

Chinese Scholarship on Iran and the Middle East

Nadia Helmy*

Abstract

In the past three decades, Chinese Iranian and Middle East Studies have become more and more systematic, which is reflected not only in the great volume of publications, but also in the varied research methodologies and the increase in Iranian and Middle East academic journals. The development of Chinese Middle East studies have accelerated in particular after Arab Spring revolutions and the political changes in the Middle East (2000- 2013). Research institutes evolved from state-controlled propaganda offices into multi-dimensional academic and non-academic entities, including universities, research institutes, military institutions, government offices, overseas embassies and mass media. At the same time, publications evolved from providing an introduction and overview of Iran and Middle Eastern states to in-depth studies of Middle East politics and economics in three stages: beginnings (1949- 1978), growth (1979- 1999), and dealing with energy, religion, culture, society and security. The Middle East-related research programs' funding provided by provincial, ministerial and national authorities have increased and the quality of research has greatly improved. And finally, China has established, as well as joined, various academic institutions and NGOs, such as the Chinese Middle East Studies Association (CMESA), the Asian Middle East Studies Association (AMESA) and the Arabic Literature Studies Association (ALSA). However, Chinese Middle East Studies remain underdeveloped, both in comparison with China's American, European, and Japanese studies at home, and with Middle East studies in the West.

Keywords: Middle East studies, Middle East Discipline, Iranian Studies, Think Tanks, Institutions, China and the Middle East

* Director of South and East Asian Studies, Beni Swif University, (nhm_ambassador@yahoo.com)
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Introduction

It is difficult to distinguish between specifically Iranian studies and more general studies about the Middle East in China. Since China shifted its attention from domestic political and ideological movements to economic development through the open door policy in 1978, a significant change almost immediately occurred in its thinking of the world order and China's foreign relations, in particular with Iran and the Sino-Iranian relationship. Regarding "Iranian studies in Chinese universities and think tanks, China has witnessed increasing numbers of Iranian studies programs in universities and think tanks. In addition Sino-Iranian cultural relations and influences from the archaeological point of view have become a common subject of many papers. New archaeological findings and cultural relics, such as Persian coins, glassware, gold vessels and silverwares, tombs and tombstones along the Silk Road within China have provided new stimulations and perspectives for Iranian studies in China. Several Chinese papers about Iranian studies focus on the study of religion and new attempts have been made to understand Iranian religious texts and documents in China.

However, in the first decade after the establishment of the PRC (1949- 1959), only propaganda offices were active, rather than academic institutes for international studies in general, or Middle East studies in particular. The practical needs of China's foreign policy led to the development of Middle East studies and in particular Iranian studies, starting with engaging experts in foreign languages and focusing on specific issues of the Middle East. On the eve of his visit



to Asian, African and European countries, Premier Zhou Enlai hosted a meeting to foster Chinese foreign studies. The participants submitted a report entitled "On the Enhancement of Foreign Research", claiming the ongoing research could hardly meet the demands of the then turbulent decolonization process in the Middle East. The report put forward a number of practical suggestions such as the establishment of independent research institutions. They were eventually approved by Chairman Mao Zedong, then head of state. At the demand of Mao and Zhou, the PRC government established an agency called the Central Leadership Team on Fostering International Studies (Zhou Enlai, 1984: 13).

The 12th Congressional Conference held in 1982 identified "Peace" and "Development" as the two major themes that China would adhere to in the following decade. At the same time, the Conference also led to less emphasis on the communist ideology and playing down the practice of international class struggle and the world united front. What replaced this in China's foreign relations was the notion that China would respect the will of each people and nation and their attitudes and opinions on international affairs on the following basis (Zhao Baoxu, 2004:142): the nature of the issues, the interests of the Chinese people and that of the people of the world. In other words, since 1980 China began considering the interests of not only the Chinese people but also of the people of the world in dealing with international affairs (Zhu Weilie , 2009: 4).

Although it is unclear exactly what the interest of the people of the world is and who represents the people of the world, it is certain that the U.S and the Soviet Union were the then superpowers. It also could implicitly indicate that China's foreign policy would take into account American interests (Weihua An, and Qian Xuemei, 2006: 63-70). It is during this period that major Middle Eastern states began to establish or negotiate diplomatic relations with China. Egypt, UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain established diplomatic relations with China in 1956, 1984, 1988, and 1989, respectively.



Egypt was the first country in the Middle East that established relationship with China in May 1956, and continued ever since to have diplomatic and political ties with it. Saudi Arabia followed suit. It contacted and discussed details with China regarding formal diplomatic relations and the Saudi Ambassador to US, Prince Bandar, visited China in 1988, precipitating the establishment of full diplomatic relations with China. The 1980s witnessed the fruition of the relationship between China and Arab countries (Zhu Weilie, 2007:19).

I- China and the Region

Having discussed major Chinese political and diplomatic principles underlying its foreign policy toward the Middle East, it helps to discuss several myths involved in this context:

The first myth is that China depends on the oil of this region. It is true that first Iran was and now Saudi Arabia is China's primary oil provider. However, it should be noted that the Middle East is just one of many regions in China's energy diversification plan. In this respect, China especially targets Central Asia and its own offshore resources. At the same time, China already has the world's biggest clean energy industry including wind, nuclear, solar, and other forms of energy supply (Huang Minxing, 2006: 31).

The second myth, as some Chinese scholars and politicians have argued, is that China possesses major interests in the Middle East. China's diplomatic concentration and its core interests clearly lie at the South China Sea, which is disputed by Southeast Asian countries, as well as its core interests in Tibet and Xinjiang. In other words, China's declaration of core interests has more to do with sovereignty and security issues that have been challenged by immediate neighbors. Although oil and gas are central to China's energy security, since China diversifies its energy interests in different countries and industries, the Middle East is not the core interest of China. However,



after the events of September 11th 2001, the Middle East has become a concern for China in so far as the possibility of the "Uyghur" separatists and Middle Eastern terrorists may work together to challenge China's sovereignty and security. The attempted bombing of the Dragon Mart in Dubai this year more or less confirms such concern for China (Zhu Weilie, 2010: 57).

The third myth is that China's Iran and Middle East policy is independently formulated. As already mentioned, since the 1980s China has seriously taken into account the US or US-dominated international community and norms when dealing with the region. From China's acquiescence of American military actions against Iraq in 2003 to China's participation in the US-led war on so-called Islamic terrorism in Afghanistan in 2001 to China's recent support to sanction Iran, it clearly shows that China has and will work with the US on any issues related to the Middle East (Chen Wanli, 1988:87).

There are many reasons ranging from economic to military considerations to account for why China has prioritized the US in dealing with Iran and the Middle East. However scholars should consider the impact of the US in China's academic and policy community with regards to the Middle East. To discuss American influence on China's Middle East academic and policy community, one has to go back to China-West history, including the US-China conflict in 1900, in which China was defeated and agreed to pay war indemnity. America was the only country to use that money to invest in China's future academic and intellectual leaders by providing financing for Chinese students to study in the US. This practice was temporarily suspended from 1950s to 1970s and restored after 1980s. By the 1980s many of China's social scientists were trained in the US. The field of Middle East study, once reserved for Arabic centered scholarship, began to be influenced and even dominated by western-trained scholars and experts in China's academic and policy community (Peng Shuzhi, 191: 23-25).



II- China's Middle Eastern Vision

In the past, China's scholars on Iran and the Middle East were quite small in number and their works were narrow in scope. Since the reforms and the open door policy, new publications of Chinese Middle East Studies began to mushroom (Cheng Hong, 2010: 71-75). There are many academic books which can be divided into ten Categories:

1. Individual State Studies: the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences initiated a major research program, called the Study of World States, to study the territory, people, history, politics, economy, military, education, science, public health, and foreign policy of individual states. The series is rich, accurate, and detailed in content, and provide interesting and in-depth analysis. The books published in the series involve several countries of the Middle East, North Africa and the Horn of Africa (Yang Guang, 2010:37).

2. A Panorama of the Middle East: This category of publications attempts to provide readers with an overview of the region. The books are mainly for beginners, so that the Chinese general public may get a better understanding of the Middle East. To reach a larger audience, the authors use colloquial discourse, though the text obviously lacks academic significance and proper research methodology (Guo Yifeng, 2006:21).

Middle East Politics: This subject is related to a wide array of Middle East political systems, peace processes as well as China's foreign policy in the region (Yang Guang , 2009:16).

3. Middle East Security Studies: This subject is related to war, military security, and conflict. Representative of this category is Zhao Guozhong's "Middle East Power Pattern after 1990" (China's Social Science Press, 1995), This book was written on the power pattern in the Middle East after 1990, and is probably the most popular among such publications (Ha Quanan , 2006: 54-79).

4. Middle East Terrorism: Since the end of the Cold War,



particularly since the 9/11/2001 terrorist attacks, non-traditional threats in the Middle East, such as terrorism, separatism, and extremism, have aroused the interest of Chinese scholars. In the past five years, the academic books in this field have been especially interesting. They have touched upon the essence of Middle East terrorism from a multi-disciplinary perspective, including political science, history, sociology, psychology, ethnology, and religion (Zhu Hehai, 2007:28).

5. International Relations History of the Middle East: This has a three-fold meaning: it concerns first, the interaction between Middle East countries, second, the interaction between the Great Powers and Middle Eastern countries, and third, between the Great Powers themselves. A great number of books in this field are about the relations of the Great Powers and lesser powers in the area. These books usually follow a chronological sequence. Adopting a historical approach, Chinese scholars have also written a large number of books on ancient Arab history (Ding Jun, 2009:43).

6. Middle East Economy: Compared with political, security and historical studies, Chinese Middle East economic studies are at an embryonic stage with little economic expertise (Qian Chengdan and Wang Tiezheng, 2010:15).

7. Middle East Energy: The Middle East boasts rich oil reserves, which makes up over half of the world market. In 1993, China became, for the first time in history, a net importer of oil; in the twenty-first century, China's energy security and oil strategy have become increasingly important to politicians, and oil companies, and has warranted much academic research. Books on this topic are not only of particular significance for top decision-makers, but also essential to China's four state-owned oil giants, i.e. CNPC, SINOPEC, CNOOC and SINOCEM (Jiang Hong, 2007:10).

8. Middle East Islamic Studies: Prior to the birth of the People's Republic of China, Chinese Middle East Studies focused on Islam. These studies have intensified since the reforms and the open door



policy beginning from 1978. Current publications on Islamic studies are mainly carried out by scholars from the five North-Western provinces of China, such as Gansu, the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Shaanxi, Qinghai and the Xinjiang Autonomous Region (Guo Shaohua, 2009:98).

9. Middle East Society and Culture: Scholars in this area strive to study the Middle East by researching its internal social and cultural development, the most representative of which is a ten-volume series, "Contemporary Middle East Society and Culture", edited by Professor Zhu Weilie, Director of Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University (Gong Chaopeng, 2009:8).

10. Generally speaking, the publications in Chinese Iranian and Middle East Studies are of a great variety, subject, and content. Yet, compared with Arab, Jewish and Persian studies, China's Turkish studies are still at an infant stage, despite the fact that China has about ten million Uyghurs, a Turkic ethnic group, and that Turkish studies would be of great academic significance and affect policy making.

II- Journals, Think Tank, and University

China has over one hundred Middle East journals and publications that have established close ties with each other. The most noted ones are the Chinese Middle East Studies Association, the Asian Middle East Studies Association, and China's Foundation for International Studies and China's Arabic Literature Association. Chinese Middle East journals and publications have, at present, over 200 councilors and members, with professors to supervise them (Peng Shuzhi, 1991:68). The progress of Chinese Middle East Studies is also reflected in various academic journals. There are many Journals that focus on the Middle East and are as follow:

1. The Journal of West Asia and Africa (monthly) is one of the oldest journals on Middle East studies, sponsored by the West Asia and Africa Institute at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, a semi-official research institution (Yin Chongjing , 2010:56-58).



2. The Journal of Arab World Studies (bimonthly), one of the oldest academic journals in Chinese universities, publishes academic manuscripts on Arab entities and the Middle East at large, including Iranian, Israeli, and Turkish studies (Xu Xiaojie ,2012:12).

3. The Journal of the Xinjiang Social Sciences, the North-West Ethno Studies, the Journal of Hui Muslim Minority Studies, and the Journal of China Muslim Studies are also influential journals published in the North-West provinces of China, with their large Muslim populations. Journal of Middle East Studies, sponsored by the Middle East Studies Institute of North-West University, is not published openly although it also has a long history. Chinese scholars publish papers related to the Middle East in these journals (Yang Guang, 2009: 87).

Since all these articles are written in Chinese, they have a very limited influence abroad. However in recent years, Chinese Middle East institutes have been probing opportunities to enhance international cooperation and make their journals known abroad. For instance, Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University has formed a strategic alliance with the U.S. Asian Cultural Academy; the two sides have jointly published an English journal called “Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies in Asia” in Washington D.C. in 2005- 2010. China cultivated over two hundred Middle East MA and Ph.D. students, who have written a large quantity of valuable papers. The China National Knowledge Infrastructure, the most outstanding database on the Internet, has many dissertations on the Middle East (Cheng Hong , 2010:71-75).

There are several types of Middle East research institutions and organizations in China. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS hereafter), the China Institute of International Relations (CIIS), the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) as well as regional institutions such as the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (SASS) and the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS) They are the leading sources of research



on the international politics and economics of the Middle East. China's major Middle East think tanks are as follow:

1. State Council and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS): At national level, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, led by the State Council, constitutes the Institute of West Asian and African Studies (IWAAS). IWAAS researchers tend to focus more on Middle East issues such as: The Changes in Middle East, Arab spring revolutions, Persian Gulf oil economies and the Iranian nuclear issue. Three researchers have been leading figures on Middle East studies in China: Yang Guang, Director of the IWAAS, who focuses on Persian Gulf economic Development and energy security. Yang is a leading Persian Gulf expert and participant in the Chinese government's discussions on oil and energy security regarding the region. Another prominent Middle East expert is Yin Gang, a historian by training, who focuses on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Yin is also a CASS researcher privy to the Chinese government's discussions on Middle East issues and meetings with U.S. officials. The Institute is responsible for publishing the bimonthly "West Asia and Africa" for "Xiya Feizhou", a major source of expert analysis on contemporary Persian Gulf politics.

2. China Institute of International Studies (CIIS): CIIS is a government think tank affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Developing Countries section is created in 2006. Li Guofu, Director of the Developing Countries section, is a prominent expert on oil, energy, and other regional issues.

3. China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR): CICIR is a subordinate to the Ministry of State Security (MSS), and has a long history of intelligence collection. CICIR's Center of West Asian and Africa Studies conducts research on various Middle Eastern problems, including the Iranian nuclear crisis, and regional organizations and relations (CICIR's website, 2009). Li Rong, the Center's director, is a leading policy analyst on economic and oil issues. In addition, CICIR's Center for Counterterrorism



Studies has conducted research on terrorism in the region. CICIR is seen as taking a more strategic approach on International politics, as well as conducting more long-term planning on policy issues.

4. Regional Think Tanks: Shanghai has two municipal think tanks. One is the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (SASS) as well as the Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS). SASS has the Institute of European and Asian Studies (IEAS), which entirely focuses on Jewish studies. Wang Jian and Pang Guang are two eminent scholars on Jewish studies. SIIS's Center for West Asia and African Studies (CWAAS) researches energy, politics, and culture and the representative researcher is Li Weijian (SIIS website, 2010). Shanghai's think tanks prioritize Jewish studies and present an Israel-centered study of the Middle East due to the historical and economic ties between Jews and Shanghai. Several of China's Middle East experts have even identified Shanghai as an Israeli lobbying base.

In addition to governmental think tanks at various levels and regions, Middle Eastern studies can also be found in departments of languages and international relations at many of China's universities.

In Beijing, Peking University and Foreign Languages University offer Arabic Language teaching. President Zayid of the UAE contributed financing to acquire a building for the Arabic language study at Foreign Languages University. Bahrain is financing an Arabic library at Peking University. Professor Wu Bingbing currently serves as chairman and his research encompasses Sino-GCC relations (Wu Bingbing website). Professor Wang Suolao at Peking University's department of international relations works on the Middle East issues including Islam and politics (Wang Suolao website).

Shanghai International Studies University's Middle East Studies Institute: it was established in 1980 and has research sections on GCC politics, economy, and culture. The Middle East Studies Institute tends to emphasize a cultural-religious approach to understanding the region. Its researchers have conducted scholarship on Arab-Islamic culture, the social role of mosques in the Middle East, Quranic



themes, and translations of Islamic texts. Director Zhu Weilie is student of Ma Jian, an Al-Azhar University graduate and the founder of Arabic and Islamic studies in the People's Republic of China. Zhu conducts broad research on the Middle East and is one of the top consultants for China's Middle East policy (Zhu Weilie Website). Zhu's Institute publishes a periodical on Arab world studies known as *The Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*.

Other Chinese universities that cover the Middle East studies include Yunnan University and Northwest University. Xiao Xian and Huang Minxing are representative scholars on Middle East history, culture, modernization and human resources (Xiao Xian website).

In contrast to previous generation of China's Middle East experts, most current scholars are not Muslims. There are several Muslim scholars from regional universities who returned to China after studying Islam in the Arab countries or Pakistan and have been labeled by some mainstream researchers as "Taliban" scholars, indicating their difficult situation in today China.

Table (1): Senior Middle East Experts of China: Affiliations, Institutions, Connections, and Social Positions

Name	Institution	Affiliation	location	Education	Foreign Language	Major Overseas contacts	Social Positions
Yang, Guang	CASS	State Council	Beijing	Beijing Foreign Languages University	English	US, France	President of Chinese Association Middle East Studies
Yin, Gang	CASS	State Council	Beijing		English	Israel, US	
Zhang, Xiaodong	CASS	State Council	Beijing		English	US, Israel	Vice President of the Chinese Association of Middle East Studies
Li, Guofu	CIIS	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Beijing		English	US	
Li, Rong	CICIR Director	Ministry of State Security			Beijing	English	US
Li, Weijian Shanghai	SIIS	Shanghai Municipal Government			English	US	
Zhu, Weilie		Shanghai Foreign Languages University	Shanghai		Arabic	Arab Countries US	
Wu, Bingbing	Peking University	Ministry of Education	Beijing		Arabic, Persian, English	Syria, Egypt, Pakistan, US	The Sultan Qaboos Professor
Wang, Suolao	Peking University	Ministry of Education	Beijing		English, Arabic	Egypt, Israel	
Xiao, Xian	Yunnan University	Ministry of Education	Yunnan		English		
Huang, Minxing	Xibei University	Ministry of Education	Shaanxi		English French		



IV- Iranian Studies in China

China and Iran first established diplomatic ties in 1971. During the ensuing years, Beijing had strong relations with the Shah of Iran. The relationship continued and expanded even further after the Islamic revolution in 1979 and is strong and robust today. From the Chinese perspective, Iran is a major power in the Middle East, with a population of nearly 75 million; it is the most populous country in the region and the second largest territory. Additionally, Tehran's military capabilities exceed those of other countries in the region. As a Middle Eastern power, in the Chinese calculus, Iran could play a key role in helping China expand its influence in the region and beyond (Chen Junhua, 2009: 110-118). There is a great body of academic literature on the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran including the works of many Chinese scholars who have worked to illustrate different topics both in their conceptual and practical dimensions (Ramazani, 1990:40).

However, there are few scientific studies done regarding Iran-China relationship after the Islamic Revolution, and even fewer in the post-Cold War era. Hence, it can be said that the current Iranian relationship with China is poorly understood (Calabrese, 2006). With this in mind, this paper, aiming to show the existing gap in the field of Iranian foreign policy studies, rests on the assumption that Iran's China policy is among the issues that have unfairly been overlooked since the inception of the Islamic Republic. Through reviewing some important works that have been published about Iran-China relations, this paper will conclude that there are merely a few works concerning Iran's attitudes and policy towards China. In other words, few researchers have shown interest in analyzing the factors that have influenced Iranian decision makers' calculations regarding relations with the PRC (Alterman & Garver, 2008: 4).

On the other hand, most scholars have devoted their attention to Sino-Iranian relations within the context of the Chinese foreign



policy. In addition, they generally provide interpretations through Western lenses, and therefore, reflect the potential consequences of the ties between the two states for the West and particularly the United States. This review, by using a qualitative content analysis method, would provide a clearer understanding of what has been overlooked and would be needed in the field of the Iranian foreign policy analysis (Bin Huwaidin, 2002: 173).

In China, Sino-Iranian relations and China's Iran policy are popular but sensitive issue. On the one hand, scholars have a heated debate at almost all symposiums concerning Iran, and many ordinary Chinese people are also interested in this issue. On the other hand, in major Chinese public media and academic journals, we can hardly see articles criticizing Iran, let alone finding a clear and specific explanation for a would-be China's policies against Iran (Zhao Hongwei, 2010: 28-33). The fact, that Iran has been discussed so widely in China proves that Sino-Iranian relations are a controversial issue. One might expect there to be many different opinions or advice on China's Iran policy in the Chinese public discourse, but in fact it is rare to find such articles in major Chinese media and academic journals (Chen Wensheng 2010: 39-54).

In recent years, the most comprehensive accounts of China's contemporary strategic involvement with Iran have come from the "Xinan University Research Center for Iran Studies" (RCIS). Informally established in 1985 by two of China's most prestigious Iranian scholars, Sheng Xugong and Sun Peiliang, RCIS became a government-sponsored center for research excellence in 2008. At present, "RCIS" is China's premier research center with a focus on Sino-Iranian relations and enjoys support from both the local government in Chongqing and from Beijing. RCIS also maintains ties with the Iranian government through the Iranian Embassy and the Iranian Culture and Communications International Research Center (CCIRC). The unique focus and government support suggest its researchers both influence and reflect Chinese government opinion



(Shanghai International Studies University, 2008).

There are two main works by the "RCIS" on Sino-Iran relations in the last two years. The first, composed by Yang Xingli and Chen Lianqing, is about "the Discussion on the Influence the Iran Nuclear Question has on Sino-Iranian Relations", and the other by Chen Junhua is the "Analysis of the Characteristics and Strategic Orientation of Sino-Iran Relations in the New Era". While strikingly different from one another, they both share what at first seems like pessimism regarding the strength of Sino-Iranian relations.

Professor Yang Xingli, Vice Director of Xinan University's Research Center for Iran studies and Professor Chen Lianqing, also of Xinan University (Chen Lianqing and Yang Xingli, 2010:79-81), claim that "Tehran is a revolutionary Islamic regime opposed to communism as much as imperialism", while "China relies on socialism to develop into the type of state that Iran openly opposes". The two scholars argue that while "China wants to develop economically; Tehran wants to expand its political and cultural influence to the Middle East and the world". Lastly, they state that while "China is focused on economic development and is intent on hiding its strength", Tehran engages in aggressive dialogue and is seeking to develop through its military"(Ibid).

Professor Chen Junhua, Director of Iranian Economic and Geographic Studies at Xinan University Research Center for Iran Studies and Council Member of the Chinese-government sponsored Middle East Research Center adds to Yang and Chen's focus on the disparity between China and Iran by relegating Iran to a third-tier foreign policy concern for the People's Republic of China (PRC). Chen Junhua writes that "in terms of national foreign policy priorities, Iran will remain a third-tier concern on the Chinese four-tier scale, officially relegated to a position behind Beijing's relations with the United States (first-tier), and the European Union, Japan, and Russia (second-tier) for the foreseeable future" (Chen Junhua, 2009:110-118).

Yet, according to Professor Wang Liping of Jiujiang University,



"Beijing supports Tehran even when such support translates into a de facto aggressive stance against the US" (Wang Liping, 2010: 58-59). While some Chinese scholars claim that "Beijing is aware that its Iran policy harms China's global image as a responsible power and complicates Beijing's central domestic priority of peaceful development, it has consistently backed Iran despite international pressure not to do so".

Table (2): Senior Iranian Experts of China: Affiliations, Institutions, Connections, and Social Positions

Name	Institution	Foreign Language	Major Overseas contacts	Social Positions
Chen Lianqing	Xinan University	Persian English	Iran, Persian Gulf Countries	Director of "Xinan University Research Center for Iranian Studies" (RCIS).
Yang Xingli	Xinan University	Persian English	Iran, Persian Gulf Countries	Vice-Director of "Xinan University Research Center for Iranian Studies" (RCIS).
Sheng Xugong	Xinan University	Persian English	Iran, Israel	Co-Founder of "Xinan University Research Center for Iranian Studies" (RCIS).
Sun peilian	Xinan University	Persian English	Iran, Political Islam	Co-Founder of "Xinan University Research Center for Iranian Studies"(RCIS).
Chen Junhua	Council Member of the Chinese Government	Persian English	Iran Islamic Studies	Director of "Iranian Economic and Geographic Studies Center".
Wang Liping	Jiujiang University	Persian English	Iran, Persian Gulf Countries	Professor of Iranian studies at Jiujiang University

V- Americanization and Israelization

The linguistic abilities of China's Iran Middle East experts suggest that most Iran Middle East scholars in China have no knowledge of the Arabic language and the major references they consult are English-language literature, generated mostly by American scholars including American Zionists. Some Chinese scholars we interviewed



even have no concept of the scholarly politics in the U.S., embodied in researchers' ethnic/religious background⁶. Thus, even China's Islamic association translated and published rightist Zionist historian Lewis Bernard's book on Islam into Chinese⁶.

It should be emphasized that out of a dozen American scholars on China's Muslims, several are Pro-Israel and whose research often associate China's Muslim "problems" with the region⁶. Several topics on China's Muslims in English literature such as China's terrorism and "Salafiyya" make cultural communication between the Chinese and the region very sensitive. In addition to importing American literature on the region into China, references on the region are often sent by Israeli Embassy in China (Liu Tianming, 2001: 12). The category of overseas exchange or study experience in the table indicates that in addition to language, the travel of China's Middle East experts to America and Israel is another issue that affects the quality and impartiality of the research. Almost all of China's experts visit American or Israeli institutions and think tanks on regular basis (Transcending Borders: Asia, Middle East and the Global Community, 2009: 16-17).

Many Washington-area based think tanks, including American Navy Academy, Woodrow Wilson Center, and the Kissinger Institute on China and the United States, have been active and have held special conferences on China-US- Persian Gulf Relations. The Middle East program under the leadership of John Alterman at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) has a special interest in communicating with China's experts on the region (WilsonCenter.org). Also, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy has expressed interests and concerns about ongoing Sino-GCC relations (WashingtonInstitute.org).

Israel on the other hand, has undertaken unprecedented efforts to cultivate friendships in the academic and policy community of the new rising superpower, China, as it has done in the United States. In addition to distributing free books and regularly inviting influential



experts to the Israeli embassy to exchange views, Israeli institutions and think tanks sponsors Chinese experts to visit Israel. It is indeed worth noting that several Chinese experts who only visited Israel claim to be experts on the region. One influential expert even owns a private business in Israel. In contrast, GCC countries, especially UAE, Oman, and Saudi Arabia, are only interested in sponsoring Arabic language and literature based institutions in several universities, and avoid involving themselves in policy-related social science research on the GCC and China (Xinhua News, 2007).

Simply put, the state of China's Middle East study demonstrates a tendency of Americanization in that many of China's Middle East experts speak English, study in America or Israel, and generate discourses on the Middle East in the way that Americans and Israelis do. To some extent, China's Middle East experts are becoming Israeli lobbying groups in major centers in China, especially in Shanghai⁶. These practices may not directly and immediately affect China's foreign relations with the region. But given the fact that the Chinese government has begun to rely on think tanks more than ever before to formulate its foreign policies, the role of China's experts will become more and more important to decision-making and policy formation in the future. The concern this tendency creates for Middle Eastern countries is that the more think tank-based Chinese foreign policy becomes, the more challenges the Middle East countries will face if the Americanization of Sino – Middle East relations studies continues.

VI - Challenges

Despite its significant accomplishments, Chinese Iranian and Middle East Studies are still confronted with a number of problems:

1. Despite its remarkable growth, Chinese Iranian and Middle East Studies remain underdeveloped. Its relative backwardness has several implications. Compared with Iranian and Middle East studies in America and Europe, China is still at an early stage. Chinese



scholars tend to research the subjects directly related to Chinese energy, security, and cultural concerns, relying mainly on the English literature, rather than on the Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, and Turkish ones. Involved with the study of the Western Middle East are outstanding scholars who have long dominated the discourse of Middle East studies. The top ten academic journals are all from the West, to the extent that the Chinese Middle East study team more or less resembles “an isolated island”⁶.

2. Compared to American, Japanese, European, Asia-Pacific and Russian studies, Chinese Iranian and Middle East studies is still “a junior brother” and relatively underdeveloped. Although China’s major energy studies have a long history, involving large research teams and various research institutes, their academic sophistication is only now inching forward to that of developed countries (Wang Jinglie, 1999: 56). Iranian and Middle East studies play a subordinate role in the overall field of international studies because the “troublesome” Iran-Middle East is seen as being physically remote, and not directly linked to China’s vital interests. Therefore, Middle East studies can hardly expect to obtain the same grants or research funds from the government as do energy studies. For instance, among the designated key journals of political science in China, the Chinese Social Science Citation Index (CSSCI), journals specializing in American studies, European studies, Asia-Pacific studies and Japanese studies are taking the lead. Middle East-related articles are rarely accepted by the top authoritative academic journals of political science, such as *World Economics and Politics*, *Contemporary international Relations*, *International Review*, and *International Studies*. However, all the Middle East-related academic journals, including *Journal of West Asia and Africa*, *Journal of Arab World Studies*, *Journal of “Hui Muslim Minority” Studies* and *China Muslim* failed to be designated as key journals by the CSSCI in the guide of the Chinese Social Science Foundation, the main research foundation in China. The major research programs covered the U.S., Europe,



Asia-Pacific, Russia, South Asia, Central Asia, but not the Middle East. Middle East Studies in China is obviously marginalized (Tickner Arlene and Waver Ole (Ed), 2009: 174).

3. Chinese Iran Middle East Studies is still fragmented and insulated. Middle East research is complex, and should integrate politics, linguistics, literature, history, religion, ethnology, sociology, and anthropology. At present, studies carried out in China in this field center on three independent areas: politics, culture, and history. The first group focuses on Middle East international relations, and applies an empirical methodology, as represented by the Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University; the second group focuses on Islamic and Jewish culture, and is represented by Beijing University, Ningxia University, the Center for Judaic and Inter-religious Studies of Shandong University, the Institute of Jewish Studies of Nanjing University and the Jewish Studies Center of Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences. The third group focuses on the history of the Middle East and is represented by the Middle East Studies Institute of North-West University and the World History Research Institute of Inner Mongolia University for the Nationalities (Li Yuanchao, 1996: 94). The three above-mentioned groups seldom attend the same national or international symposiums and to some extent even express contempt for each other. Internal competition for academic resources and fame is so fierce that it often hinders the further development of Chinese Middle East Studies. Only if the Chinese Middle East scholars manage to transcend the gap between the various disciplines, will they be able to form a unique Chinese school of Middle Eastern study (Huang Minxing, 2006:31).

4. There exists an imbalance in Middle East studies: Chinese scholars tend to focus on Middle Eastern history, religion, and security, while its economy and society are generally ignored. For instance, due to the lack of knowledge on the cultural background of the Middle East, Chinese students of macro and micro-economics are often reluctant to focus on the Middle East (Yin Chongjing, 1999:17-



19).

5. Innovative theory and methodology are lacking: Chinese Middle East Studies are an important component of international studies. It started with many Chinese scholars profound interest in Western literature. Although they put forward some important suggestions and ideas, they lack the professional training on how to combine theory with practice, so their research findings are more descriptive than interpretative and more of an emotional articulation than a rational analysis. Since Chinese scholars are basically evaluated by their home universities and institutes for the quantity rather than the quality of their publications, they are inclined to focus on fashionable policy studies rather than time-consuming theory studies (Yang Haocheng and Zhu Kerou, 2000: 53-57).

6. Chinese scholars have not yet gone global. Restrained by language barriers, most Chinese Middle East scholars cannot write in English, and thus cannot contribute to *Middle East Policy*, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and other mainstream key journals in the West. Moreover, most of their books and articles are published in Chinese only, with limited academic influence worldwide (Yang Guang, 2010: 37).

7. Talented researchers with an extensive knowledge of the subject are rare. The situation in China is such that those who speak fluent English, Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, or Turkish will become language instructors, and they are always in demand as language teachers. They cannot set aside enough time to conduct research on the target countries, nor do they receive sufficient academic training or guidance in their research. Those who are responsible for academic studies on Middle East politics, economics, and society often do not master the relevant languages. To make matters worse, due to a shortage of funds and out of concern for their physical security, Chinese scholars seldom conduct field research in the Middle East, so their research is almost entirely based on second-hand English and Chinese literature, and bias in citation becomes inevitable (Ma Mingliang, 2008: 41).



Conclusion

How will China seize strategic opportunities and build up a Chinese school in Middle East studies over the next decade? This question is undoubtedly of great significance, not only to policy-makers, but also to researchers and scholars. The Chinese government and decision-makers should, view Iran and the Middle East from a strategic perspective and increase their funding for research.

This paper outlined and focused on China's main academic strategic concerns regarding Iran and the Middle East generally. Rather than rely on existing English language academic and government accounts of China's position - which often fail to account for the Chinese perspective, the researcher primarily depended on Chinese language government reports, academic journal articles, business reports, and blogs for analysis. In preparation for the paper, the author sought the most recent accounts of Sino-Iranian relations as well as those from official government sources, recognized experts in the region, and institutions with a specialty in China's foreign policy towards Iran.

China views both Iran and the Middle East as a key geopolitical region in terms of global economics, politics, and security and sees expanding its influence in the region as a key national development goal. Yet Beijing understands that it is a latecomer to the Middle East both in terms of political and economic influence and in the energy market. While unrest swept North Africa, Jordan, Syria, and Yemen in 2011, and China's growing energy relationship with Saudi Arabia, has the potential to fundamentally alter the Arab world's dynamics, Beijing still considers the US presence in the region unassailable in the medium-term. To balance the US presence in the Middle East without attempting to erode extant relationships, China naturally looks to Iran.

Iran serves as a natural bridge between the Middle East and Central Asia, two areas of increasing importance in China's energy



domain; Iran straddles the Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea, two of the world's most vital oil and gas zones. Beijing values Iran's proximity to the Strait of Hormuz, through which more than 13 million barrels of oil pass each day, as China would like to establish a naval base near the Strait and views Iran as an ideal location. Iran is also a member state of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and can thereby represent China's desires and concerns within the organization.

In this regard, we can emphasize academic and policy studies that should be integrated. Currently, Chinese Iranian and Middle East Studies concentrate on policy instead of academic studies, and the publications and research programs focus only on the immediate needs of China's foreign policy, such as its measures regarding the Iranian nuclear issue, the Middle East peace process, the political crises in Sudan, Tunisia and Egypt, and so forth. Basic academic studies are stagnating. As Professor Su Changhe of Shanghai International Studies University pointed out "there are two driving forces for the innovation of social sciences. One is social need, and the other is researchers' personal interests. Scholars should stick to their research subjects for a long period of time. Otherwise, they will be too impetuous to be specialized in academic research".

In conclusion, China's peaceful development requires that China become not only an economic and political power, but also an authority in academia and the field of knowledge, offering intellectual support for China's peaceful development. In this sense, the Chinese Iran Middle East study team is confronted with an overwhelming task and will face more growing pains in the years to come.

Note

1. 韬光养晦 is a Chinese idiom that stresses the need to develop a capability before daring to use it. Since the 1980s, it has been attributed to Deng Xiaoping, who argued that China must refrain from confrontation in order to ensure the peaceful environment necessary for economic development. While Western translations of the phrase tend to focus on the negative connotations of surreptitious development, Chinese scholars argue the concept is more in line with Realism's presentation of power relations. 韬光养晦 has been the driving force behind Chinese foreign policy since Deng Xiaoping. For a detailed account of Chinese historical and contemporary perceptions of the concept, See: (Yuhong, 2006).
2. The interviews with many China's gulf experts indicate that China's gulf scholars generally cannot identify Jewish background of American academia even some even mistakes Israeli scholars with American scholars of Middle East studies.
3. The Britain Orientalist "Bernard Lewis".
4. The good example is "Raphael Israeli" whose research often focuses on conflicts between Muslims and other peoples such as the Chinese.
5. The most recent comment on China's academia on Arabs and Israelis is made by an visiting scholars from Nanjing University, "Xu Xin", that "the (Chinese) people, especially academics, have a more positive view of Israel and people are more pro-Israel than pro-Arab, in general". On the link: http://www.cjnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=20271&Itemid=86.
6. Take the Middle East Studies Association (MESA), the world's largest NGO of Middle East studies as one example. In, the association had formal members, most of which were American research institutes. A great number of Middle East studies scholars from all corners of the world attend MESA's annual meetings as individuals, however very few are from China.

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