MERIA

MIDDLE EAST STUDIES IN CHINA: ACHIEVEMENTS AND PROBLEMS

By Jin Wang*

In the decades since 1949, China has made major progress in the area of Middle East studies. These academic achievements are reflected not only in the great volume of publications, but also in an increasing number of Middle East academic journals. The development of Chinese Middle East studies has become even more popular since Chinese president Xi Jinping introduced the "One Belt One Road" initiative in 2012. Since then, research institutes have evolved from state-controlled propaganda offices into multi-dimensional academic and non-academic entities, and Middle East studies publications in China have evolved from providing a basic introduction to Middle-Eastern states to in-depth studies of various Middle East issues. China has joined existing academic institutions and NGOs, such as the and Arabic Literature Studies Association (ALSA), as well as establishing its own, such as the Chinese Middle East Studies Association (CMESA). However, while Middle East studies in China are now turning out a large quantity of literature, the quality is not yet up to international standards. Middle East studies in China remains a marginal field, both in comparison with American, European, and Japanese studies within China, and with the prominence of Middle East studies in Western countries.

INTRODUCTION

Chinese Middle East studies can be traced back to the late 16th and early 17th century with the efforts of Chinese Muslims, particularly Wang Daiyu (1584-1670) and Liu Zhi (1655-1745), to translate and introduce the religious literature of the Middle East to China. Wang Daiyu combined Islamic doctrines with Chinese traditional culture and explained basic Islamic beliefs for average Chinese Muslims. Liu Zhi compiled the book *Faithful Records of the Prophet* (天方至圣实录), the first biography of Muhammad in the Chinese language.[1] From the 17th to early 20th centuries, many other Chinese Islamic scholars contributed to the research into Islam, such as Wu Zunqi (1598-1698), Ma Dexin (1794-1874), Wang Jinzhai (1879-1949), Pang Shiqian (1902-1958) and Ma Jian (1906-1978). Ma Jian's translation of the Quran is today the most popular Chinese translation of the Quran.

MIDDLE-EAST STUDIES BEFORE 1978

Since Communist China was established in 1949, Chinese Middle East research has made significant progress, but most of this progress has come since 1978, a watershed year in Chinese Middle East research. This came about when China government decided to adopt an "Open Door" policy, known by the four characters *gaige kaifang* (改革开放), which eased restrictions on academic research. Prior to 1978, Middle East research in China was largely influenced by political direction and government will. From 1949 until approximately 1948, the Chinese government viewed Islamic research as "superstitions and feudal ideas," running counter to Communist ideology, and thus should be eliminated. Academic research on the Middle East were largely concentrated on language instruction. For example, the Chinese translator of Quran, Ma Jian, suffered political persecution in the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and between that time and 1978, he was only permitted to teach Arabic at Peking

University. The role of Middle East research in China before 1978 was to introduce basic knowledge and literature to Chinese political decision-makers, and to serve as translators for Chinese leaders' foreign visits.

After the Bandung Conference, a meeting of Asian and African states which took place in Indonesia in 1955, China viewed Arab states as "anti-imperialist" allies, while Israel and Iran were "allies of US imperialism." To strengthen China's understanding of the Arab world, China began to encourage Arab-language teaching in Chinese universities. Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai published his report "On the intelligentsia problem" (关于知识分子问题的报告), in which he emphasized that "we should strengthen foreign-language teaching and foreign literature translations."[2] Before visiting Egypt in winter of 1963, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai convened leaders from Chinese diplomatic and educational establishments in order to approve a report entitled, "On the enhancement of foreign research" (关于加强研究外国工作的报告). This report encouraged enlargement of the research capabilities of Chinese academies and establishing new research institutions. Guided by this report, China's State Department organized the "Foreign Research Committee," which directed the formation of several important Middle East research establishments, including the Asia-Africa Studies Institute of China's Academy of Social Science[3], Asia-Africa Institute of Peking University, the Islamic Studies Center of Xibei University[4], and South Asia Studies Institute of Yunnan University. However, before the year 1978, the intended role of Chinese Middle East studies was solely to serve foreign affairs, rather than fostering independent academic study. And over the years of the Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1976, China's Middle East studies suffered from the national climate of political unrest and the entire field sank into stagnation.

Since 1978, when China initiated its "Open Door" policy, Chinese Middle East studies developed fast, leading to the creation of many academic establishments concentrating on Middle East studies, including:

- Institute of West Asia and Africa Studies, at China's Academy of Social Science (CASS)
- Asia and Africa Studies Institute at Peking University
- Middle East Studies Center at Peking University
- West Asia and Africa Studies Institute at the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR)
- Middle East Studies Institute (MESI) at Shanghai International Studies University
- Middle East Studies Institute at Xibei University
- Institute of International Studies at Yunnan University
- Institute of World History Studies at Inner Mongolia University
- Institute of Central and East Europe-West Africa Studies at Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences (SASS)
- West Asia and Africa Studies Center at Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS)
- Jewish Studies Institute at Nanjing University
- Institute of Africa Studies at Zhejiang Normal University
- Arab Studies Center at Wuhan University
- Department of Arab Studies at Beijing Foreign Studies University
- Middle East Studies Center at China Foreign Affairs University[5]
- Turkish Studies Center at Shanghai University
- Jewish Studies Institute of Henan University

Before 1978, due to the political climate, there was very little Chinese literature concentrating on Middle East studies. Chinese leader Mao Zedong once said with regret that "Christianity, Islam and Buddhism still influence a huge population in the world, but we lack knowledge about this."[6] Publications on the Middle East during this period were

limited to topics such as, most notably, *The Suez Canal and the Suez Issue* (苏伊士运河和苏伊士运河问题) in 1957 by Fang Dezhao, and *A Brief History of Modern Egypt* (埃及近现代简史) in 1963 by Na Zhong (纳忠). Most Middle East research prior to 1978 was in the form of classified government documents, including *Handbook for Africa* (非洲手册) in 1972, and *African Nations* (非洲列国志) in 1964. In 1972, twelve Chinese presses jointly published a series of books covering different foreign states, including 99 African and Middle Eastern states. In the late 1960s, China's Academy of Social Science (CASS) began publishing academic journals on the subject: *Africa-Asia Translations* (亚非译丛), *Africa-Asia Information* (亚非资料), and *West Asia-Africa Information* (西亚非洲参考资料).

Several commonalities dominated Chinese Middle East studies before 1978. First, China's Middle East studies were largely driven by, while also limited by, political considerations. Mao Zedong scorned efforts towards academic study, believing that, "the only thing that professors and college students can do is to read. They do not know how to fight, how to work, how to farm and they do not know what revolution is. Actually, they are illiterates; they know nothing."[7] During the Cultural Revolutions, Humanities and Social Sciences scholars were "volunteered" to accept "re-education" from poor and lower-middle-class peasants." Humanities and Social Science scholars were only required for meeting the needs of political demands, which included translation and information collection for the political leaders. Thus, the sole function of Middle East studies before 1978 was to serve politics.

Second, the methodology of Middle East studies in China during this period was largely based on official Chinese Marxist ideology. Terms such as "imperialism," "revisionism," and "colonists" were highlighted, with Arab and African states largely viewed as belonging to the Third World, while states such as Israel, Iran, and Turkey were viewed as "allies of the Imperialists." Mao Zedong believed that China should encourage all the Third World states to unite, saying, "it is the United States which fears the people of the world, not the people of Vietnam, Laos, Palestine and the Arab states who fear the United States." Following the principle of "a just cause enjoys abundant support, while an unjust cause finds scant support," Mao Zedong believed that it was necessary to encourage the Arab states to unite to fight against the West, led by the United States, saying also that "a weak state could defeat a stronger one while a smaller state could defeat a larger one."[8] All the backwardness and suffering observed within the Arab states were attributed to "robbery and oppression." Literature during this period stressed China's role in "leading the world revolution" to defeat "imperialism and revisionism."

Third, most literature produced during this period were "internal documents" for the eyes of senior Communists leaders only. The role of the academic study was advisory, to help Chinese diplomats understand the world. Mao Zedong believed that China's academic studies should be "independent" and free of any potential capitalist influence. Under this type of political pressure, most academics were able to produce only such "internal files" to avoid potential political risks that could jeopardize their career and livelihood. The production of this type of "internal files," on the one hand, guaranteed the continuity of Middle East studies, even during this period of extreme unrest, while on the other hand, hindered academic exchange and freedom.

ACHIEVEMENTS SINCE 1978

After 1978, China fully abandoned the Cultural Revolution, often known as the "Ten Years of Chaos" from 1966 to 1976, and universities and academic establishments began to normalize their research and study. During the 12th Congressional Conference of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1982, "Peace" and "Development" as two major themes for ongoing development. Meanwhile, China gradually began to de-emphasize ideology and downplay the struggle against

revisionism and imperialism. China replaced its aggressive Communist stance of "exporting revolution" with one that attempted to respect the will of different states and their people. Against this backdrop, at the end of 1978, the Chinese Middle East Studies Association was established at Yunnan University. With the academic establishments back on the right track, China's Middle East studies began to flourish in earnest.

From 1980 to 2015, more than 600 books were published on the topic of the Middle East in Chinese (including translations from other language into Chinese), in a variety of categories. First, many travel records and memoirs were published, suggesting that more and more Chinese researchers and scholars were now traveling and working throughout the Middle East. Second, beyond books dealing with the Middle East as a whole, more and more of these books were "national studies," demonstrating that Chinese Middle East studies is becoming increasingly professional and specialized. And third, these books' subjects cover a wider range of sub-topics, including politics, energy, history, terrorism, tourism, the economy, local customs, religions, and culture, demonstrating the more comprehensive nature of contemporary Chinese Middle East studies.

Since 1978, Chinese Middle East scholarship has attained several major milestones of progress. First, several Middle East studies associations have emerged and grown since then, with the largest being China's Middle East Studies Association (CMEA), which was founded in 1978 in Yunnan University, which has over 400 and a full-time staff member responsible for its daily operations. Leadership of CMEA includes notable scholars in the field including Yang Guang, Dean of Institute of West Asia and Africa Studies of CASS, Li Weijian, Dean of the Institute of Foreign Policy, Shanghai Institute of International Studies (SIIS), Li Shaoxian, Dean of the Institute of Arab studies, Ningxia University, Xiao Xian, vice president of Yunnan University, Zhou Lie, chair of the Scientific Committee of Beijing International Studies University, Pan Guang, Director of the Shanghai Jewish Studies Center and Shanghai Cooperation Organization Studies Center, Xu Xin, Dean of the Institute of Jewish Culture, Nanjing University, Zhang Qianhong, of Zhengzhou University, and Zhang Xiaodong, Research Fellow in Institute of West Asian and African Studies with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Additionally, each year since 2007, CMEA has hosted an annual conference in a different Chinese city, organized around a different conference theme. See Table 1 for a full list of conferences since 2007.

Table 1: CMEA annual conferences from 2007-2015

Year	Sponsor Organization	Host City	Conference Theme
2007	CASS	Beijing	Middle East situation
2008	Yunnan University	Kunming	Retrospect and the Prospect: China's Middle East studies from 1978
2009	Sun Yat-sen University	Guangzhou	Multidisciplinary research of Middle East studies
2010	Shanxi Normal University	Linfen	Urbanization and Modernization in Middle East
2011	Zhengzhou University	Zhengzhou	Middle East Turbulence: Background and Influence
2012	CASS	Beijing	Review of Middle East Turbulence
2013	Inner Mongolia University	Huhehot	China, US and Middle East: Trend and Development
2014	Xibei University	Xi'an	Workshop of 50 Anniversary for Middle East Studies Institute of Xibei University
2015	Ningxia University	Xi'ning	China-Arab Think Tank Forum

(Collected from Chinese Journal of West Asia and Africa (西亚非洲) and websites by author.)

Second, more and more academic centers and institutes of Middle East studies have been established in various Chinese universities and other academic establishments, such as the Wuhan University, Xiamen University, China Foreign Affairs University, Chinese Defense University, Xi'nan University, Nankai University, Hebei Normal University, China Ocean University, Lanzhou University, Shanxi University, Xi'an Foreign Language University, Qingdao University, Zhejiang Normal University. Many non-government think tanks have also begun to organize their own Middle East studies teams, the most well-known of which is the Bolian Group, founded and directed by former Xinhua news reporter Ma Xiaolin.

Third, a large number of books and academic journals on Middle East studies has been published. According to the information retrieval system of the Chinese National library, more than 600 books with "Middle East" in the book title were published between the years 1978 and 2015. These books could be arranged under several different themes:

1) Religion: Titles published since around 1985 include *A Brief Introduction to Islam* (伊斯兰教概论) by Jin Yijiu, *The Chinese Encyclopedia of Islam* (中国伊斯兰百科全书), published by Sichuan Dictionary Press (四川辞书出版社), *Modern Islamic Resurgence* (当代伊斯兰复兴运动) by Liu Zhongmin, *Law of Allah—Sharia* (真主的法度——伊斯兰教法) by Wu Yungui, *Islam and the World after the Cold War* (伊斯兰与冷战后的世界) by Dong Fangxiao, and *The Emergence of Modern Shi'ite Islam* (现代什叶派伊斯兰主义的兴起), by Wu Bingbing.

2) Histories of Middle Eastern nations: The most well-known series under this heading is *The General History of Middle East Countries* (中东国家通史), edited by Peng Shuzhi of Xibei University. The series includes volumes covering Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Palestine, Iran, Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Cyprus and the Gulf States. These volumes are still considered introductory literature for any Middle Eastern studies in China.

3) Terrorism: Particularly since 2001, terrorism has become a hot topic in China's Middle East studies. Influential books about terrorism have included *The Evolution of Terrorism in the Middle East* (中东恐怖主义的历史演进) by Zhang Jinping, *Counter-Terrorism in the Middle East* (中东反恐怖主义研究) by Zhu Weilie, and *Terrorism in the Middle East* (中东恐怖主义研究) by Qian Xuewen.

4) Energy and Economy: Given increasing energy demands and China's growing economic involvement with Middle East states, energy and economy has become another important topic since the 1980s. Books focusing on Middle East energy and economy include *Theories and Realities of Middle East Economy Modernization* (中东经济现代化转型的现实与理论探讨) by Feng Lulu, *Strategies of Middle State Economies* by Zhang Junyan, and *The Development of a Financial System in the Middle East* (中东金融体系发展研究) by Jiang Yingmei.

5) Middle East politics: The majority of Chinese Middle Eastern studies books concentrate on Middle East politics, such as *United States policy and the Middle East* (中东问题与美国中东政策) by Zhao Weiming, *The European Union's Policy towards the Middle East* (欧盟的中东政策) by Wang Bo, *Modern Middle East International Relations* (当代中东国际关系) by Xiao Xian, *Middle East Politics and Society* (中东政治与社会) by Wang Lian, and *Political Systems in the Modern Middle East* (当代中东政治制度) by Wang Tong.

A third and final measure of the growth in Middle East studies has been the many academic journals in the field that have been inaugurated since 1978. These journals, most prominently the *Journal of West Asia and Africa* (西亚非洲) and *Journal of Arab World Studies* (阿拉伯世界研究), have become the academic centerpieces of the field. A more complete list is shown in Table 2 below.

Several Chinese academic establishments also published yearly reports, as seen in Table 3 below.

Table 2: Influential Chinese Middle East studies journals

Name of Journal	Published by	Founded	Language
Chinese Journal of West Asia and Africa (西亚非洲)	Institute of West Asia and Africa Studies, CASS	1980	Chinese
Chinese Journal of Arab World Studies (阿拉伯世界研究)	Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University	1981	Chinese
Xinjiang Social Science (新疆社会科学)	Xinjiang Academy of Social Science	1981	Chinese and Uyghur
Chinese Muslim Studies (中国穆斯林)	Xinjiang Academy of Social Science	1957	Chinese
Hui Minority Studies (回族研究)	Ningxia Academy of Social Science	1991	Chinese
Chinese Journal of Middle East Issue Studies (中东问题研究)	Xi'bei University	2015	Chinese
North West Ethno-national Studies (西北民族研究)	Northwest University for Nationalities	1986	Chinese
Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)	Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University& US Asian Cultural Academy (UACA)	2007	English
Peking University Middle East Studies	Arabic Studies Department of Peking University	2016	Arabic

Table 3: Middle East Studies Yearly Reports published by Chinese academic establishments

Report Title	Publisher	Editor
Yearly Development Report for the Middle East Region (中东地区发展报告)	Middle East Studies Institute, Institute of Arab Studies, Shanghai International Studies University	Zhu Weilie Liu Zhongmin Sun Degang
Arab Development Yearly Report (阿拉伯发展报告)	Institute of Arab Studies, Beijing Language and Culture University	Luo Lin Ma Xiaolin
Middle East Development Yearly Report (中东发展报告)	Institute of West-Asia and Africa Studies, China Academy of Social Science (CASS)	Yang Guang

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Chinese Middle East studies establishments have also been seeking opportunities for international cooperation with foreign academic establishments and to create new international academic journals. For instance, the Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University has formed a strategic alliance with the U.S. Asian Cultural Academy (UACA), jointly publishing an English-language journal called *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* (in Asia) (JMEISA).

PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

Although China's Middle East studies have made significant progress since 1978, several problems remain. The first is that China's Middle East studies are still significantly

influenced by China's official political viewpoint and, thus, to some extent, lack objectivity. For example, nearly all the academic articles praised the political regimes of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya. Chinese academic articles published during the Libyan civil war in 2011 unanimously predicted that Qaddafi would win. At a Middle East studies conference held in Wuhan in 2007, nearly all in attendance praised Qaddafi as "China's Old friend."[9] Ironically, after the Qaddafi regime was overthrown, many researchers declared: "Qaddafi was never a friend of China."[10] This overnight transformation in opinion can be attributed to Chinese government attitudes towards the Arab Spring. Chinese Middle East establishments, which are under the control of Chinese official education departments and supervised closely by the Chinese government, are inevitably affected by the political viewpoint of the Chinese government.

A second challenge facing Chinese Middle East studies, given the political influence and even pressure faced by academics, is the problem of uneducated researchers hopping on the Middle-East "bandwagon." For a long time, Middle East studies in China was a marginal field, while most scholars concentrated their interests on China's relations with the United States, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and Japan. However, after 2013, when President Xi Jinping advanced the "One Belt One Road" (OBOR) initiative, which encourages Chinese studies on the Middle East and Africa, many scholars, whose interests were in fact far from the Middle East, chimed in as "Middle East experts." Many of these new experts' academic knowledge is based only on personal tourism trips to Middle East nations, while they lack a basic understanding of the religions, culture, demography and history of the region. With many researchers swarming to Middle East studies, although the number of studies in the area is growing, the quality of this work has been negatively impacted.[11]

Third, Chinese scholars lack serious international academic influence in the field of Middle East studies. Most "famous Chinese Middle East experts" are famous only within China. The vast majority of Chinese scholarship is written in Chinese and published inside China, with only a very few scholars have published English-language papers in leading international academic journals.[12] Blame for this weak international academic influence can be placed in part on China's specific scholarship evaluation system. Like the SSCI (Social Science Citation Index), China establishes its own academic journals index, known as CSSCI (Chinese Social Science Citation Index). Promotion, tenure and other opportunities for Chinese academics, including Middle East researchers, are largely based on the number of academic papers they have published, as listed in the CSSCI. Additionally, writing in a foreign language is still difficult for most Chinese researchers. Although the international academic value of an SSCI paper is surely more than that of one published only within China, the time, energy and difficulty expended on a paper for SSCI and other English-language journals offers little payoff in Chinese academic circles.

A fourth and final challenge is the limited focus and methodology of Chinese Middle East studies . Most scholarship—whether academic papers or books—focuses on politics and religion of the Middle East, especially alongside American, Russian or other great powers' Middle East policy, while newer themes such as Middle East social and economic development or themes pertaining to the expansion of the internet are overlooked. Research methodology, as well, is largely concentrated on document and historical materials analysis, while field investigations from the perspectives of sociology, psychology and economics receive little or no attention. Further, some scholars lack rigorous academic training, meaning their research is neither professional nor practical. And within the scholarship that does exist, Arab studies and Jewish studies dominate, while Turkish, Persian, and other national studies are relatively weak. Most members of the Chinese Middle East Studies Association have concentrated on Arabic studies and Gulf-state

politics, while North-African states, Turkey, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and other regions are ignored.

CONCLUSION

In an analysis of the Chechen conflict, Babak Rezvani wrote, "…a scholar of Middle Eastern studies should have a broad knowledge of the region and it is imperative that he or she knows one or more countries at intimate level… Middle Eastern studies require scholarly outlets which represent its character fully."[13] During the decades since 1978, with China's "Open Door" policy, China's Middle East studies has made tremendous progress towards developing these scholarly outlets. More and more Middle East studies establishments have been created, with more researchers dedicating themselves to this field, making increasingly valuable contributions. However, there are still glaring deficiencies, including a lack of professional interest, comparatively backward research methods, homogeneous professional knowledge structure, and lack of necessary international influence. China's peaceful development requires that China become not only an economic and political power, but also an authority in academia and knowledge fields, offering intellectual support for peaceful development. For Chinese Middle East scholars, there is still a long way ahead.

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NOTES

[1] Chinese Islamic Encyclopedias Committee, *Chinese Islam Encyclopedia* (中国伊斯兰百科全书), Sichuan CIshu Press, 1994, p. 761.

[2] See Zhou Enlai: *Selected Works of Zhou Enlai* (周恩来文选), Second Volume, People Press, p. 186.

[3] The Asia-Africa Studies Institute of China's Academy of Social Science (CASS) became the Institute of West Asia-Africa Studies at CASS after 1978.

[4] The Islamic Studies Center of Xibei University evolved into today's Institute of Middle East Studies at Xi'bei University.

[5] The Middle East Studies Center of China Foreign Affairs University was concealed after 2013.

[6] Zhao Baoxi, Some historical materials on Chinese foreign studies (关于加强外国问题研究一点史料), *Chinese International Politics Studies* (国际政治研究), Issue 4, 2004, p. 142.

[7] The Collections of Mao Zedong's lectures during the Cultural Revolution (毛泽东在文革期间的重要讲话、批语), *Party Literature* (党的文献), No.2, 1998, p.2.

[8] People of the world unite to defeat US invaders and its stooges (全世界人民团结起来，打败美国侵略者及其一切走狗), *People Daily*, May 21, 1970, A1.

[9] Academic Conference of Qaddafi thoughts held in our university (卡扎菲思想学术研讨会在我校召开), *Wuhan University Newspaper*, May 11, 2007, Page 4.

[10] Sun Lizhou: Qaddafi not "Chinese old friend" (卡扎菲绝不是中国人民的老朋友), *Youth Reference*, April 6, 2011, Page 8; Li Shaoxian: Qaddafi not Chinese old friend (卡扎菲不是中国人民的老朋友), *People News*, August 22, 2011, http://fangtan.people.com.cn/GB/147550/15481189.html.

[11] See Jin Wang, The Chaos of "One Belt One Road" Studies in China (一带一路乱象丛生), *Lianhe Zaobao*, May 30, 2015, p. 6.

[12] The few papers published in recent years in leading international academic journals include: Sun Degang and Yahia Zoubir, China's Response to the Revolts in the Arab World: A Case of Pragmatic Diplomacy, *Mediterranean Politics*, Volume 19, Issue 1, January 2014; and Sun Degang and Yahia Zoubir：China's Economic Diplomacy

towards the Arab Countries : Challenges Ahead, *Journal of Contemporary China*, Volume 24, Issue 95, 2015.

[13] Barak Rezvani, Reflections on the Chechen Conflict: Geopolitics, Timing and Transformations, *Middle East Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 6, 2014, pp. 870-871.