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FROM ENEMY STUDIES TO AREA STUDIES:
REFLECTIONS ON ISRAEL STUDIES IN CHINA

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From Enemy Studies to Area Studies: Reflections on Israel Studies in China*

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Abstract: Having emerged from the context of enemy studies in the 1960s and 1970s, Israel studies in China is developing rapidly within the framework of area studies owing to the impetus of the Belt and Road Initiative, which was launched in 2013. This essay addresses the beginnings of Israel studies in China, some Chinese perceptions of Israel that have exerted significant impacts on Israel studies in China, and the challenges for future growth that Israel studies scholars in China are facing.

Keywords: Israel studies, China, enemy studies, area studies

Although Israel studies hardly existed in China before its diplomatic relations with the State of Israel were normalized in 1992, the field is now well-established among Chinese universities. China's academic environment is very different from that of the US or Europe: our Israel studies positions are not privately funded but state-sponsored; the standing faculty and the students are non-Jewish, hence without particular emotional ties to Israel; antisemitism in its classical manifestations and the BDS movement are irrelevant in Chinese academic circles. Consequently, no doubts have been raised about the legitimacy of Israel studies as an academic field of study. From 2014 through 2019, roughly 32 scholarly monographs and edited volumes, 31 Chinese translations of scholarly books, and 172 journal articles on Israel studies were published in China, on a range of topics that are almost all-encompassing: from diplomatic relations to military affairs, from political parties to the education system, from agriculture in Yishuv to the start-up economy in Tel Aviv, from migrant laborers to the national heritage conservation, from Etgar Keret to Sinology in Israel, from the diamond industry to banking regulations.¹ In tracing the field's ascent toward its booming status quo, this essay will focus on three aspects: the

beginnings of Israel studies, certain Chinese perceptions of Israel that have exerted a significant impact on Israel studies in China, and the challenges for future growth.

The Beginnings

In China, Israel studies has historically been regarded as a component of Jewish studies. This appears so self-evident that many in China believe that Jewish studies scholars pioneered Israel studies in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and that the Chinese interest in Western civilization has naturally led to an interest in Jewish contributions thereto and consequently to Israel studies.² This trajectory is tenable for the growth of most Jewish studies scholars, who usually have a background in humanities. Yet it makes up, I think, at most half of the story.

The other half should be viewed in connection with two developments: that of Communist China's study of foreign affairs in general and that of Chinese policy toward the Middle East during the Cold War in particular. At the end of 1963, when China had already established—and intended to establish more—diplomatic relationships with several African and Middle Eastern countries, a report was submitted to Mao Zedong, pointing out the deficiencies in international studies in China at the time and proposing eight improvement measures that included the founding of specialized research institutes. Mao not only endorsed the report but also added in his reply that it “did not mention religious studies” and that “without criticizing theology we cannot learn the history of philosophy well, nor can we write well the history of literature and the world history.” Mao's sanction led to the formation of the first institutes for foreign studies, including African and Middle Eastern studies, in China. However, the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 abruptly suspended the activities of these newly emerged institutes. It was not until 1973 that these institutes in the universities were revived.³

Meanwhile, before and during the Cultural Revolution, as She Gangzheng's meticulous research shows, Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated and Third World countries became one of the main battlefields in the Sino-Soviet rivalry to lead world revolution. China foresaw the vitality of Palestinian nationalism well before Moscow and Washington first grasped the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO)'s increasing impact, becoming

the first non-Arab major power to substantially aid the Palestinian national movement while simultaneously stepping up its rhetoric against Israel. With the waning of Beijing's zeal for world revolution and the growing Sino-American rapprochement of the early 1970s came diminished Chinese assistance to the Palestinians and recalibration of Chinese policy: thenceforth, anti-Israel rhetoric would be associated with the struggle against Soviet hegemony.⁴ Given that China's foreign studies were in the service of diplomacy and thus highly politicized, Chinese policy toward the Middle East left an indelible imprint on the first fruits of Chinese research on Israel, which consisted of translations before China re-opened its door to the world in 1978.

In the beginning, Chinese knowledge about Israel was derived from Russian sources. The early 1960s witnessed the publication of two Chinese booklets written by Soviet writers: *The Situation and Policies of Israel* (1960) and *Behind the Scenes of Israeli Politics* (1962).⁵ The first depicted Israel as an outpost of Western imperialism and colonialism in the Middle East, while the second investigated Israel's economic foundation, making explicit the involvement of Western capital in Israel's nation-building. Polemical in nature, these booklets questioned the legitimacy of modern Zionism, and their translation into Chinese evinced China's solidarity with the Soviet Union in their shared commitment to combatting Western imperialism. Despite their politicized shell, these translations are not outdated even by current standards. Some of their diatribes against Israel and its treatment of the Arab refugees are now trademarks of contemporary anti-Zionist discourse, and the topic of the second booklet has never been discussed again in Chinese writings on the Israeli economy.

In late 1973, the first truly comprehensive Chinese book on Israel appeared: a translation of Nadav Safran's *The United States and Israel*, re-titled in Chinese *The History and Overview of Israel*.⁶ Its publication must have been shocking at the time: in diametrical contrast with the two booklets, it is pro-Zionist, arguing that "the strength of Zionism lies precisely in its capability to combine the traditional yearning for Return with consideration of the practical needs of the Jews"; it does not deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict; and the author is a Harvard scholar, that is, from an enemy country. As if to forestall any possible criticism, the publisher explains that Safran "wrote this book from the standpoint of

Zionism and tried his best to beautify Israel, which was aided and bred by American imperialism. He did not hesitate to use the clumsy techniques of fabricating and falsifying history, in order to vigorously defend the crimes committed by the Israeli Zionists in their persecution of the Palestinian Arab people and their invasion of the neighboring Arab countries.”⁸ However, neither Safran’s Jewishness nor Richard Nixon’s visit to China in 1972 are mentioned.

After entering the United Nations in 1971, a direct byproduct of the Sino-US rapprochement, China used the political capital of its pro-Arab stance to gain momentum for a growing movement of developing countries calling for a more just world order against the dominance of both superpowers—i.e. “American imperialists” and “Soviet revisionists” in its eyes. The Arab-Israeli conflict provided a renewed opportunity to discredit the Soviet Union. In 1975, as if to compensate for the absence of the conflict in Safran’s book, his publisher issued a Chinese version of *Palestine, the Arabs, and Israel*, written by Henry Cattán (a renowned Palestinian jurist) and translated by the Institute for the Study of Islam at Northwest University—a testimony to the revival of the first institutes for foreign studies in China. While endorsing Cattán’s copious recitation of primary sources and his strongly pro-Arab narrative, the publisher also criticizes his “views of the bourgeoisie,” pointing out that

the essence of the Middle East issue is the aggression of Israeli Zionists, the struggle between the two superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—for hegemony in the Middle East, and the struggle of the Palestinians and Arabs against this aggression and hegemony. [Cattán] emphasizes the aggressiveness of Israel, but ignores the fact that Israel is a tool of aggression concocted by imperialism. Moreover, the author is full of illusions about the UN and American imperialism.... As for the Soviet revisionists’ socialist imperialism, he never even mentions its connivance with and acquiescence to the aggressive activities of Israel, nor does he say anything about the evil acts of its overt support and covert betrayal of the just cause of the Arab people. ⁹

The very first well-documented monograph in Chinese addressing the conflict thus donned a politicized garb.

The first batch of Chinese books on Israel, though small in quantity and intertwined with China's ultra-leftist political policies, indicates that Chinese scholars were actually quite well-informed for those few in China who were concerned with Israel at the time. To a large extent, these translations are still worthy of reference because their nuanced insights and intimate grasp of primary sources have rarely been equaled in later Chinese works. Israel studies was hardly "a suspended subject" prior to 1978, as many have claimed. Instead, these early translations remind us of the context in which Israel studies emerged in China: that of "enemy studies." This is a far cry from the inception of Chinese Jewish studies before the Communist revolution. More importantly, the enemy-studies context would foster the configuration of Chinese Israel studies for years to come.

The enduring legacy of the "enemy studies" context is first and foremost reflected in three recurrent themes, or even paradigms, in Chinese writings on Israel up until today: Israel's military intelligence and security situation, its international relations with a particular focus on Israel-US relations, and, above all, the Arab-Israeli conflict. The continuous Chinese preoccupation with these topics is remarkable indeed. Already during the Cold War, the "aggression" and "militarism" of the Israeli army spawned a large number of popular works and translations on Israeli intelligence and espionage, especially on the Mossad. This trend has never abated, and it continues sprouting offshoots. Many popular works on self-defense training, sometimes called "Krav Maga" (*ma jia shu*), are promoted as "the official self-defense system of the Israel Defense Forces."¹⁰ Max Nordau's ideal of "muscular Jews" (*Muskeljuden*) has triumphed in a land famous for Kung-fu. The image of Israel as a "tool," "running dog," or "lackey" of "Western imperialist powers" has metamorphosed into "the US-Israel special relationship" (*mei-yi teshu guanxi*) in Chinese academic writings, a relationship that is now widely regarded as fraught with implications for China under the shadow of its trade war with the United States.¹¹ As for the Arab-Israeli conflict, it is no exaggeration to say that Israel has been examined in China largely through the prism of the conflict. Although the conflict has been somewhat marginalized both in the foreign affairs of today's Middle East and in Israel's

domestic concerns, it remains pivotal in China, notably in President Xi Jinping's policy that "the Palestine question has always been the core issue in the Middle East region, and China supports the 'two-state solution' as the right direction." This official policy, which was first put forward in 2013,¹² has been reiterated time and time again. Its importance for Chinese scholars of Israel studies cannot be overestimated.

The conflict tends to polarize Chinese practitioners of Middle Eastern studies into pro-Israel and pro-Palestine groups, and the former is mainly composed of scholars with backgrounds in Jewish studies. What is often neglected, however, is that the pro-Zionist seeds were actually sown in the context of enemy studies and that some Arabists and Middle Eastern studies scholars played a crucial role in initiating the pro-Zionist discourse. It was only in the mid-1980s, when the ultra-leftist ideology had begun to ebb away, that Chinese scholars started to argue openly, following Nadav Safran, that Zionism should be viewed not as a "tool" manipulated by Western imperialists but rather as the product of antisemitism and the denial of the Jewish people's right to exist.¹³ In fact, by the early 1980s, a group of pro-Israel scholars had been formed in the universities and political advisory bodies. Impressed by Israel's economic, technological and military strength, they felt a diminished sense of obligation towards the Arabs. They drafted a secret report on how Israel could help China update its military and agricultural technologies and submitted it to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in 1984, proposing that China should gradually normalize its diplomatic relations with Israel. Most of these scholars are former Arabists.¹⁴ The most distinguished is arguably Xu Xiangqun, who served in the intelligence branch of the Chinese army, and was involved in translating Arabic sources into Chinese for many years. In order to decipher the IDF codes, he studied Biblical Hebrew for one year with a Chinese Christian theologian trained in the US; later, through self-teaching, he became the military's first Hebrew-language instructor in the 1970s. One of the first students in his Hebrew training class became the head of the BA program in Hebrew at Peking University, the first such program in China. This legendary career was crystalized in a monograph of truly *sui generis* qualities on Hebrew grammar.¹⁵ He also co-authored one of the first comprehensive academic studies on Israel, in which he emphasized the superiority of Israeli political system in comparison with those of other

Middle Eastern countries.¹⁶ Like many other subsequent comprehensive Chinese books on Israel,¹⁷ it is divided into six sections, addressing the history, politics, economy, the military, culture, and diplomacy respectively—a structure that bears a palpable resemblance to Safran's.

Thus the emergence of Israel studies in China was Janus-faced, bequeathing a heritage that is still discernible. Middle Eastern studies scholars usually perceive Israel synchronically through the lens of the Arab-Israeli conflict and within the framework of international relations or politics; for this reason, Israel is seldom a major part of their oeuvre. In contrast, Jewish studies scholars, usually affiliated with history, foreign languages, philosophy and religious studies departments, tend to write more on the historical, social, cultural and religious dimensions of Israel, and are likely to understand Israel and the Zionist project diachronically as a modern realization of the biblical return to the Promised Land.

The Perceptions

No matter how different their approaches to Israel, both types of scholars share a deep-seated assumption that the rise of modern Israel should be traced to the biblical past. Almost all books on Israel written in Chinese, whether scholarly or popular, start with the Bible. This is perhaps the most singular characteristic of Chinese perceptions of Israel. The best-known history of modern Israel written by a Chinese scholar consists of 499 pages of text proper, of which 193 pages are devoted to introducing the Jewish history from Abraham to the Holocaust as a background, arguing that “although [the diaspora Jews] were loyal to their host countries, their yearning for the nation-state was interlaced with their longing to revive the national religion and for return to the ancestral homeland, which constitutes the main theme of the national memory and spiritual world of the diaspora Jews.”¹⁸ It conveys a conviction that the whole Jewish history has culminated in the establishment of the State of Israel—unmistakably *both* a Zionist historiographical stance *and* a nationalist view of history. While it is true that the Chinese version of Abba Eban's *My People: The Story of the Jews* (1968)¹⁹ is extremely influential among the first Chinese Jewish and Israel studies scholars and may have helped shape this perception, its

overwhelming appeal can only be understood as a consequence of the indigenous tradition, not as a foreign implant.

On the threshold of the twentieth century, many in China embraced racial nationalism. For Sun Yetsen (1866–1925), the father of the Chinese nation, nationalism was the sole generator of the rise and fall of any race, and he believed that it was the Jewish nationalistic spirit, or Zionism, that bound the Jewish race together. Sun and many of his contemporaries perceived the Jews as a homogenous racial group or nation characterized by common blood, religion, language and culture. Palestine, as a material manifestation of this racial heredity, was accepted by many Chinese nationalists as the homeland of the Jewish people.²⁰ The racial discourse was rejected by the communist government after 1949, but it casts a long shadow on New China's definition of nation (*minzu*)—which is mainly derived from that of Stalin—as a distinct cultural group sharing a common language, territory, economic life, and ethos. In the same vein, Israel is viewed as a Jewish nation-state—the old Jewish race with a new country and new language. Therefore, the Jewish past constitutes an authentic and inalienable prelude to the establishment of Israel, the only “Jewish state” in the world. This entrenched perception has far-reaching consequences.

First, it presupposes that the Jewish people are homogenous, and this essentialist understanding makes the terms “Israel” and “Jew” almost interchangeable and synonymous in the Chinese-speaking context. Israel, as a result, is widely regarded as the center of the Jewish world, a kind of spokesperson for world Jewry. In today's mainstream Chinese scholarship, the Zionist project is construed as a movement aiming at not only the restoration of the Jewish political sovereignty but also “the revitalization of the Jewish people.”²¹ Chinese practitioners in the field never bother to engage with the tension between Israel studies and Jewish studies, unlike their counterparts in the West.²²

Second, it dovetails with the Zionist discourse of negation of the diaspora. The history of the Jewish diaspora in Chinese academic writings has been presented basically a history of sufferings, plagued by political powerlessness, humiliating antisemitism, endless massacres, and delusion of assimilation—what the Chinese scholars perceive as a logical justification for the Jewish longing for return to the ancestral land. However, the

lachrymose depiction of the diaspora is intended, I believe, not so much to echo the Zionist discourse as to compare the Jewish sufferings with the trials and tribulations of modern China that have resulted from its colonization by Western imperialism. The purpose of this kind of hidden comparison is to affirm the Chinese conviction that only a sovereign nation-state can wash away national shame. In this respect, it is noteworthy that scholars specializing in Jews in traditional or modern China often write extensively on the State of Israel. According to their master narrative, as Zhang Qianhong, the author of the best known history of modern Israel (mentioned above), argued, the history of Jews in ancient China is that of voluntary Jewish assimilation into Chinese society and of Chinese Jews' heartfelt identification with Confucianism.²³ This narrative may serve as the perfect foil for strengthening the cultural confidence of Chinese identity on the one hand and for highlighting the vital importance of a Jewish nation-state to the preservation of Jewish identity on the other. In any event, the Zionist discourse, when conflated with this nationalist view of history, readily resonates among Chinese scholars. This orientation is also reinforced by a widespread Chinese propensity to equate Judaism with the religion of the Hebrew Bible.²⁴ The significance of the Talmud and other rabbinic literature within today's Judaism has been underestimated in China, with the result that "Torah" is frequently rendered into Chinese as "the Bible" (*shengjing*), and the Haredi party "Yahadut Hatorah" as "biblical Judaism" (*shengjing youtaijiao*). Thus, Haredi fundamentalism is often taken for granted as Bible-fundamentalism rather than mainly Talmud-fundamentalism.

Third, Chinese scholars are generally hesitant to accept the revisionist "New Historians" on account of this perception. The reception of Ilan Pappé and Shlomo Sand is a case in point. The translator of Pappé's *A History of Modern Palestine* (2nd ed.), Wang Jian, a noted expert on Israel, felt obliged to restore a Palestinian perspective to the current understanding of the history of Israel in China, because, in his view, disregarding Palestinian rights contradicted Israel's self-definition as a democratic state. Moreover, most of the books on Israel that have been translated into Chinese are pro-Zionist. Wang Jian believes that Pappé's book advocates against the grip of nationalism on historiography. On the other hand, Wang personally disagrees with his view that Zionism is a colonization movement. Rather, he is "more inclined to regard Zionism as a special nationalist

movement; its special character lies in the fact that it is a revival movement without a national homeland and must acquire territory to fulfill its goals. Meanwhile, Zionism has been besieged by antisemitism and other hostile forces for a long time, so it is extraordinarily sensitive to its own security.”²⁵ This exceptionalism is paradoxically the very nationalist view of history that Wang tries to guard against. Nationalism, after all, is the norm in China, where nationalistic emotion is frequently mobilized to achieve social cohesion.

Yet nationalism has its critics, and it is mainly these intellectuals who applaud Shlomo Sand’s *The Invention of the Jewish People*.²⁶ What they find most striking is that Sand, being Jewish himself, has the courage to attack the myth-making of the nationalist historiography—and that his book has still been published in Israel. It speaks to the fact that the political system of Israel is mature enough to tolerate dissidents who are fearless enough to mock the hypocrisy of nationalism, thereby teaching the Chinese reading public an important lesson: “A modern state can only be based on the principles of constitutionalism. It should endeavor to seek out the greatest common denominator among different cultures and ethnic groups, so as to gain the recognition of all citizens rather than specific ethnic groups. A state based on nationalist imagination is doomed to be unsustainable and unable to solve the practical problems it confronts.”²⁷ Interestingly, what began as an anti-Zionist project has resulted in vicarious approbation of the Israeli political system, even though Israel still does not have a constitution.

The political system notwithstanding, Chinese people are now much more eager to embrace one aspect of Israel’s “soft power.” On the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of Israel Ying Gang, an influential commentator on Middle Eastern affairs, observed, “There are many reasons for Israel’s survival and prosperity. A strong military force and the full support of the United States are crucial, but the key reason is its soft power, which is prominently reflected in its millennium-old sense of national identity, an indefatigable sense of crisis, a high degree of national cohesion, and a well-implemented legal system.”²⁸ The nationalist character of the soft power, as Ying admitted, is “hard to replicate,” but one dimension that Ying did not mention has always been eminently reproducible in China—technological expertise.

In the 1980s, before the normalization of Sino-Israeli diplomatic relations, a secret channel facilitating trade and technology exchange between the two countries already existed, aiming at bringing military and agricultural knowledge to China.²⁹ Israel was trying to break through its diplomatic isolation with arms sales and agricultural technology exports, while China since the mid-70s has regarded the military, the economy, and technology as neutral, classless, and non-ideological spheres. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of Chinese publications on Israel were, perhaps still are, works on Israeli military affairs and agriculture. Israel studies scholars in China often neglect this phenomenon, obviously because the two fields are far removed from their own backgrounds, and because these publications are usually either purely technical or catered to the mass market. New trends do emerge in this aspect. Mainly after the Chinese publication of Dan Senor and Saul Singer's bestseller *Start-Up Nation*,³⁰ which enjoyed a devoted following in certain sectors of China,³¹ Israel as a start-up nation increasingly dominates Chinese popular perceptions of Israel. Many people view Israel as a role model or incubator, one that is conducive to high-tech innovation by Chinese entrepreneurs. This perception has resulted in numerous publications exploring the reasons for Jewish/Israeli creativity and on China-Israel economic ties. It appears fashionable to contend, following Senor and Singer, that service in the IDF fundamentally contributes to Israel's economic miracle. This trend has resulted in a recent boom of Chinese publications on the Israeli military. With regard to Israeli agricultural expertise and its potential utility to China, numerous articles in Chinese already testify to the miraculous achievements of Zionism. Recent articles and degree theses or dissertations have investigated the Israeli export of agricultural technology within the context of Israeli public diplomacy, a development that will certainly promote interaction between the agriculture experts and the Israel studies scholars.

Israeli soft power also benefits from the flourishing of contemporary Jewish/Israeli culture in general. The sensational sales of Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* and Simon Sebag Montefiore's *Jerusalem: The Biography* in China have led to the publication of other Jewish/Israeli-themed books in Chinese. In addition, modern Hebrew literature has attracted widespread attention, both among the reading public and among

contemporary Chinese writers and scholars.³² The most influential Israeli authors in the Chinese-speaking world by far are Amos Oz, Yehuda Amichai, and Etgar Keret. Oz, a child of the Kibbutz ethos, seems to resonate particularly well with the generation who have intimate memories of communism, while Keret is enthusiastically welcomed by college students amidst the volatile urban landscape. In contrast, Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the first Israeli Nobel laureate in literature, has not obtained the attention he deserves from Chinese literary critics despite the fact that some of his books have been translated into Chinese. Unlike the secularized Biblical heritage that informs many contemporary Israeli writers, Agnon's texts are saturated with allusions and references to rabbinic literature. For readers unfamiliar with the Talmud and with later rabbinical literature, much of the subtle meaning of Agnon's work is lost and only the plot is left for appreciation. Similarly, there is even a Chinese collection of poetry by Rachel the Poetess, yet there is still no Chinese collection for Hayim Nahman Bialik, whose poetic muse had left him before he settled in Tel Aviv. The negation of the diaspora and the Chinese engagement with Judaism through the exclusive lens of the Bible are also palpable in Chinese research on modern Hebrew literature.

One aspect of Israeli soft power in China, the *hasbara* ("explaining"), was first noticed by a distinguished senior journalist covering the Middle East who had been stationed in Gaza for three years. In his article discussing how to enhance the image of Saudi Arabia in the Chinese media, he wrote, "Arabs are known for their generosity, Israelis for their 'stinginess.' But any media man in Beijing who has dealt with Israelis and Arabs would probably come to the opposite conclusion." Israeli "generosity" includes taking every opportunity to befriend Chinese journalists in Israel and the Middle East; cultivating an Israel lobby in China by inviting Chinese experts, scholars, and media leaders to visit Israel; building a positive image of Israel through the extensive social activities of Israeli diplomats in China; tracking Chinese media coverage of Israel and intervening when necessary; and supporting scholarly activities and relevant publications. All Arab countries, in his opinion, should recognize the importance of this public relations campaign in China and learn from Israel's experience and skills. He further observed, "Most Chinese media men take a sympathetic and pro-Arab stance in their coverage and

public statements, but privately, they increasingly express understanding and even appreciation for Israel. “³³ Indeed, the official media still largely focuses on the Arab-Israeli conflict and public security in its coverage of Israel. China consistently maintains that Israel should halt the building of settlements in lands claimed by the Palestinians, yet China does not deny Israel’s right to exist and rejects slogans such as “Throw Israel into the Sea.” On the other hand, more and more Chinese are now accustomed to obtaining information from new media such as WeChat articles, popular blogs, TikTok videos, and online reports in which Israel is covered from multiple perspectives and philosemitism is phenomenal.³⁴

We are on the eve of a communication revolution ignited by new technologies. The most influential history of modern Israel in Chinese is arguably Daniel Gordis’ *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn*.³⁵ Since its publication in 2018, it has sold 90,000 copies. In 2020, it was noticed by Fan Deng, who is tremendously popular for his e-reading app which is “dedicated to developing reading habits for 300 million people in China” in general and to giving tips on parenting and on workplace relationships in particular. Fan made a 50-minute video interpreting the book in his own way. It was played 5 million times within the first month after it went online.³⁶ How can we assess the impact of this unmistakable trend on the Chinese perception of Israel and its implications for Chinese Israel studies? Perhaps it is too early to tell.

The Challenges

Nevertheless, it is certain that Israel studies in China will develop within the framework of area studies as a result of the so-called the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This massive project of Chinese overseas investment, launched in 2013, involves wide-scale construction of infrastructure across Eurasia and Africa, and is designed to provide China with convenient access to world markets through highly modernized trade routes, with the Middle East forming an integral part of the project. Israel, whose technology has long been valued in China, is regarded as a key state in the strategy of the BRI.³⁷ However, China’s low engagement in areas beyond its traditional sphere of influence has imposed constraints on the realization of the BRI. To meet this challenge, China has begun to

develop think tanks since 2015, with a focus on building a number of research centers for the study of global and regional issues in universities.³⁸ As the BRI transitioned from plan to cooperative undertaking, more than 400 programs of area studies covering the world's major countries and some BRI countries were established in Chinese universities by 2017.³⁹

The rapid rise of area studies calls for, first, the study of the target country through sources in its native language(s). Hence the importance of Hebrew has been stressed. By far the majority of Chinese studies on Israel rely on English sources. Measures have been taken to enhance language training, including joint programs with Israeli universities to train undergraduates in modern Hebrew and graduate students in area studies or Jewish/Israel studies. Program participants usually stay in Israel for more than one year. Second, prospective practitioners in the field are expected to employ interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary methods, especially those borrowed from social sciences such as politics, economics and sociology. Third, think-tank-oriented research is urgently and unabashedly encouraged. As a result, new topics of study have emerged: Israel's anti-terrorism legislation, its environmental management, its immigration policies with respect to Africa, the reception of the Chinese language and literature in Israel, the implications of Sino-Iranian relations for Sino-Israel relations, etc. The relevance of these topics to the problems currently facing China is self-evident. In general, areas studies, thanks to the input of the Chinese government, will certainly attract more talents into the field of Israel studies. In fact, not a few Jewish studies scholars in China are increasingly focusing on Israel. On the other hand, think-tank-oriented study will inevitably prioritize contemporary issues. Israeli history and the Jewish past, in which certain segments of Israeli society—the Haredim for example—are deeply rooted, may receive even less attention among Chinese scholars. The rejuvenation of the Haredi groups has stimulated Chinese discussion on the relationship between religion and state in Israel, but without a sophisticated understanding of *halakhah*, our discussion will remain at the level of factual description.

In terms of the number of practitioners and the extent of scholarly output, Israel studies, like Middle Eastern studies and Jewish studies, is still on the periphery of Chinese academia. How to broaden the impact of Chinese Israel studies remains a challenge. The current tendency to seek out relevance to or affinity with current Chinese concerns will

surely be reinforced in the foreseeable future. Perhaps the way to achieve a real breakthrough is to consciously conduct theory-guided research in order to enrich the understanding of subjects other than Israel and to healthily neutralize the two competing narratives—that is, pro-Israel or pro-Palestine—that have long dominated the field.

Finally, the scholarly output of Chinese Israel studies is mainly consumed by an academic audience, yet Jewish/Israeli themes have a wide appeal in popular culture. The Chinese reading public prefers to read translated books about Israel written by Israelis or Jews, although Chinese readers are not those authors' intended audience. The question for Chinese scholars is: In addition to satisfying our academic colleagues, how can we engage the reading public in a more accessible, more articulate, and more relevant way? Modern Hebrew literature, especially non-fiction imbued with personal emotion and introspection (such as *A Tale of Love and Darkness* and *My Promised Land*), frequently hits the bestseller list in China. In contrast, skimming over the scholarly papers on Israel (those on Israeli literature apart) that have been published over the past decade, I cannot help but think of them as "Israel studies without Israelis." Israel has by and large been represented within the totalizing discourse of Zionism, which deals with the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israel's military prowess, its maneuvering in the international arena, its agricultural and technological expertise, its Kibbutzim, and its educational system (which is thought to have shaped a unique Jewish mindset). In these papers, Israelis are essentially a blank screen onto which abstract concepts or social theories are projected. Even papers on a specific Israeli political giant are few and far between—much less "a Hebrew prostitute, a Hebrew thief, a Hebrew policeman," all of whom Bialik deemed indispensable for the normalization of the Jewish state. Nearly thirty years ago, one of the first books on Israel written by Chinese scholars was titled *Israel: An Enigmatic State*.⁴⁰ Since then, the word "enigmatic" (*mi yi ban de*) has often been used to refer to Israel and to the Jews. If sufficient attention is not paid to flesh-and-blood Israelis, I am afraid the image of Israel as an enigmatic state in China is here to abide.

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¹ These statistics, with emendations by this author, are based on Zhang, et al., eds. *Yiselle fazhan baogao, 2015–2020*. This foremost annual report contains a bibliographical survey of Israel studies in China from 2016 onward, but it does not distinguish Israel studies from Jewish studies. The statistics given here are exclusively those relating to Israel studies.

² This tendency is apparent, inter alia, in a survey article and in a magisterial tome by two distinguished Jewish studies scholars in China: Xu, “Israel in Chinese Scholarship”; Pan, ed., *Yutai yanjiu zai zhongguo: sanshinian huigu: 1978–2008*, which also contains a comprehensive bibliography (319–367) that places the books and articles on Israel studies published between 1978 and 2007 under the rubric of “Jewish studies.” For Chinese Jewish studies, see Song, “Reflections on Chinese Jewish Studies: A Comparative Perspective.”

³ Zhao, “Guanyu jiaqiang waiguo wenti yanjiu de yidian shiliao,” 142–143. This article includes the full text of Mao’s reply dated December 30, 1963.

⁴ She, “The Cold War and Chinese Policy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1963–1975,” 125–174.

⁵ Yi fan nuo fu and Xie ni si, *Yiselle de jushi he zhengce*, trans. Ma Guangzhi; A. Lie ao ni duo fu, *Yiselle zhengzhi muhou*, trans. Li Yuanming, originally published in the USSR in 1958 and 1959, respectively. A collection of 118 translated documents (1897–1959) regarding Palestinian issues was also published around the same time. See Guoji guanxi yanjiusuo, ed. *Balesitan wenti cankao ziliao*.

⁶ Safran, *Yiselle de lishi he gaikuang*, trans. Translation Team of the History Department of Peking University, originally published by Harvard University Press in 1963. For Safran’s biography, see <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2014/06/nadav-safran/> Accessed April 6, 2021.

⁷ Safran, *Yiselle de lishi he gaikuang*, 33.

⁸ *Ibid.*, “Publisher’s Statement” (Chuban shuoming), 2.

⁹ Cattan. *Balesitan, alabo ren he yiselle*, trans. Institute for the Study of Islam at Northwest University, “Publisher’s Statement” (Chuban shuoming), 2–3. The same critique of the Soviet Union is expressed in Mohamed Heikal’s book on the Yom Kippur War (translated from Arabic). See Heikal, *Zhaiyue zhanzheng*, trans. Zhong Fei and Xin Hua, “Chuban shuoming,” 2. In 1975, the same press published another translated (from German) book on the Yom Kippur War by Gerhard Konzelmann, *Di si ci zhongdong zhanzheng*, trans. Kang Younan. These books published in the 1970s were all labelled as “Inner Reading / Circulation” (neibu duwu / faxing), which means that their circulation was limited to the privileged, but their large print runs—the first printing of Safran’s book was 33,000 copies, a number that later Chinese publications on Israel can hardly surpass—makes them still easily available through the secondhand market, not to mention university libraries.

¹⁰ For example, Zhang, ed., *Yiselle guofangjun gedou jishu quanjie*, 5 vols.

¹¹ See, for example, Ehud Yaari, “China’s Middle East Policy: Speak Softly and Wave a Large Purse,” June 17, 2019. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/chinas-middle-east-policy-speak-softly-and-wave-large-purse> Accessed April 6, 2021.

¹² “Xi Jinping: Balesitan wenti shi zhongdong wenti de hexin,” <https://china.caixin.com/2013-05-08/100525131.html> Accessed April 6, 2021.

¹³ Pan, “Qiantan ben shiji shangbanye yingguo de balesitan zhengce,” 58–62, in which Safran was cited. This argument was eventually elaborated into the first comprehensive work on the Zionist movement written by Chinese scholars. See Pan, Yu, and Wang, *Yutai minzu fuxing zhi lu*.

¹⁴ Du, *Zhongguo he yiselle guanxi shi*, 139. Originally a doctoral dissertation titled *China and*

Israel: Five Decades of Relations (Brandeis University, 1998), it remains the most detailed study on this topic.

¹⁵ Xu, *Xibolaiyu yufa*. The manuscript was finished more than twenty years before its final publication. See also She, “The Cold War and Chinese Policy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1963–1975,” 159.

¹⁶ Xu, and Yu, eds., *Di san shengdian: yiselie de jueqi*, 154.

¹⁷ For example, Lei, and Huang, et al., eds., *Yiselie*, 2nd ed.; Chen, *Yiselie*.

¹⁸ Zhang, *Yiselie shi*, revised ed. “Qianyan,” 2.

¹⁹ Eban, *Youtai shi*, trans. Yan Ruisong.

²⁰ For a discussion of Chinese perceptions of Zionism before Communist rule, see Zhou, *Chinese Perceptions of the ‘Jews’ and Judaism: A History of the Youtai*, 56–57, 111–139.

²¹ See Pang, Yu, and Wang’s monograph, cited in endnote 13.

²² See Kotzin and Rekhess, “The State of Israel Studies: An Emerging Academic Field,” 334; Becke, “Land and Redemption: The Zionist Project in Comparative Perspective,” 3.

²³ Zhang, “Studies on the Confucianisation of the Kaifeng Jewish Community.”

²⁴ See, for example, Liu, ed. *Shijie wenming yuandian xuandu, IV: youtaijiao wenming jingdian*.

This book on “the Classics of Judaic Civilization” consists entirely of texts from the Old Testament. The author is a pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan.

²⁵ Pappe, *Xiandai balesitan shi*, trans. Wang Jian, Qin Ying, and Luo Rui, “Yizhe xu,” xiv.

²⁶ Sand, *Xugou de youtai minzu*, trans. Wang Dongxing and Zhang Rong.

²⁷ Cao, “Sui shi youtairen?—guanyu Xugou de youtai minzu,” 257.

²⁸ Ying, “Ruanshili zhicheng yiselie 60 nian,” 13–15.

²⁹ Du, *Zhongguo he yiselie guanxi shi*, 114–128, 136–139. See also Ou and Tang, *Cong yelusalen dao Beijing*, 10–36.

³⁰ Senor, and Singer, *Chuangye de guodu*, trans. Wang Yuehong, Han Junyi.

³¹ See Min, *Yiselie gonggong waijiao yu ruanshili jianshe*, 106.

³² On the reception of Israeli writers in China, see Qi, Du, and Yang, *Zhongwai wenxue jiaoliu shi: zhongguo-xila, xibolai juan*, 169–205; and Zhong, “The Reception of Contemporary Israeli Literature in China.”

³³ Ma, “Zhongguo meiti zhong de shatealabo xingxiang,” 34–36.

³⁴ Ainslie, “Chinese Philosemitism and Historical Statecraft: Incorporating Jews and Israel into Contemporary Chinese Civilization”; Min, *Yiselie gonggong waijiao yu ruanshili jianshe*, 103–111.

³⁵ Gordis, *Yiselie: Yige minzu de chongsheng*, trans. Wang Rong and Song Lihong.

³⁶ Personal communication with the publisher on April 12, 2021.

³⁷ Xiao, “The ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ and China–Israel Relations”; Evron, “The Challenge of Implementing the Belt and Road Initiative in the Middle East: Connectivity Projects under Conditions of Limited Political Engagement.”

³⁸ Zhonggong zhongyang bangongting, guowuyuan bangongting yinfa *Guanyu jiaqiang zhongguo tese xinxing zhiku jianshe de yijian*, 2015-01-20, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-01/20/content_2807126.htm; Jiaoyubu guanyu yinfa “guobie he quyu yanjiu jidi peiyu he jianshe zaxing banfa” de tongzhi, 2015-01-26, http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A20/s7068/201501/t20150126_189316.html Accessed April 15, 2021.

³⁹ Hu Li, “Tuidong xingcheng 21 shiji quyu yu guobie yanjiu de zhongguo fanshi,” 2019-07-15, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_3922348 Accessed April 15, 2021.

⁴⁰ Yang, ed., *Yiselie: mi yiban de guojia*.

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