s that I managed to convince the dean of the faculty and the university president of the demand for this subject. Finally, I was able to initiate the opening of the Department of East Asian Studies at Tel Aviv University, and it was as if a dam had burst—students flocked to the departmental office to register. Twenty years later, the number of students surpassed seven hundred, and ours became the largest academic department in the Faculty of Humanities of Tel Aviv University, and the largest in Israel.

My first visit to China was in September 1989, three months after the events in Tiananmen Square, eventually known in the West as the Tiananmen Massacre. To me it felt like a return visit, as I had been following events in the country for many years through its maps, stories, books, and economic developments. A feeling of *déjà vu* accompanied me throughout my trip, as if my eyes had seen every corner there in a previous reincarnation. I arrived as academic leader of a small group of students, and we toured the distant land for a month, during which we heard comprehensive lectures on a host of issues related to China. The experience was particularly meaningful for me, since China had long been my heart's desire. My decades-old dream was finally realized.

But even then, I was disappointed to note many telltale cracks appearing in Chinese society. Thirteen years after Mao's death and the formal end of the Cultural Revolution, I observed economic gaps and their social consequences in Chinese society, which had extracted itself from the revolutionary and cultural chaos that had led to almost complete equality. After

that point, I observed beggars on the streets of Beijing alongside villagers in worn rags, while beside them strolled members of the new, affluent middle class. As I was an idealist who supported the ideal of equality, I felt drawn to probing the issue of Chinese socialism. Was China exhibiting a retreat from the principles that I admired, and that had attracted me to it in the first place? Would China's opening to the world at large and the international commercial market mean that in the future I would see enormous skyscraper hotels with restaurants revolving in their towers, alongside slums like the ones I observed in Beijing? At a time that neighborhoods still had public toilets, since private homes had no bathrooms, luxury high-rises sprouted simultaneously across the street.

My idealistic, utopian image of China as the model state was also shaken by my first encounter with the security forces. When our group arrived at Tiananmen Square, the "Gate of Heavenly Peace," soldiers stopped us and did not permit us to enter. Since we were very close to the incident in the Square, both geographically and chronologically, I was very interested in the details of events during the first days of June that year. I soon realized that people who had been present in the Square didn't know exactly what had happened either. The statistics about victims in the Square varied widely. At Heathrow Airport, while on our way to Beijing, I had bought a book that described the Tiananmen Massacre in harsh words and grisly photos. This was a mass market book, published quickly and without thorough research, but of the type that makes a powerful first impression. When I showed it to one of the guides that accompanied us in China, he turned white. He was petrified. He stared silently at the photos, and although he himself had been present at the Tiananmen Square during the events, it seemed to me that he was discovering new, shocking information. He suggested to me in a friendly manner that I hide the book and not show it to anyone else.

During one of our first tours of the Forbidden City, a formal delegation arrived at the famous site. Unidentified guards firmly pushed aside the ordinary tourists, both locals and foreigners. Our own tour guide implored us to leave the site immediately. In my diary, I wrote that everywhere, the fear of authority was palpable.

The most important milestone of progress in the establishment of relations between China and Israel was the opening of the Chinese embassy in Tel Aviv in 1992. I was in contact with several of its representatives, particularly Ms. Zhang Xiao-an, the deputy ambassador. At the same time, I had contact with the representatives of Taiwan stationed in Tel Aviv at what was

known as the "Taipei Cultural and Economic Office." Of course, navigating between these two entities wasn't easy, as the Chinese embassy was very wary of Israelis who had any contact with the Taiwanese office. A rumor even went around that the Chinese were spying on the receptions given by the Taiwanese to find out which Israelis were consorting with the enemy. Throughout my dealings with the Chinese, I was surprised by the embassy's efficiency of operation. Its staff was well-informed of what was going on in Israel and even in the East Asian Studies Department at Tel Aviv University, including activities and names of lecturers. In one case, an embassy attaché phoned me and asked, or rather demanded, that we cancel a planned lecture on the Falun Gong movement.[4] I explained to him the meaning of academic freedom in Israel, but he was not convinced. He simply insisted that we cancel the lecture. Over the years they interfered in other events as well, such as their attempt to remove an exhibit of Falun Gong supporters in the entrance to the main library.

I also had close contact with the Taiwanese representatives in Israel, and they invited me to visit their country. When I was researching my biography of Zhang Xueliang, I requested their assistance in arranging a meeting with him in Hawaii. They tried their best to comply, but returned to me in disappointment. The general was almost one hundred years old, ill, and could not receive me. Shortly afterward, he died, and my dream of a meeting evaporated.[5]

After the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and China, much discussion ensued on the background of each culture, Chinese

4 Falun Gong (法轮功) or Falun Dafa (法轮大法). This spiritual movement was founded in 1992 by Li Hongzhi. It focuses on meditation and slow qigong exercises (physical movements based on spiritual principles), and emphasizes moral development as well. Since the late 1990s, when the number of Falun Gong practitioners reached tens of millions, the Chinese Communist Party has energetically worked to discourage this movement, and in 1999 the Chinese authorities under Jiang Zemin declared it an illegal practice. Much evidence (although it is disputed) shows that this categorization led to the violent suppression, imprisonment and torture of Falun Gong members, and even harvesting of their organs for international trafficking.

5 General Zhang Xueliang, nicknamed the "Young Marshal," was a Manchurian Chinese. Born in 1901, he ruled under the nationalist regime of Chiang Kai-shek and plotted with the communists to organize the kidnapping of his commander. For this, he was placed under house arrest for over fifty years. My book *Zhang Xueliang: The General Who Never Fought*, discusses his life against the background of the history of modern China.

and Jewish, in an attempt to identify their shared foundation and unifying factors.

David Libai had participated in the same tour of China in 1989 as I did, and he was later appointed Minister of Justice in Yitzhak Rabin's government. Before his first formal trip to China, he asked me to write his chief address. It was a great pleasure for me to write this address; for me, this was an opportunity to point out shared aspects of the two nations. When discussing these two celebrated, ancient peoples located at the two extremes of the Asian continent, we noted that China's inhabitants had lived in their country continuously, but the Jews did not have the privilege of remaining in their homeland for long. In fact, after the destruction of the Second Temple, the Jews' national existence in their homeland ended for hundreds of years. Thus the story of the Jewish people's return to their land and reestablishment of a national home is an experience unfamiliar to the Chinese.

Around 1850 BCE, during the rule of the quasi-mythological Xia dynasty, the first to earn mention in the records of Chinese historians, the Jewish forefather Abraham made his way from Ur of the Chaldees in Mesopotamia to the Land of Israel. His descendants experienced several exiles from their land. Still, the similarities between these two peoples overcome their differences. The written language, which is the focus for the development of every human culture and for preservation of the values accumulated over generations, was preserved in both the Jewish and Chinese cultures. This is a rare core that no other nation in the world (except for Greece) has enjoyed for such a long history. In most of the world, languages have undergone processes of disruption and distortion.

Both cultures nurture the family unit, with rituals and ceremonies providing a firm foundation for cultural continuity. It would be superfluous to expand on the importance of the Bible and the significance of the Oral Torah in Judaism, and the same is true for the special importance of the writings of the Chinese philosophers—Confucius, Lao Tzu, and their successors. Both cultures place a high value on learning, introspection, and study of the secrets of the universe and of human existence. Neither sanctified the military ethic, and violent combat was spurned. A Chinese proverb emphasizes that just as one does not forge nails from quality metal, so one does not mold soldiers from fine men.[6] We find similar expression of

6 好鐵不當釘; 好兒不當兵 Pinyin: Hǎo tiě bùdāng dīng; hǎo er bùdāng bīng.

the ideal of peace and tranquility in the prophecies of Isaiah,[7] and in the writings of Chinese philosophers such as Mencius. Confucius emphasized the values of family, honoring one's parents, tradition, and ceremony, values that Jews have held dear for millennia. Several decades ago, a book of Confucius' analects was translated into Hebrew, and it received much attention in Israel.[8]

Although every generation has a desire to rebel, change, and improve, both cultures have preserved their traditional principles. When Confucius was asked to give one word that would serve as a guideline for life, he answered, "Reciprocity," and expanded, using almost the same phrase as Hillel the Elder: "Do unto others as you would have them do to you."

In the hundreds of lectures that I have given on China throughout my academic career, I felt that despite my fifty years of studying the culture, history, and economy of this distant land, I was never able to completely break down the barrier between my "Israeliness" and complete internalization of "Chineseness." Although I believed in my ability to understand in an academic context the historical processes that affected China, I was repeatedly astonished at the wonders and surprises presented by this country.

Furthermore, I eventually realized that there was a wide gap between the Judeo-Christian ethos and the cultural tenets of East Asia and China, a gap that was very difficult to bridge. The European worldview is dichotomous and has distinct categories: good and bad, pure and impure, male and female, light and dark, yes and no. This decisiveness parallels the Israeli mentality and language, appearing in expressions such as "Are you coming or not?"; "Do you agree or disagree?"; "Do you accept this or not?"; "Are you communist or capitalist? Religious or secular?" But this approach does not fit the Chinese view of life. Chinese culture was inspired by a philosophical and ethical system that is thousands of years old and is based on the concept of *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* means negative, darkness, the cloudy or northern side of the mountain, while *yang* represents the positive, light,

7 It will come to pass at the end of days.... They will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation; neither will they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2:2–4).

8 In the introduction to their translation, which was published in 1960, Daniel Lesley and Amatzia Porat wrote that because the classic was written during the period of Ezra and Nehemiah (early Second Temple period), they decided to use biblical style in their translation, to match the general ideas found in Judaism as well. In Amira Katz's 2006 translation of Confucius' analects, she uses modern Hebrew, mainly in order to render his ideas accessible to the younger generation.

and the abundance of the sun's warmth. But although these forces may seem to be working against each other, in fact they are interrelated and interdependent, like Siamese twins. They represent the unity of opposites. Further, they nurture each other. Pairs in nature, such as light and dark, warmth and cold, and even life and death express the concept of *yin*/*yang*, which forms the foundation of China's philosophy as well as its science, medicine, and military arts.

I believe that this sophisticated spectrum, which enfolds opposites in a single embrace, holds the key to understanding China. It is the only way we can understand, for example, the Open Door Policy that China has adopted in the modern era, which permits a rare coexistence between the free economic market and a police state controlled by the Communist Party. I do not have space here to pursue this philosophical issue, but I will offer an instructive example, which Henry Kissinger presents in his book on China.[9]

Kissinger emphasizes the diplomatic and strategic implications of this thesis. In his view, the Chinese are experts in realpolitik. Their strategic approach is completely different from that practiced in the West. History has taught them that not every problem has a solution. In opposition to the accepted belief in the West (including many sectors in Israel), the belief in the ability to achieve complete domination over events—whether a crisis, dispute, or any other definitive historical event—is merely an illusion. The actions resulting from this illusion can disrupt the world's harmony. Security, or even complete satisfaction, cannot be found in our world. Rather, it is the roundabout, sophisticated path, which sometimes focuses on wearing down the opponent, that provides the desired relative advantage.

This concept finds ample expression in the difference or contrast between two games that are representative of the two cultures: chess, and the Chinese *wei qi* or *go* (围棋), in which the object is to surround the most territory. As opposed to chess, in which the winner is usually the player who has completely destroyed his opponent by pursuing the king and removing it, the Chinese game has no clear, definitive goal that marks the end or the winner. Instead, the game ends when the players have no more interest or desire to continue. At this point, the players count the points on the squares of the game board, which represent the territory that each one

9 Kissinger, *On China*, 23–25.