

The Development of Hebrew Teaching and Israel Studies in China

By Yang Yang¹

The development of Hebrew teaching and Israel Studies in China reflects an important aspect of China-Israel relations. Since the initiation of the Hebrew program at Peking University 32 years ago, Chinese universities have witnessed two waves of opening such programs. With the recent unveiling of the 'Belt and Road' Initiative by President Xi Jinping and the encouragement by the Chinese government of research in area and country studies, Israel Studies is becoming a growing field in China's academic range of country studies. A new generation of young Chinese scholars of Israel Studies is maturing and will gradually become more active in academic exchanges with their counterparts from all over the world to further promote Israel Studies in China.

With the establishment of the China-Israel Innovation Cooperation Committee in 2015 and the launch of the 'Three-year Action Plan on Cooperative Innovation,' we have also witnessed the deepening of economic cooperation between China and Israel in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. On March 21, 2017, when President Xi met with visiting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, he announced the establishment of a comprehensive partnership to stimulate innovation between the two countries. This will also promote the Hebrew teaching and Israel Studies in more Chinese universities, research institutes and think tanks.

The History of Hebrew Teaching and Israel Studies in China

Hebrew teaching in China can be divided into two tracks: Biblical and Modern. Biblical Hebrew teaching mainly refers to the study of the Old Testament in some of China's Christian seminaries as well as the Biblical Hebrew courses offered by departments of philosophy and religious studies in some universities and colleges. For example, Nanjing Union Theological Seminary has opened Biblical Hebrew courses in the last few years. Several other Christian seminaries in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan also offer Biblical Hebrew courses. Universities and colleges that offer them include the Institute of Comparative Religious Studies of Sun Yat-sen University, the Center for Judaism and Inter-Religious Studies in Shandong University, and the School of Philosophy and Sociology in Lanzhou University. However, the scale of these courses is small and they haven't developed into regular courses due to the lack of qualified teachers.

The first Modern Hebrew program in China was established in the Department of Oriental Languages and Literatures of Peking University in 1985. At that time, just eight students were enrolled in it. They had only two teachers: one was Chinese, who had learned to read Hebrew in

¹ Dr. Yang is an Associate Professor at Shanghai International Studies University, Director of Hebrew Program and Israel Studies Center, and Assistant Dean of the School of Asian and African Studies. He is a Visiting Scholar at the Gildenhorn Institute for summer 2017.

the army, while the other was an American Jew invited from the U.S. An American Jewish foundation paid for his salary, provided the textbooks, and even provided a scholarship for one of the best students to continue her studies in U.S. At that time, there was no organized curriculum, only some language classes and a few courses on Israeli literature and culture. Students were required to study 5 years for their BA degree.

In 1991, a year prior to the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Israel, the second Hebrew course opened in Peking University. A teacher from the ulpan program of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem came to Beijing to teach language and other courses on Jewish and Israel Studies. This program was also supported by the same American Jewish foundation and lasted 4 years instead of 5. Since then, every four years, 10-15 students from all over China have been admitted to the Hebrew program in Peking University. For almost 20 years it was the only university that offered a Hebrew program.

In 2005, the second Hebrew program opened at the Communication University of China in Beijing, but after these students finished the 4-year Hebrew course, the program ended. In 2008, Shanghai International Studies University, Beijing Foreign Studies University and the PLA (Peoples Liberation Army) University of Foreign Language all established Hebrew programs. This was the first wave of the development of Hebrew teaching in China's universities. But Beijing Foreign Studies University and the PLA University of Foreign Language stopped recruiting new students when the first group of Hebrew students graduated in 2012. During 2012-2016, only Peking University and Shanghai International Studies University retained their Hebrew programs.

From 1991 to 2017, about 150 Chinese students received B.A. degree for Hebrew study, and at least 50% of them have also had the opportunity to receive a scholarship from the China Scholarship Committee to study for a year in an Israeli university while pursuing their B.A. Almost 50% of these students continued their studies for higher degrees in China, Israel, the U.S., or other countries. Some of them studied in Hebrew-related fields while some went on to different subjects. The other 50% of Hebrew students started their careers after their B.A. In recent years, more and more students can find jobs related to Hebrew, such as teaching Hebrew in universities, joining the diplomatic service, becoming journalists, working in state-owned enterprises interested in doing business with Israel or elsewhere in the Middle East. Some start their own businesses dealing with China-Israel commerce in economic and technical areas. Some of those who finished their graduate degrees have become the new generation of researchers in Middle East, Jewish, or Israel Studies.

China's Belt and Road Initiative is promoting the development of so-called "non-universal" or "less-taught" languages in universities, through which citizens of member states would study in China. The government is also encouraging Chinese universities to emphasize research in area and country studies for the second wave of development. In 2016, Sichuan International Studies University became the third university currently teaching Hebrew. I also understand that Beijing

International Studies University, Tianjin Foreign Studies University, and Shantou University are all planning to establish Hebrew programs within the next 2-3 years. Beijing Foreign Studies University and the PLA University of Foreign Language will also resume enrollment for new students to learn Hebrew. Thus, in the next 2-3 years, we will see 7-8 universities in China with Hebrew programs, which will expand Hebrew studies in China considerably.

Furthermore, in some major cities, including Beijing, Shanghai, and Kunming, Hebrew teaching salons have opened so that ordinary Chinese people who are not university students can learn about the Hebrew language, Jewish culture, and Israel. In Shanghai, the Municipal Education Commission initiated a plan to open so-called 'small language' courses in primary and secondary schools to encourage students to learn about different cultures. Currently there are Hebrew courses given in one primary and one secondary school in Shanghai. One is under the framework of the Shanghai Municipality initiative, while the other was begun at the request of the school headmaster.

The Development of Israel Studies in China

Israel Studies in China only began after the Reform and Opening Policy in 1978. Before that, China's academics had been too deeply enmeshed in politics and ideology to do so. The very limited number of publications on Israel or the Middle East before 1978 were filled with political or policy-oriented judgments and conclusions and lacked any serious academic analysis. From the end of the 1970s, a few Chinese scholars began to translate or they themselves wrote some books and articles on Israel's history, politics, culture, and economy. In this first stage, Israel Studies was not an independent discipline but still a minor part of Jewish or Middle East Studies, which were also recovering from the political tumult of the 1970s.

Some Chinese scholars now began to break with the traditional ideological restrictions and wrote about Israel without asserting that it is colonialist and imperialist. These scholars tried to introduce Israel to the Chinese people and government in a more objective way, but publication of some of their work was restricted. At the end of 1980s, a number of research institutes for Jewish Studies were established, such as the Shanghai Jewish Center, the Institute for Jewish Culture at Nanjing University, and the Center for Judaism and Inter-Religious Studies at Shandong University. In 1990, the Shanghai Jewish Center organized the first conference on Israel Studies in China. Actually, Shanghai Jewish Center was requested to hold this conference by the Chinese Foreign Ministry, as part of preparation for the breakthrough of the official China-Israel relationship.

A publisher in Shanghai published China's first series of books on Jewish Studies, which also included some Israel on Studies. Some of these books were written by Chinese scholars, such as research on the Jews in ancient China. Other books on Jewish history, literature, and religion were translated from foreign languages. It should be noted that since Hebrew teaching had just begun

in Peking University at that time, none of those books was translated from Hebrew. Most were translated from English, German, or even Arabic. It was during this period that a few Chinese scholars became the first Chinese to visit or study in Israel in recent times.

After the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1992, China's Israel Studies witnessed a process of rapid growth period. More books on Israel Studies were translated and published in China unrestrictedly. From this period more Chinese scholars and students began to visit Israel, made direct contact with Israeli scholars, and had first-hand access to do their own research from a Chinese perspective. Chinese scholars tend to shrug off restrictions on their publications. Some groups of Israel Studies scholars worked in institutes and universities such as the Institute of West-Asian and African Studies of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Shanghai Social Sciences Academy, Nanjing University, Yunnan University and Northwest University. These institutions and universities initiated degree program for M.A. students and doctoral candidates in Jewish and Israel Studies. Though Jewish Studies still has the dominant position, Israel Studies has recently developed more rapidly.

China-Israel relations experienced a setback after 2000 because of Israel's cancellation of the deal to sell China the Phalcon Airborne Early Warning System under U.S. pressure. However, the development of Israel Studies in China was not affected by this incident. Some scholars of Israel Studies wrote policy recommendations to the government to help deal with this crisis, and Israel Studies experts began to have a say in China's Middle East policy decision-making.

In the 21st century, China's Israel Studies has entered a period of deepening and expanding. Since 2012 especially, Israel Studies in China has grown up remarkably. With the cooperation of the organization SIGNAL (Sino-Israel Global Network & Academic Leadership), more than 10 Israel Studies programs or centers were established in Chinese Universities around the country, including in Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing, Xi'an, Chongqing, Kunming, Henan, and Xinjiang. The number of centers focused on Israel is now greater than the number studying any other Middle East and North Africa country. One Arab scholar has said that there is a growing pro-Israel advocacy movement within China that would become an 'Israel lobby'.

In 2011, SIGNAL invited 14 well-known Chinese scholars to Israel, and Israel's Global Research Center of International Affairs (GLORIA) jointly organized a seminar with it on strategic security. In June 2012, SIGNAL and Bar-Ilan University, Shanghai International Studies University, and Fudan University co-organized an international symposium in Shanghai on Israel Studies in China, in which more than 50 scholars from China, Israel, and the U.S participated. Every year, SIGNAL sends Israeli scholars to China to make a 2-3 week lecture tour at these universities. Five or six young Chinese scholars have also participated in a one-semester Israel Studies Faculty Training Program at Ben-Gurion University in recent years. Some Chinese scholars have participated in the Summer Institute for Israel Studies in Schusterman Center for Israel Studies of Brandeis University.

At the annual conference of the Association for Israel Studies (AIS) in the last several years, Chinese scholars have shared their perspectives with scholars from U.S., Israel, and other countries. SIGNAL also organized a National Level of the Israel Studies Research Paper Competition. Two winners of the grand prize will travel to Israel on an all-expense paid study trip. These will be China's Israel Studies scholars of the future.

Israel Studies has also received more support and encouragement from the Chinese government in recent years. In 2015, the Ministry of Education established the Consortium for Jewish Culture Studies with members from eight universities including Nanjing University, Peking University, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Shanghai International Studies University, Shandong University, Foreign Trade University, Sichuan International Studies University, and Henan University. Though its name refers to Jewish Culture Studies, in fact its establishment is based on the suggestion by Vice Premier Liu Yandong to promote Israel Studies as well as Jewish Studies.

As a part of the China-Israel 'Three-year Action Plan on Cooperative Innovation', Chinese scholars can receive more funds from the government for research on Israel Studies. For example, the National Social Sciences Fund has provided support for several research programs on Israel Studies, including Israel's Agricultural Modernization as an Inspiration for China, Studies on Soviet-Israel Relations Early in the Cold War (1948-1953), Judaism and the Modern State of Israel, Cultural Zionism and Israel's Nation-State Building, and others. The Humanities and Social Sciences Research Fund of the Ministry of Education has also provided funds to research programs on Israel's Economic Model, Jewish History, Culture and Israel's Diplomacy, Israel's Arab Minority, and Israel's Ethnic Policy. Other research programs on Middle East Studies include the subprograms on Israel Studies. This is in addition to Israel Studies research programs funded on the level of provinces and universities. The Chinese Embassy in Israel has also invited a few groups of Chinese scholars of the Middle East and Israel Studies to visit Israel as part of academic exchanges with Israeli think tanks and universities.

In China, Jewish Studies and Israel Studies have no clear distinction. But with the government's emphasis on Regional Studies and Country Studies, Israel Studies is getting more support from it. Some institutes and research centers for Jewish Studies have also changed their names or added "Israel Studies."

Challenges and Suggestions for the Further Development of Hebrew Teaching and Israel Studies in China

1. Teaching Hebrew in China has been a fact for more than thirty years. About 150 students have graduated from the Hebrew programs of various universities, but very few students have gone on to enter the field of Israel Studies. Most of the Israel Studies scholars in China still have no knowledge of Hebrew and thus have no access to Hebrew material for their research. We need to change this fact by encouraging more Hebrew language students with research

potential to continue their studies in the fields of Israel and Jewish Studies.

2. The Hebrew teaching program will expand to 7-8 universities in China within the next few years. The existing Israel Studies programs in China (more than 10 at this point) also assume the responsibility for training the next generation of Israel Studies scholars. Currently we lack a sufficient number of experienced Hebrew language teachers and high-level Israel Studies scholars to offer high-quality Hebrew language and Israel Studies courses. We also need language teachers and Israel Studies professors from Israel, the U.S., and other countries to come to China to help us promote Hebrew teaching and Israel Studies. China's universities are being encouraged to reform their curriculum so Israel Studies courses are not limited to Hebrew language students. These courses should be included in the curricula for students of Arab, Persian, and Turkish Studies, as well as other students.
3. Chinese scholars have published a number of books on Israel Studies and papers in journals such as *Arab World Studies* and *West Asia and North Africa Studies*. Although a team of scholars from Henan University edit and publish an annual blue-paper book on Israel, China still lacks an academic journal that specializes in Israel Studies. A high-quality and reputable journal of Israel Studies would promote China's growing programs of Israel Studies. It would also be advisable to hold an international conference in China on Israel Studies, or even invite the Association for Israel Studies (AIS) to hold its annual conference in China sometime in the next few years.