Not Lost in Translation
A Torah scholar goes to China
During my childhood growing up in New York I had heard about China. Chinese food on Sunday nights before the Ed Sullivan show was Torah from Mt. Sinai. Although I loved the food (especially the fortune cookies – I could never figure out how they knew much about us) the introduction to MSG left a lot to be desired.

There were always a couple of “Chinese kids” in school through the years; very smart but somehow “different” more than the rest of the “different” kids as if lost in an ancient world removed and mythical. In Junior High School my social studies report was on China. Tons of cut up National Geographic magazines and anything else I could puzzle together went into the report. I became fascinated with Mao Zedong and the struggle for change that the Chinese people were going through.

The Talmud says “there is no comparison between (merely) hearing about something and (actually) seeing it.” So I was left to but wonder each time we went to New York’s Chinatown if China was just like this but magnified a million times over?

It wouldn’t be for many years (about 40 to be precise) that I would have the chance to find out the answer. About five years ago, work (in high tech) finally provided me the opportunity to go to China. All through the magic of email and SKYPE, I was now on an almost daily basis in contact with D&B China, communicating, of course in English, but that kind of Chinese English I remembered from Chinatown. Except this time it wasn’t about ordering egg rolls it was about talking to people whose brilliance shined. Sharp minds and curious thinkers, opened minded people with an excitement for life. These were the Chinese? I was impressed, amazed and thankful to “discover” another intelligent ocean on a planet that seemed to be drying up.

My virtual image of China’s tipping point to reality occurred as the Chinese New Year arrived. My new Chinese “friends” told me they were going to tour China and asked if I would like to join. Wow! I had never been to China (although, when I was a Jewish teacher back in the late 1980s I had lectured in Hong Kong) and here was a chance to see China through the eyes and minds of the Chinese. I was there!

Of course everywhere we went I felt like “where is Waldo”. I thought it was cool, although my hosts were very embarrassed, when they told me the local children were making fun of me calling me “round eyes”. I have Woody Allen black rim round glasses. I’m sure for the kids it was an even more exaggerated sight! It brought back shades of the book Black Like Me and gave me my first feeling of being a minority. Here “Chinatown” was the whole city with little pockets that perhaps could be called “Western town”.

The Chinese were awesome. It was instant love. In Shanghai I felt the same energy I remembered in my youth in New York City during the “fun city” days of Mayor Lindsay. It was alive, growing and nobody knows or knew where it was heading – but who cared – the ride was incredible. Even in Beijing which had a much more sedate nature to it, the Forbidden City with Mao’s picture was a synapse between fantasy and reality. I mean when Mel Brooks said “It is good
to be the King", had he known about the 3,000 wives (three times King Solomon's harem) in the Imperial City, I'm sure he would have corrected that to "it is good to be the Emperor". Personally I can confirm that. When we made it to West Lake there was a tourist trap renting Emperor clothing. I couldn't resist and within seconds I had three wives! (Okay, at least 3,000 is a multiple of three).

Clearly the more important part of the trip was the exchange. There didn't seem to be enough hours in the day (or night) for the dialogues, each wanting to know more and more about China and the Jews. I had never thought about it before, until my new Chinese friends brought it to my attention, the Jewish impact on Chinese life. Beginning with Jesus, who I quickly described as a distant cousin who had some "family issues" and then to Karl Marx, whose grandfather was a great rabbi and Kabbalist.

From their perspective they were most curious about the Talmud and Kabbalah. I told them the story that had just broken before my trip in Israel where the Ambassador from South Korea announced at a meeting in Tel Aviv that "more children in Korea know who Rav Pappa is than in Israel." Sadly he is correct, because anyone who has studied more than ten (daf) pages of the Talmud will have come across the name Rav Pappa. Now, Israel suddenly discovered that Koreans study the Talmud and within months Korean TV crews were all over the Yeshivot (Talmud study schools) in Israel.

They told me that the Talmud was also now becoming of interest in China as the secret to Jewish success in business. I agreed, quoting Rava from the Talmud that anyone who wishes to become smart should study the section of Talmud dealing with business law (Nezikim). I also told them I had been a Rabbi. I know, my friends always say "once you are a rabbi you are always a rabbi" and I try to explain that was only true of the Jets (not Jews) from West Side Story. But I guess if it is in your blood it is in your soul.

So I began to share very deep ideas in Jewish thinking – why the moon was smaller than the sun, what does resurrection of the dead mean to modern thinkers, and how much cream cheese must be applied to the bagel for it to qualify as a smear (smear). It was incredible to see these young minds gobble up this information and retort with almost parallel teachings from the East.

Upon my return to Jerusalem I sent them two "Torah" books I had written, one called Good Morning, Moon and one called I Never Prayed for My Father. I was touched by the heartfelt feedback both positive and negative I received. Reminds me of a classic Charlie Brown cartoon where Charlie Brown is storming away from Lucy standing in her 5 cents Psychiatric box and she is yelling after him, “The problem with you, Charlie Brown, is you don’t know how to handle destructive criticism.” But I welcomed all of it. I always remember my rebbe teaching me, “We have two ears and only one mouth because we need to listen twice as much as we speak.” Considering I like to talk a lot I don’t know if I ever succeeded in following his dictate but it has been something at least worth striving for.

This story continues until about June of this year when I was blown away to find out my friends had translated Good Morning, Moon into Mandarin. I was so touched by this gesture that I decided to give the book away for free as an eBook and have posted the book on a website I helped to create for Jewish and Israeli books in general at www.peopleoftheebooks.com and have watched, in just a couple of months, an incredible number of the hits from China. These hits are not just coming in from the main cities but across the country. It has been forwarded by friends, in China, as a gesture to help bridge a better understanding of our two cultures.

The book is light on the heart and deep on the mind. I guess when you speak from the soul to the soul you can rest assured the content will not get lost in translation.