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**CHINA** *local / global*

# How China Learned to Harness Israel's Media and Booming Tech Scene

Roie Yellinek

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace  
Publications Department  
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
P: + 1 202 483 7600  
F: + 1 202 483 1840  
[CarnegieEndowment.org](http://CarnegieEndowment.org)

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## China Local/Global

China has become a global power, but there is too little debate about *how* this has happened and what it means. Many argue that China exports its developmental model and imposes it on other countries. But Chinese players also extend their influence by working through local actors and institutions while adapting and assimilating local and traditional forms, norms, and practices.

With a generous multiyear grant from the Ford Foundation, Carnegie has launched an innovative body of research on Chinese engagement strategies in seven regions of the world—Africa, Central Asia, Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa, the Pacific, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Through a mix of research and strategic convening, this project explores these complex dynamics, including the ways Chinese firms are adapting to local labor laws in Latin America, Chinese banks and funds are exploring traditional Islamic financial and credit products in Southeast Asia and the Middle East, and Chinese actors are helping local workers upgrade their skills in Central Asia. These adaptive Chinese strategies that accommodate and work within local realities are mostly ignored by Western policymakers in particular.

Ultimately, the project aims to significantly broaden understanding and debate about China's role in the world and to generate innovative policy ideas. These could enable local players to better channel Chinese energies to support their societies and economies; provide lessons for Western engagement around the world, especially in developing countries; help China's own policy community learn from the diversity of Chinese experience; and potentially reduce frictions.

Evan A. Feigenbaum

*Vice President for Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*

## Summary

Israel and China established full diplomatic relations only in 1992, making Israel almost the last Middle Eastern country to do so. Starting in the early 2000s, ties between the two countries began to blossom, mostly because the Chinese government started to view Israel as a global technology hub and began seeking to capitalize on Israel's innovation capabilities to help meet its own developmental needs and strategic challenges. In addition, as China's rivalry with Israel's leading ally, the United States, has heated up, Beijing's interest in Israel also has gotten stronger. In light of Israel's status as a major technology hub and a leading U.S. ally, China has sought to deepen its influence in Israel through media engagement and other forms of outreach.

As Chinese actors have pursued technological innovation and greater political influence in Israel, they have employed three basic approaches to court favor in and through Israeli media circles: direct messaging to the Israeli public in local Hebrew-language newspapers, the use of Chinese outlets (especially the Hebrew department of China Radio International) targeted at Israeli audiences, and efforts to leverage prominent public figures friendly toward China to amplify favorable messages delivered on these local Israeli and Chinese platforms.

China's messaging strategy in Israel has evolved in three stages. Early on, this strategy mainly included recycled talking points from the Chinese Communist Party that do not always translate well overseas. Between 2015 and 2018, this messaging from Chinese actors started to become more direct and tailored for the Israeli people. Since 2018, Chinese engagement has expanded to include a much wider variety of Israeli media outlets, which has meant even more direct access to ordinary Israelis.

This strategy and other elements of China's diplomatic outreach to Israel seem to be having an impact. According to 2019 polling from the Pew Research Center, Israeli respondents view China more positively than those in any other Western-oriented countries that took part in this survey did. These results are an outgrowth of China's desire to build influence vis-à-vis Israeli society, especially in terms of Israelis' views on China. Chinese government officials and other actors see this campaign toward the Israeli people as part of a broader and more important strategic campaign, as Beijing competes with Washington for worldwide influence.

Israel has a clear national interest in carefully examining how and why Beijing deploys such strategic messaging and how Chinese actors have leveraged local conditions, language habits, and consumer preferences to advance their objectives. The new Israeli government under Prime Minister Naftali Bennett must act prudently and keep these Chinese messaging activities in mind as it balances and advances Israel's foreign policy interests, seeking to underscore that it does not see China as an enemy but that cooperation with Beijing needs to be pursued in the right way.

## Introduction

Up until 1992, Israel and Communist-led China had poor relations, including periods of complete diplomatic estrangement and periods of limited and covert engagement. That year, the countries established official diplomatic ties, and a new chapter in their relationship opened. This formal rapprochement began after several years of negotiations and after both sides had opened offices in the other country that functioned as small quasi-embassies.

Since the early 2000s, the China-Israel relationship has blossomed. Economic ties, especially those involving technological innovation (including in areas such as agriculture, communications, and healthcare), have served as the foundation of this increasingly warm relationship. Beijing views Israel as a global technology hub and has sought to capitalize on Israel's innovation capabilities to help meet its own developmental needs and strategic challenges. In particular, China has sought technological solutions as the country has accelerated its transition from a low-cost manufacturing titan to a high-tech economy with an industrial base that is moving steadily up the value chain. Meanwhile, as China's rivalry with Israel's leading ally, the United States, heats up, Chinese messaging strategies in Israel are also designed to maximize Beijing's political sway in influential Israeli circles.

To tap into local innovation hubs and gain influence in Israel, Chinese policymakers and media commentators have sought to cultivate positive Israeli perceptions of China, its development trajectory, and its potential as a trusted partner. In Israel's freewheeling media environment, achieving that kind of strategic messaging is no easy feat. Chinese officials and business executives have learned to tailor their messaging (including in Hebrew) to Israeli tastes, preferences, and biases. Significant cultural gaps between China and Israel, resulting from a lack of common history, mindsets, or traditions, have at times made this complex task an uphill struggle.

Chinese actors have used a variety of messaging tools and tactics to court high-tech collaboration and political influence in Israel. In some cases, they are using Israeli media outlets to deliver, tailor, and ultimately amplify Chinese messaging. Meanwhile, Chinese-run media outlets, such as China Radio International (CRI), are learning to adapt their messages to Israeli consumers. In addition, Chinese actors use other forms of soft power—such as Confucius Institutes and other educational and cultural exchange programs—to foster relationships, cultivate influence, and advance the country's interests.<sup>1</sup>



## China's Top Priorities in Israel

China's central interests in Israel are to tap into the Israeli economy's capacity for innovation and to expand Chinese influence in the country in light of the growing competition between the United States and China. Israel is a standout when it comes to innovation. In the World Economic Forum's 2020 *Global Competitiveness Report*, Israel ranked seventh in the world in terms of its citizens' digital skills.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the *Global Startup Ecosystem Report 2020: Rankings 2020: Top 30 + Runners-up* ranked Tel Aviv and Jerusalem as the world's sixth-best innovation hub (tied with Los Angeles).<sup>3</sup> China, for its part, continues to cultivate its own domestic capacity for innovation. For instance, in 2017 the venture capital company Asgard ranked China second and Israel third as "ecosystems" that excel at artificial intelligence (AI); that same year, Israel held a market share of around 11 percent for AI internationally.<sup>4</sup>

Technology-focused collaboration between China and Israel has attracted some high-profile supporters from both sides. In 2016, the first China-Israel Innovation Forum was held in Beijing.<sup>5</sup> In a speech at the 2018 Israeli Innovation Summit that then prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu organized, Netanyahu proudly declared that Israel had gone from being a "start-up nation" to an "innovation nation."<sup>6</sup> The former prime minister has even played up the potential for technology and innovation to be avenues for greater collaboration with China, as it seeks to make good on its clear ambitions to go from being the world's second-largest economy to being the largest.<sup>7</sup> On a 2017 visit to China, Netanyahu said, "We are your perfect junior partner for that effort . . . I believe this is a marriage made in heaven."<sup>8</sup> One of China's main goals for its relationship with Israel is to ensure a steady flow of advanced technology and innovation into China in conjunction with the country's Going Global strategy and other major Chinese plans.

For their part, Chinese players in both government and industry tend to view Israel's knack for innovation as reflecting important features of Israeli society, most notably a successful education system and history. Consider the case of Li Ka-shing, a Hong Kong business magnate who donated \$130 million in October 2013 to the Technion (the Israel Institute of Technology) based in Haifa; at the announcement ceremony, Li said, "Our responsibility is to invest in education to . . . enable the continuing realisation of human potential, building a society rich in knowledge and securing a sustainable quality of life for all."<sup>9</sup>

Beyond technological innovation, China also has sought to bolster Israeli public support for closer ties with Beijing through strategic messaging intended to reinforce Israel's standing as a pivotal country amid the burgeoning superpower competition between China and the United States. The Chinese government seeks to use Israel as a testing ground for new strategies and practices in its pursuit of greater international influence by observing how other countries (especially a small, strategically significant, and Western-oriented one like Israel) respond to Chinese actions and what international effects such acts have. These efforts at times have been controversial in part because they are seen (for good reason) by some in Israel and the United States as challenging the U.S.-Israel strategic alliance.<sup>10</sup>

One way this geopolitical contest has played out is through Chinese investment deals and bids for major Israeli infrastructure projects, which have sometimes proven contentious. The case of the new Israeli port in Haifa, which China has invested in, demonstrates this point well.

Another similar instance was a construction project for a large desalination plant in Israel, for which a subsidiary of a Hong Kong based firm called CK Hutchison Holdings Limited was one of the final bidders. When former United States secretary of state Mike Pompeo visited Israel in May 2020, he reportedly conveyed U.S. concerns over these kinds of Chinese economic overtures and the bid for the desalination plant in particular.<sup>11</sup> Not long thereafter the coveted bid was granted to another company instead.<sup>12</sup>

## How China Communicates With the Israeli Public

As Chinese actors pursue technological innovation and greater political influence, they have employed three basic approaches to court favor in Israeli media circles: direct messaging to the Israeli public in local Hebrew-language newspapers, the use of Chinese outlets (especially CRI) targeted at Israeli audiences, and efforts to leverage prominent public figures friendly toward China to amplify favorable messages delivered on these local Israeli and Chinese platforms.

## The Evolution of Chinese Messaging in Israel

Initially, Chinese messaging in Israel bore many of the most obvious hallmarks of China's state-directed and tightly scripted information space. A section of the Chinese embassy's website known as Embassy News was launched in 2008 to aggregate all the embassy's media activities in Israeli outlets. Early on, it mainly recycled boilerplate Chinese Communist Party (CCP) talking points that do not always translate well overseas.<sup>13</sup> In those early years, for example, the Chinese embassy published articles with titles such as: "Dalai Lama Lies Again," "CIA Ran Tibet Contras Since 1959," and "Tibet Myth and Reality."<sup>14</sup> On some controversial subjects, Chinese officials have continued to closely toe the party line in a similar fashion, including the Chinese government's treatment of Uyghurs and non-Han ethnic minorities in Xinjiang (as they did in propaganda pieces from the late 2000s and early 2010s like "The Facts of Urumqi Riot" and "Ethnic Unity—the Source of Happiness in Xinjiang").<sup>15</sup>

That said, in some cases, the Chinese embassy in Israel has become somewhat more sophisticated or localized over time in terms of its media placements and the subject matter of its public diplomacy. Starting in 2010, at least some of the Chinese embassy's generated content began changing significantly in both its tone and its adaptations to local conditions. This messaging also began presenting content more tailored to the Israeli public, rather than only echoing and recycling typical CCP messaging. The embassy began to concentrate on the activities of embassy officials, highlighting media outreach in Israel, productive diplomatic and business meetings, and community engagement within Israel.

The most meaningful change in the Chinese embassy's messaging came in September 2015, when then ambassador Zhan Yongxin began to address the Israeli public directly by writing articles in the leading English-language newspaper, the *Jerusalem Post*.<sup>16</sup> In part, these editorials were meant to discourage scrutiny of Chinese activities that were generating tensions in China-Israel relations and putting Israel in an awkward position vis-à-vis the United States. Israeli and U.S. misgivings about and criticisms of China's economic activities in Israel seem to be part of a broader, Cold War-style struggle between the two superpowers for spheres of influence or global hegemony.<sup>17</sup> In addition, U.S. leaders presumably fear the emergence of information leaks, particularly ones related to sensitive cutting-edge technologies.

Such technological concerns have long been a feature of Israel's relationships with China and the United States. A series of historical disputes between Israel and the United States over weapons sales to China arose in the late 1990s and early 2000s. At this time, Israel reached deals to sell the Phalcon (a special type of early-warning radar system) and Harpy drones to China, but the deals were canceled amid massive U.S. pressure.<sup>18</sup> These cancelations became emblematic of the line between what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable in Israel-China relations.

The best example of more recent tensions in Israel involving China and the United States is the Shanghai International Port Group's successful March 2015 bid to operate the new Israeli port in Haifa for twenty-five years. The country's ports are highly strategic assets, in part because around 99 percent of Israeli imports come from the sea.<sup>19</sup> After the Chinese firm won the bid, opposition to the deal began to emerge after a year and so in both the United States and Israel. As a result, there were extensive discussions about the strategic implications of such deals, including at a joint event organized by Haifa University and the Hudson Institute, a panel featuring speakers concerned about China's influence in Israel.<sup>20</sup> It is important to mention that some of the event participants were U.S. and Israeli national security experts, but Chinese speakers were not part of this discussion.<sup>21</sup>

For their part, Chinese officials have continued trying to make their case to Israel for the Haifa port deal, while attempting to mollify concerns that the deal would harm U.S.-Israeli relations. Besides helping place numerous articles in Israeli outlets by the Chinese ambassador at the time about the Haifa port, the Chinese embassy also worked with the *Jerusalem Post* to publish a special edition of a magazine featuring Chinese messaging about the port.<sup>22</sup> The magazine included contributions by Zhan and then Israeli president Reuven Rivlin. Despite all the controversy, the project ultimately moved ahead. Despite fears of delays due to the coronavirus pandemic and the extensive discussions of the deal's implications, the port opened in September 2021 as planned.<sup>23</sup>

Chinese officials and embassy staff went to great lengths to defuse opposition to the port deal, but they were not alone. Former Israeli transportation minister Israel Katz has been very active in promoting Chinese companies in the Israeli economy. According to one reporter, the minister said in 2018 that he "has actively promoted infrastructure projects between the two countries since taking office eight years ago" and took steps to encourage Chinese firms to bid on projects in Israel.<sup>24</sup>

All these efforts, especially the Chinese ambassador's articles, aimed to reassure the Israeli public (and by extension Israeli decisionmakers), while assuaging potential concerns about Chinese reliability, conduct, and strategic behavior. For example, an October 2017 article written by the Chinese ambassador argued that "China's new era of development is [a] win-win with Israel."<sup>25</sup> He

highlighted Israel's role as a technological hub and the complementarity of the two countries' economies. He went on to point out Israel's well-known status as "the Start-Up Nation, strong in creation and innovation" while also boasting about China's merits, namely "its strong manufacturing capacity and huge market."<sup>26</sup>

One potential reason Chinese officials have chosen to communicate in English-language publications could be because these messages are meant to reach not only people in Israel but also readers in the United States and English-speaking diplomats from various countries who live in Israel. In addition, officials and staff at the Chinese embassy in Israel need to report back to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the nature of their work, which is easier to do with English-language newspapers rather than with Hebrew-language ones.

Starting in 2018, Zhan began getting exposure in a much wider variety of Israeli media outlets beyond the *Jerusalem Post*—including in video interviews with Hebrew news websites like YNet News and others.<sup>27</sup> Because Israel's relationship with China had by this point become a sensitive issue with Washington, Zhan used these opportunities to bolster Beijing's position by minimizing the potential for conflict with Washington. His key message was this: "China does not want to cause any harm to Israel's special relationship[s] with other countries." He also remarked that the relationship between China and Israel is unique because it is part of a long-term friendship between two of the "oldest nations in the world" and that "all the [Chinese infrastructure] projects [in Israel] set a very good example [of] a win-win situation." In his remarks, Zhan touched on technological innovation as well, saying "China is a country with a huge market and [a] powerful manufacturing [sector]. Israel is . . . the Start-Up Nation, so if we can work together, we can bring more opportunities to our businesses and people and even [for] the world."<sup>28</sup>

Ambassador Du Wei, Zhan's successor, continued this approach during his tenure from February 2020 until his untimely death in May 2020. Du engaged with Hebrew-language media outlets, and more importantly, he interacted with a range of outlets to reach a wider array of important religious and secular constituencies from across Israel's political spectrum. For example, he wrote for *Makor Rishon*, a conservative Hebrew newspaper associated with rightwing religious Zionism, and *Yated Ne'eman*, a Hebrew paper associated with Israel's Orthodox Haredi community.<sup>29</sup> These interviews signaled to Israeli audiences that Chinese officials were departing from a more traditional, hidebound media strategy and that the Chinese embassy was showing a greater understanding of Israeli society and diversifying its outreach to different segments of the populace.

One recurring feature of Du’s messaging was a rhetorical emphasis on Israel’s status alongside China as a deeply significant historical civilization. As he put it in one interview, “The Jewish people and the Chinese people have both created marvelous civilizations.”<sup>30</sup> In doing so, Du seemed to be seeking to convey an implicit contrast between longtime civilizations like China and Israel and countries like the United States with shorter histories.

Chinese officials also have pursued broader engagement with mass-market Hebrew dailies, including the newspaper *Haaretz*, through which Beijing-based officials have sought to send reassuring messages to the Israeli public about mutually beneficial relations between their countries. Zha Peixin, a long-time Chinese official whose posts include Chinese ambassador to the UK and deputy director of the CCP Central Committee’s Foreign Affairs Office, wrote one such article titled “China Does Not Aspire to World Hegemony.” In it, he repeated the point that Israel and China are heirs of ancient civilizations that have contributed much to humanity.<sup>31</sup> He added that China is a responsible country that takes real action on climate change. In doing so, he presumably sought to draw for the Israeli people a clear difference between China as a supposedly responsible and reliable country as opposed to the United States after its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement under former president Donald Trump. As with most Chinese diplomatic messaging toward Israelis, he wished the two countries would sustain a general sense of cooperation particularly with respect to technology.<sup>32</sup>

### CRI Helps China Reach an Israeli Audience

Originally established in 1941, CRI is now the international radio arm of the China Media Group, the national holding company for Chinese state-run media services including CRI, China Central Television, and China National Radio. In 2015, a Reuters investigation identified more than thirty radio stations in fourteen countries that are part of a “global . . . web” of radio broadcasters ultimately controlled by CRI.<sup>33</sup> This fact may help illuminate how Beijing has sought to broaden the reach and messaging strategies of Chinese state media to avoid having them labeled Chinese propaganda. In February 2020, the U.S. government designated CRI and four other Chinese media outlets as “foreign missions.”<sup>34</sup> For Israel and other U.S. partners, this decision sent a signal that the United States considers CRI’s employees to be acting as CCP agents.

Despite CRI’s apparent ties to the CCP, prominent Israeli figures have celebrated the inroads it has made in their country. In late September 2009, CRI launched its first Hebrew-language website, which it billed as “the first and only Hebrew website run by an official entity in China”; the website states that it aims to “offer [Israeli readers] a glimpse into Chinese perspectives on various issues.”<sup>35</sup> CRI’s Hebrew-language website also runs a Facebook page in Hebrew.<sup>36</sup>

In keeping with China's focus on technology as a major pillar of China-Israel relations, Wang Chen, who was then the director of the State Council Information Office, visited Israel for the launch of CRI's Hebrew-language website along with Xia Jixuan, CRI's vice president.<sup>37</sup> For Israel's part, then president Shimon Peres, who helped pioneer Israel's success in cultivating startups, welcomed the launch of CRI's Hebrew website.<sup>38</sup> Eden Bar-Tal, then director general of the Israeli Ministry of Communications, described the launch as "an important start in the effort to convey the story of modern-day China to the Israeli public."<sup>39</sup>

When CRI's vice president was explicitly asked why the Israeli people should see the new Hebrew-language site as anything more than a propaganda arm of the Chinese government, he deflected. "This is my first time in Israel," he said, "and my impression is that the country is different from what I saw on CNN."<sup>40</sup> The Israeli people, he sought to imply, should share China's familiarity with the feeling that global media outlets, especially U.S. ones, do not always portray their country in ways that Israelis consider fair. In claiming this common negative experience with global media coverage, he suggested, Israelis should understand the impulse to build one's own media outlets to share China's point of view with the world. CRI's launch into Hebrew-language media dissemination was met with very limited protests on behalf of Amnesty International.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps the most creative Chinese adaptation to a Hebrew-language Israeli audience has been the emergence of a media superstar known as Xi Xiaoqi—or Chinese Itzik—who is one of the CRI Hebrew department's best-known writers. Xi's choice of a colloquial, friendly nickname (Yitzhak), which is a popular name in Israel, demonstrates his desire and attempts to address Israelis as kindred spirits.

In a webinar he gave to an Israeli audience in December 2020, he briefly talked about his background. He works for the China Media Group (CRI is one part of the corporation), and he has invested a lot of time in learning about Israeli history, Israeli culture, and the Hebrew language. According to Xi, the Communication University of China opened a new department for Hebrew in 2005, and he chose it as a major with his grandfather's encouragement. In 2007, he moved to Israel to study at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and he has worked for CRI since 2009.<sup>42</sup>

In his writings and media appearances, Itzik conveys carefully crafted, China-friendly messages in fluent Hebrew with localized social references. He has appeared many times on behalf of CRI on *Zinor Layla*, an interview-based television program on Israel's Channel 13 to comment on an array of current affairs and cultural issues including climate change, geopolitics, and the U.S.-Israel alliance.<sup>43</sup> In addition, Itzik and other CRI colleagues (including some Israeli employees) have appeared on Kan 11, the Israeli state-affiliated television channel, to present a variety of segments and short videos



related to China.<sup>44</sup> CRI and Kan 11 have collaborated both by featuring CRI representatives as commentators and producing and distributing jointly made web videos.<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, on the Israeli television network Keshet 12, Itzik has been featured as a pundit speaking on Chinese culture in a series of news videos filmed in China and presented by two of the channel's news anchors.<sup>46</sup>

Xi's Chinese Itzik persona has become something of a fixture in Israel; he even has been the subject of a comprehensive profile story in *Makor Rishon*.<sup>47</sup> The newspaper published that interview without critical commentary, which perhaps suggests just how much resonance such messaging can have when it is offered in a local language and by a person with a high local profile. In this interview, Itzik painted the United States in a negative light as picking quarrels with China and putting undue pressure on its ally Israel.

In the *Makor Rishon* profile, Itzik was asked point-blank whether his endeavor amounted to disseminating propaganda. He replied by noting that Israelis themselves often struggle with the gap between their own perceptions of Israel and global public perceptions. Through the efforts of figures like Itzik, China is deploying localized outreach to enhance its messaging about China to the Israeli public.<sup>48</sup>

For some critics in Israel, Itzik has raised concerns about whether Hebrew-language media circles are unquestioningly providing a platform for CCP propaganda simply because Chinese media platforms have been savvy about crafting a compelling character with Hebrew-language aptitude and an understanding of the local environment. These critics worry that many Israeli media outlets are picking up CCP messages verbatim, often without adequate interpretation or analysis.

## Chinese Efforts to Win Over Israelis

It is worth asking what impact these Chinese messaging and outreach strategies have had on Israeli views of China. While it is difficult to definitively answer this question, some polling data offer indications of where Israeli public opinion stands. On balance, polling data from the Pew Research Center seem to indicate that many Israelis have positive views of China. Chinese public diplomacy and outreach are one major factor to consider, though there are others. In any case, if public opinion polls are any indication, China seems to have been somewhat successful in its use of strategic messages tailored to the Israeli public.<sup>49</sup>

According to Pew's 2019 Global Attitudes Survey, many Israelis view China quite favorably. Among the thirty-four countries surveyed, Israeli respondents viewed China more positively than those of any other country except for Lebanon, Nigeria, and Russia. Specifically, 66 percent of Israeli respondents rated China in a "favorable" light, while a mere 25 percent gave a negative response.<sup>50</sup> By comparison, 60 percent of U.S. respondents see China in "unfavorable" terms, while only 26 percent



view China positively, though the U.S. polling numbers have shifted considerably in recent years. Survey results showed a jump of more than 10 percent in China's favorability rating among Israelis since 2018, and the numbers have trended upward in recent years with some fluctuations here and there.

These polling numbers offer other indications that Israelis have warmed to China, with some apparent limits. The share of Israelis who trust Chinese leaders "to do the right thing with regard to world affairs" has grown over time but is still relatively low. In 2007, only 13 percent of Israelis expressed confidence in then Chinese president Hu Jintao, though since current President Xi Jinping has taken the helm, the number of Israelis confident in Chinese leadership has risen somewhat to 24 percent in 2014 and 35 percent in 2019.<sup>51</sup> The messaging strategy of Chinese officials toward the Israeli population could very well be one factor that has prompted these numbers to rise.

That said, there are several potential explanations of why Israeli views on China have improved, each of them with some limitations. First, China has poured a great deal of investment into Israel and has gotten involved on some notable infrastructure projects in the country, such as the red line of the Tel Aviv subway. Between 2004 and 2007, China's bilateral trade with Israel ballooned to reach over \$5 billion, and during this period China also ramped up its strategic messaging in Israel.<sup>52</sup> The two countries' bilateral trade volume kept growing from there, reaching nearly \$15 billion in 2019.<sup>53</sup> Yet it is important to note that such Chinese investment has not necessarily been positively received in all cases, and occasionally it has spawned negative Israeli reactions that have approached Sinophobia.<sup>54</sup>

A second factor has been China's rapid evolution from a regional power to a superpower, a development that has arguably made it a more attractive partner to Israelis. Nevertheless, China's meteoric ascent has not led to higher favorability ratings elsewhere and has already raised concerns with at least some Israelis. For that reason, it is no given that China's growing geopolitical clout automatically leads to a boost in the country's favorability ratings around the world.

Another explanation of how China is making inroads in Israel is the success of its adaptive messaging, including the localized metaphors and allusions this outreach deploys. Chinese leaders have long believed deeply in the utility of this kind of messaging. Laozi, a great Chinese philosopher from the sixth century BCE, advocated the use of "indirect" and "soft" influence rather than outright force as a tool of statecraft.<sup>55</sup> He argued that great leaders persuade their people to follow their vision without resorting to force wherever possible.

China's strategic messaging campaign in Israel and other related forms of public outreach indicate that Chinese actors are committed to cultivating influence in Israel and shaping the views of the Israeli people on important geopolitical matters. The CCP sees this campaign as part of its broader efforts to compete with the United States for influence around the world. It is too early in U.S.

President Joe Biden's tenure to know how the new administration will view and seek to shape these issues, but judging by Biden's remarks, his approach to China will be no less tough than his predecessor's, though his methods may sometimes differ.

Bennett and the new Israeli government must make plans for how to deal with these Chinese messaging activities, making clear that the Israeli government does not see China as an enemy but that cooperation with Beijing must be done right. This will require a balancing act because a key element of Israel's foreign policy will continue to be its cooperation with long-time partners like the United States and other Western countries with which it shares important values such as democracy, freedom of speech, and human rights.

## About the Author

**Roie Yellinek** received his PhD from Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan, Israel. He is an associate researcher at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, a nonresident scholar at the Middle East Institute, and an adjunct researcher at the Dado Center, which is affiliated with the Israeli Defense Forces. He specializes in studying the growing relationships between China and the countries of the Middle East, especially with regard to Chinese diplomacy and soft power. He has written extensively on Chinese diplomacy in the Middle East and is a frequent commentator in local and international media outlets.

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