Since its foundation by Czarist Russia as a strategic railway town in 1898, Harbin was in its essence a foreign domain on Chinese soil. The contract signed in Berlin on September 8, 1896 by the representative of the Qing government gave imperial Russia an opportunity to annex a wide corridor of land inside China making it a territorial possession for its ambitions of expansion. Harbin thus became home not only to Russians but to many foreign ethnic groups who came to form new future roots here.

Harbin became a home to Jewish entrepreneurs, settlers and émigrés and to members of many other nationalities, ethnicities and religions. It was a space where cultures, traditions, commerce and politics converged and merged to form a unique town that made it international in her core.

Its inhabitants, Russians, Jews, Poles, Ukrainians, Germans, Japanese, Americans, French, British, Tartars, Koreans, Chinese, and many others, saw their city as a microcosm of several connected universes. Most importantly, they participated in Harbin’s decision-making and planned its future.

It was a special international zone within a Chinese space that governed itself. Harbin’s early architectural heritage, and
the echoes of its complex social and cultural makeup – nationalities, people on the streets, goods, shops, workers, servants, interrelations, conflicts, and problems – is still visible today.

The past is a strange place to visit: you never know what will be found. The story of Jewish Harbin is alive and will keep its existence as long as it is being told and researched. It is the story of strong willed people who formed a vital Jewish community in a place far removed from global centers. By being here they created a legacy. And it is this legacy that is being unveiled and studied in its daily details.

Those who were born in Harbin or came from other places to live there are very old now. As a matter of fact not many Harbinskies are left to tell their stories. But those who passed away and those who still cling to their extremely old age had a rich history here, a past that was waiting to be deciphered and told.

In 2000 the Harbin Jewish community was present in the memories of its former members and in the imagined visions of their descendants only. The unique community that was established in 1903 came to a close in 1963 when its last family left China to find a new life in Israel.

In 2000 the Harbin Huangshan Jewish cemetery was being renovated and cleaned from accumulated debris and overgrown weeds. Death provides one lasting monument of a community’s past and sometimes a future marker, as a Chinese proverb says “home is where your relatives are buried.” But some Jews who died in Harbin between 1903 and 1962 had a second burial. A 1958 decree issues by the city government ordered the relocation of graves from the old Jewish cemetery to a new one at the outskirts of the city. Out of over 3000 graves only one fourth of the tombstones were relocated. The rest were “deep buried”, a Chinese euphemism for “destroyed”, under what are now the Harbin Ice Palace and the Harbin Fairgrounds.

At the beginning of the new millennium, the Jewish history of Harbin was considered a state secret and the very fine Harbin Jewish Archives were still closed to any inspection including academic investigation and research. The Jewish archives were shut down in the mid 1980s by an order from Beijing and every effort since then to reopen them for academic study has failed.

In 2000, the local authorities have rediscovered the Jews and although the Jewish archives of the city were to remain closed, the provincial and the
City governments were going to invest huge sums of money in renovation and preservation of Jewish communal buildings, including the two remaining synagogues, as well as private establishments that were constructed and owned by Jewish families but now were part of the state enterprises. They did so because they have adopted the old notion that all Jews are extremely rich and are very good in business, and therefore, Harbin having a Jewish history, will be an incentive to come here en mass and invest money in the hungry local economy.

The authorities entrusted the job with a newly created “Jewish Institute” at the provincial Academy of Social Sciences. The appointed director was brought from the general accounting department and her deputy came from another governmental enterprise because he studies Russian history and spoke the language. None of the newly appointed personnel had any knowledge of Judaism, what constitutes Jewish philosophy or Jewish history. Never the less, they were sanctioned to tell the Harbin Jewish story to the Chinese and the world. They wrote speeches for government officials, organized three conferences and published a photo album. Their high regard of Jews was proclaimed in a speech they wrote for Mr. Zhang Xiaolian, the Mayor of Harbin “the admirable entrepreneurial spirit and extraordinary wisdom of the industrious... Jewish nation has won them the reputation of ‘world’s No. 1 merchant’ with their unique business skills and large number of successful entrepreneurs over the world... In today’s world there is a classic appraisal of the Jewish wealth, ‘the world’s money is in the pockets of Americans, and the Americans’ money is in the pockets of the Jews’. This is the highest acclaim and praise to the Jewish wisdom...”

In 2000, very few foreign tourists came to Harbin. With the exception of Russians from across the Heilong River that serves as a natural border between China and Russia, most of the foreign travelers landed in Beijing and from there took trips to the south and the southwest of China. Almost no one made a detour to the northeast of the country. Harbin was not on the tourist maps, including those of Jews.

But two years later things started to change. The establishment of the Sino-Israel Research and Study Center (SIRSC) in 2002 at the Heilongjiang University’s School of Western Studies in Harbin, came to provide an independent alternative to the shut down Jewish archives, to find a way to reverse official and non-official ignorance, as well as to launch research projects that can benefit international and Chinese historians and former residents and their offspring.

Foremost in importance was a creation of a global family contact database from which information could be gathered, stored, and served for research.
The foundation of the Sino-Israel Research and Study Center carried several aims. Primarily, as referred to above, it was to create a Jewish archive that is independent of governmental considerations. Archives should belong to academia and to scholars for their research and studies and should be removed from any political considerations. It meant however that the research center would have no governmental funding and would depend totally on donations and contributions, something very unusual in China.

It also established certain criteria for the conduct of historical research on the Jewish community of Harbin, on general studies of the history of Harbin and its various foreign communities, historical studies about Manchuria (the northeast of China as it is termed today), and general studies of and about the presence of Jews in China.

In the ten years of its operation, the Sino-Israel Research and Study Center has become one of the leading independent research establishments of its kind in China. And its now extensive archives hold original documents, photos, memoirs, video interviews, taped interviews, historical films and personal relics donated by Jewish families who had roots in Harbin and who are now scattered all over the world.

Being an academic enterprise in its core, the research center caters to the growing numbers of international scholars who are engaged in research about Harbin and Manchuria. The center has made the students and faculty of the School of Western Studies at Heilongjiang University a prime target for broadening their intellectual knowledge and academic experience by engaging in research activities.

While learning to conduct research, the Chinese students have an opportunity to deepen their cultural, educational, social, and economic exchange with the Jewish people. This, in turn, provides a better basis for understanding cultural similarities and differences, thus creating a true and realistic image of the Jewish people.

In January 2003, the research Center established a cooperative relationship with the Hebrew University of Jerusalem creating a special program for the exchange of Doctoral candidates who will come and work on their research in Harbin.

The University of Heidelberg in Germany invited the Center in 2007 to create cooperation and exchange programs between the two universities, as well as to jointly work on a long-term international research project on the historical and cultural dimension and development of the city of Harbin between 1889 and 1949. It is an interdisciplinary, multi-country and multi-university long-range project that involves scholars and academic/
research institutions from China, Japan, Russia and the West.

The first joint international conference was held at Heidelberg University in Germany in April 2008. It was followed by the second international conference and summer school at Heilongjiang University, School of Western Studies in June 2009. The third international conference was held in Heidelberg University in November 2010.

A cooperation and exchange program between Heilongjiang University, School of Western Studies and Bar-Ilan University was signed in November 2009 in Israel. The Center is working on setting an extensive Hebraic Institute within the School of Western Studies and is an editorial partner to the academic journal Mizrekh.

A joint conference was held in Heilongjiang University in September 2008. The unique meeting, the first of its kind in China, jointly organized by Bar-Ilan University in Israel and the Sino-Israel Research and Study Center in Harbin under the title “The 1st China-Israel Jewish Sciences Conference - The Jews of China – Past and Present. Their Uniqueness and Connection to World Jewry and Israel” brought to the city over 60 Israeli scholars, representing various universities and colleges in Israel.

The Center’s research projects vary in their scope and immediacy. Among the major on-going research themes are “The Chinese Perception of the Jewish People” in which we are looking for how, when and why the Chinese formed their attitude toward the Jews, “Occupying ‘the Other’: Japan’s invasion of Manchukuo, the occupation of Harbin, and the Japanese Unit 731 experimental camp”, “Jewish Cultural, Social and Economic Contributions to Harbin and China”, “Comparative analysis of war and peace themes as reflected in major contemporary Israeli and Chinese literary works”, “Study of Harbin as an Intersection of Cultural and Ethnical Communities in Conflict 1932-1945”, as well as “Time and Space in the History of Harbin and Northeast China”.

The Sino-Israel Research and Study Center owes its growing activities and collection of documents to the generosity and support of many people around the world who understand the importance of the past. Their support preserves the legacy of the Jewish people in Harbin and China, as well as bringing about a deepening of relations between the Jewish people, Israel, and the Chinese people.

In 2012 Harbin is known again and tourists as well as scholars from afar come to visit her past and present in growing numbers.

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