

The Images of Israel in Shanghai College Students' Eyes - A Questionnaire Perspective

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Abstract

This research paper aims to explore the images of Israel in the eyes of college students in Shanghai, China. The author chooses students from East China Normal University, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai University of Finance and Economics together with some other small groups of college students as the subjects of the questionnaire. These target college students are supposed to represent the mainstream discourse concerning the public images of Israel among Shanghai young intellectual groups. In the survey, the author discovers the responses are both positive and negative, though not half to half, mostly depending on from what (which)channels they have learned about Israel.

Keywords: Israel, image, college student, Shanghai

1. Introduction

The Middle East peace process has been for long observed and debated by Chinese scholars in the last decade, among which, Israel, as the only non-Arabic nation in this region, has been on the research agenda in the Chinese academic circles. To most Chinese, especially those who were born in the 1920s or 1930s, Jews are not as unfamiliar as their neighbors, especially in Shanghai and Harbin. Take Shanghai as an example, during the WWII, a lot of Jewish people escaped away from the NAZI-occupied zones in the East Europe into Shanghai for an asylum, where they received a quite warm and generous welcome, greetings and help. Therefore, Shanghai, as a metropolitan city in the Far East region, witnessed what a trauma Jewish people suffered during the war time, as well as what a persistent and smart ethnic group they were of.

Now more than half of century has passed, and the old generation in Shanghai is fading away. What an image of Israel it is in the eyes of Shanghai new generation's remains unanswered, which invokes and intrigues the author's research interest in taking a field study by a questionnaire to investigate it. The author assumes that Shanghai college students could represent the mainstream discourse trend of the young generation in China, therefore, the author chose the three principal universities for this questionnaire, namely East China Normal University (ECNU), Shanghai International Studies University (SHISU) and Shanghai University of Finance and Economics (SUFU). Although this questionnaire is conducted in Shanghai, the students in these three different universities are originated from all parts of China, which are supposed to reflect and echo the nation-wide young generation's propositions towards the state of Israel.

2. Literature Review

In the contemporary China, Jewish studies, as a subject study, mostly locates in Harbin, Jinan, Kaifeng, Nanjing and Shanghai. The Center for Jewish Studies, Heilongjiang Provincial Academy of Social Sciences, primarily targets on the Jews in Harbin where in the history starting from later 19th and early 20th century, there was pouring in thousands of Russian Jews in Harbin. The Book *The Jews in Harbin* (2006) fully discusses and narratively explores the history, the culture and life style of Russian Jews in Harbin. It is regarded as a masterpiece in Harbin Jewish studies in China (Note 1). In Jinan, where Shandong University is located, Center For Judaic and Inter-Religious Studies of Shandong University is well known for its inter-religious studies. The journal of *Jewish Studies* was first issued in 2002. The editor in chief is Professor Fu Youde, a very distinguished and leading scholar, also the director for the Center. This journal is very influential by its specific focus on Judaism studies in China. Prof.Fu himself is a very productive author who has published numerous papers as

"Maimonides on Prophecy: Synthesis and Reconciliation" (1994); "Judaism and Confucianism: A General Comparison" (2000); "Revelation and Prophet: Comparative Studies of Judaism and Confucianism" (2002); "God-Man in Judaism and Heaven-Man in Confucianism: A Comparative Study" (2003) and other 30 more articles and books or book chapters (Note 2). This Center includes nearly one fourth Jewish experts and scholars in Chinese academic circles. When moving down a bit southern, Kaifeng should not be ignored, when in history, a Jewish community was existing there for hundreds of years. The Institute of Jewish Studies, Henan University was established in 2002, targeting its research on Jewish community in Kaifeng, Jewish history and contemporary Israeli studies. One leading paper is "A Study on the Social Condition of Kaifeng Jews from the Remaining Stone Inscriptions" (2006) by Zhang Qian-hong and Liu Bai-lu. It is a depth case study, empirically exploring the Kaifeng Jews community life and worship basing on the three remaining stone inscriptions left in Kaifeng by Kaifeng Jews. This institute has composed and written hundreds of such theoretical and empirical research books and articles, but most of them are written by professor Zhang Qian-hong, former director of this institute (Note 3). Now this Institute has expanded its research fields from Jewish history, culture to Islamic world and Israel as well as the Middle-East and peace processing. The Diane and Guilford Glazer Institute of Jewish Studies, Nanjing University is well known for its first Chinese edition of the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1994). Professor Xu Xin, as the founding father of this institute (1992), is a Judaic expert, who wrote books like *Legends of the Chinese Jews of Kaifeng* (1993); *A History of Jewish Culture* (2006) and *Stories of the Jews* (2006). These books are very popular readings in the universities and are best sellers in China. His broad-view and comprehensive understanding of the Jewish history and culture has won him the title of "Pioneer of Jewish Studies" in the contemporary China (Note 4).

When it comes to Shanghai, an asylum for Jews during the WWII, (there is a) The Center of Jewish Studies Shanghai (which) was established in 1988 and now is headed by Professor Pan Guang. This center is the mostly influential research institute on Jewish and Israeli studies in China. Its contributions include books *The Jews in Shanghai* (1995); *Shanghai Jews Memoirs* (1995); *Shanghai Jews (1840s-1990s)* (2002); *Jews and China* (2010), just name a few. All those books dedicatedly discuss and explore the history, culture as well as the community life of Shanghai Jews and their impact on the modern Shanghai. The papers "On Jews and Shanghai Economy" (2006); "The New Waves of Jewish Immigration to China since the Reform and Opening-up" (2007) are the best among the other 20 more papers in this area by the Center team members (Note 5). Now this Center has a very good academic relations with other research centers or think tanks either in U.S. or in Israel. It has been (is) playing an indispensable role of puller and pusher for China-Israeli relations and Sino-U.S. Relations.

3. Framework and Approaches

3.1 The Value of This Research

The state of Israel was established half year earlier than P. R. China, and it acknowledged China immediately afterwards in 1950. Although the two sides established the formal diplomatic relationship much late in 1992, China and Israel relationship has been quite stable thereafter. In China, a household word for the nation of Israel is *persistent* and *smart*, and most young people know this nation from the Old Testament, Shakespeare's works, the Holocaust or from the recent mainstream media about the Palestine-Israel conflicts, and even the Iranian nuclear crisis today, which is highlighted in the China newspapers. But do they have a full picture of the state of Israel? To what extent do they understand the situation the Israel people are facing with? What are their propositions towards the Palestine-Israel conflicts? What channels do they have to approach the hot issues in the Middle East peace process? How do they respond to the conflicts regarding this area? All these questions drive(s) the author to think and reinforce the importance of exploring the answers.

3.2 Methods and Data Collecting

This research (is) starts(ed) with a set of written questions in the form of a questionnaire which was conducted in the three different universities like SHISU, ECNU and SUFE (Note 6). The reasons why the author targeted these three universities are: 1) the three universities are top ones both in Shanghai and China and the students are from different parts of China; 2) SHISU is a university majoring in foreign languages programs, and well-known for its integrity, vision and academy. It has a lot of foreign students coming from almost 32 nations and regions, including some from the Middle East. The SHISU students are very open to the world and the graduates are mostly engaged in working with foreign affairs sections or with some foreign or joint companies both outside and inside of China. They would be very influential. 3) ECNU is one of top 2 normal universities in China, and it has both science and arts programs with long tails which have attracted excellent students from all parts of China. The students are very knowledgeable compared with the students in other universities in Shanghai. They are rational, enthusiastic and full of sense of mission. Nearly 80% graduates are working in the education field as

teachers, educators or researchers. Some would be idea brokers, remaking of next generations' cognition of the outside world. 4) SUFE is a rising university with its programs in finance, economics and laws of all kind. Students there are more rational and realistic. 90% up graduates are working as economic analysts, economic or financial lawyers. These characters and categories mentioned above have facilitated and strengthened the author's decision to choose the three universities.

3.2.1 Questionnaire Design and Application

The author designed a questionnaire with both open-ended and close-ended questions. The reasons are, as we know, the close-ended questions could only generally measure the interviewees' knowledge of historic facts and attitudes toward "Israel image" issue, but often fails to measure the interviewees' independent perceptions of their own, especially those intellectually sophisticated young college students who are mostly active in articulating their own ideas and comments instead of putting theirs into a few categories or turning theirs into numbers for they always think close-ended questions block their rich thoughts. Due to the nature of inadequacy of close-ended questions, open-ended questions are supplied here to balance the questionnaire to serve the objective needs of this research. Thus, the author designs the first question of this questionnaire with an open-ended question but employ both open-ended and close-ended questions with the rest nine questions, requiring the interviewees to mark his/her choice among the given answers numbered A/B/C/D, or write down their own answers in "E" blank if they feel it necessary. All the answers provided in the questionnaire are widely accepted in China as popular views about the nation of Israel and the Middle East to observe and examine what propositions the young generation has and how they would respond to the issue of the Middle East peace process.

QUESTIONNAIRE

The Images of Israel in Shanghai College Students' Eyes

Direction: Please mark your choice before the ones you prefer or you could write down your own choice in "e) others" blank.

- 1) Please describe the nation of Israel in 3 or 5 words.
- 2) What do you think setbacks the Palestine-Israel relations?
 - a) religion
 - b) land
 - c) economy
 - d) security
 - e) others
- 3) Who do you think should be blamed for the Palestine-Israel conflicts?
 - a) Israel
 - b) Palestine
 - c) USA
 - d) The Arabic world
 - e) others
- 4) In your eyes, Gaza is:
 - a) peaceful and wealthy
 - b) poverty and disorder
 - c) neither good nor bad
 - d) hard to say
 - e) others
- 5) What is your proposition towards the Jewish settlements?
 - a) No objection
 - b) pull down unconditioned
 - c) no idea
 - d) whatever
 - e) others
- 6) I think the issue of Palestine-Israel conflicting could be resolved through
 - a) land for peace
 - b) security for peace
 - c) UN
 - d) US involvement
 - e) others
- 7) What is your reaction towards the Israel's security dilemma in the Middle East?
 - a) sympathetic
 - b) understand Israel's tough position
 - c) co-operate with the Arabic nations
 - d) no idea
 - e) others
- 8) What's your comment on Israel's role in the Middle East peace process?
 - a) hegemony, but good to the peace there
 - b) hegemony, but harm to the stability
 - c) seek the collaboration with the big powers for peace
 - d) no idea
 - e) others
- 9) What do you think the future of Israel and the surrounding nations is?
 - a) optimistic
 - b) pessimistic
 - c) must be a war
 - d) whatever
 - e) others
- 10) From what channels do you know about Israel?
 - a) TV
 - b) internet
 - c) books and journals
 - d) scholars
 - e) others

Thanks

3.2.2 Sampling

During April 10-20, 2012, to examine the feasibility and effectiveness of the questionnaire, the author sent out an investigator to *Shanghai Xiahemancang Theater* for a testing of the questionnaire. This theatre is a non-profit private sector where Shanghai current college students and some graduates from different universities of China who are self called juvenile generation perform some stage plays. The investigator dispatched 100 sheets, and got back 87 copies. The testing result shows the questionnaire is mostly workable, except some 35 students said that they do not know Gaza and Israel settlement. Thus, the author adds the choice of “no idea” to amend it. Later on, during May 1-30, 2012, the author sent out 6 investigators to the three target universities, 2 persons investigated at ECNU, 1 at SUFE, 3 on the two campuses of SHISU. Since this research is intended to capture the real Israel images in Shanghai college students’ eyes, it is wise and safe to draw a random sampling together with a cluster sampling in the three universities and then to put the subsamples together to form the total sample. The random sampling is done at SHISU since students are mostly foreign languages majors, while at ECNU and SUFE, we did the cluster sampling since at these two universities, students are from different majors as in science, social sciences and humanities; or as in law, finance and economics fields. Therefore, the investigators chose two big classes of students at ECNU who are focusing on science, social sciences, arts and humanities subjects as the target sampling, totally up to 150 students; at SUFE, 100 sheets of questionnaire are dispatched to two classes of students who are from law, finance and economics majors as the target sampling.

4. Results

The questionnaire sheets dispatched to the three chosen universities are totally up to 350 copies, and the recalled copies are 328. The detailed statistics are as follows. See Table 1.

Table 1. The data for the recalled questionnaire sheets

| Place | Dispatched | Recalled | Valid | Invalid | Reclamation (%) |
|-------|------------|----------|-------|---------|-----------------|
| SHISU | 100 | 100 | 98 | 2 | 98% |
| ECNU | 150 | 147 | 146 | 1 | 97.3% |
| SUFE | 100 | 81 | 81 | 0 | 81% |
| Total | 350 | 328 | 325 | 3 | 92% |

The response from *SHISU* to the first question in the QUESTIONNAIRE is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. The data for SHISU

| Question 1 Please describe the nation of Israel in 3 or 5 words. | | |
|---|--------------|------------|
| The responses are | Total Number | Percentage |
| very smart | 32 | 32.7% |
| living with wars and hardship | 25 | 25.5% |
| religion colored | 16 | 16.3% |
| vigorous & unique | 14 | 14.3% |

Note: Those below 10 are not included here.

The response from *ECNU* to the first question in the QUESTIONNAIRE is shown in Table 3.

Table 3. The data for ECNU

| Question 1 Please describe the nation of Israel in 3 or 5 words. | | |
|---|--------------|------------|
| The responses are | Total Number | Percentage |
| very smart | 31 | 21.2% |
| full of conflicts | 27 | 18.5% |
| persistent & unique | 22 | 15.1% |
| wealthy and warlike | 21 | 14.4% |
| religion colored | 20 | 13.7% |
| home for Jews | 19 | 13% |
| no answer / no idea | 23 | 15.8% |

Note: Those below 10 are not included here.

The response from *SUFE* to the first question in the QUESTIONNAIRE is shown in Table 4.

Table 4. The data for SUFE

| Question 1 Please describe the nation of Israel in 3 or 5 words. | | |
|---|--------------|------------|
| The responses are | Total Number | Percentage |
| conflicting & unsafe | 24 | 29.6% |
| very smart | 23 | 28.4% |
| persistent & unique | 12 | 14.8% |
| religion colored | 10 | 12.3% |
| no answer / no idea | 18 | 22.2% |

Note: Those below 10 are not included here.

The total numbers responding from the three universities to the nine questions in the QUESTIONNAIRE are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. The data table in charts for the nine questions

| | | | | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|---|------------------|--------|--|
| Question 2 What do you think setbacks the Palestine-Israel relations? | | | | | |
| Religion | Land | Economy | Security | Others | |
| 183* | 77 | 47 | 43 | 4 | |
| Question 3 Who do you think should be blamed for the Palestine-Israel conflicts? | | | | | |
| Israel | Palestine | USA | The Arabic world | others | |
| 74 | 62 | 156* | 44 | 13 | |
| Question 4 In your eyes, Gaza is: | | | | | |
| Peaceful & wealthy | poverty and disorder | neither good nor bad | hard to say | others | |
| 6 | 244* | 32 | 50 | 3 | |
| Question 5 What is your proposition towards the Jewish settlements? | | | | | |
| No objection | Pull down unconditioned | no idea | whatever | others | |
| 199* | 42 | 118 | 17 | 5 | |
| Question 6 I think the issue of Palestine-Israel conflicting could be resolved through | | | | | |
| land for peace | security for peace | UN | US involvement | others | |
| 80 | 127* | 81 | 13 | 38 | |
| Question 7 What is your reaction towards the Israel's security dilemma in the Middle East ? | | | | | |
| sympathetic | understand Israel's tough position | co-operate with the Arabic nations | no idea | others | |
| 61 | 95 | 116* | 55 | 10 | |
| Question 8 What's your comment on Israel's role in the Middle East peace process? | | | | | |
| hegemony, but good to the peace there | hegemony, but harm to the stability | seek collaborations with big powers for peace | no idea | others | |
| 33 | 82 | 120* | 81 | 15 | |
| Question 9 What do you think the future of Israel and the surrounding nations is? | | | | | |
| optimistic | pessimistic | must be a war | whatever | others | |
| 64 | 116* | 114 | 32 | 10 | |
| Question 10 From what channel do you know about Israel? | | | | | |
| TV | internet | books and journals | scholars | others | |
| 230* | 117 | 59 | 20 | 4 | |

Note 1: The students are permitted to mark more choices with one question.

Note 2: The number with "*" stands for the highest number in each question.

5. Findings

The results showed in Table 1、2、3、4、5 have enhanced the author's following findings:

1) In those college students' eyes, Israeli people are very smart and unique. And the results from the three

universities basically remain very close. When examining the recalled sheets, the author finds that there is no hesitation when they wrote "smart" or "unique" down in this open-ended question as their first preference (choices).

2) In their eyes, the Middle East is dangerous and full of conflicts. As for such a situation, they think U.S. as well as Israel should be more blamed rather than the Arabic nations or Palestine. But still there are seven of thirteen who chose "others" in question 3 wrote "Russia".

3) They think religion is the largest obstacle between Israel and Palestine relations. And Israeli people are religion colored with a long history.

4) In their eyes, Gaza is a zone of poverty and disorder, and 1/7 students say "hard to say," while only 6 chose "peaceful and wealthy," which tells that they do not have a clear picture of what Gaza is really like.

5) Overall, 71% votes indicate the Middle East Peace could only be achieved by collaboration rather than unilateral action (or say "hegemony," a term popularly used in China), though there are a total of 57% votes for "understanding Israel's tough position," and "sympathetic" for Israel security dilemma as well as "hegemony but good to the peace there".

6) It is obvious that they are more pessimistic rather than optimistic toward the future of Israel and the surrounding nations. 116 votes for "pessimistic" and 114 for "must be a war." There are even 8 students who chose "others" by writing 'War! War! War!' there.

7) Judging from SHISU recalled sheets, they are more familiar with Israel and Arabic world for their choices are more focused and centered rather than SUFE and ECNU. See Table 2.

8) SUFE is less active and unfamiliar with the questionnaire and a total of 61 votes for "whatever" and "I don't know" in questions 4/5/7/8/9, a few even left some choices undone.

9) ECNU is more sincere when doing the questionnaire. They marked (made) more choices and wrote more to the open-ended questions (See Table 3). Some even wrote down a few concrete words (added a few choices) in the close-ended questions (by concrete words)like: "Well, it depends" or "definitely no peace there" or "win-win development."

10) TV and internet are the two major channels for them to approach the knowledge of the Middle-East (peace) situation. But still there are 22.6% votes for books/ journals or scholars as their minor (information) channels. Only 4 votes say that they know this region by talking with other fellow students.

6. Conclusions

After the exploration and the analysis of the recalled questionnaires, the results and the findings confirm the author's assumption that basically Shanghai college students have a good impression of the nation of Israel. They are ready to show their respect to the smart and unique Jewish people and admire their statecrafts and success in science, but in the meantime, quite a few students are showing some mixed feelings towards Israel-Palestine conflicts. For an example, when those who chose "understand Israel's tough position," also chose "Israel should be blamed for the Israel-Palestine conflicts." In my understanding, such a response tells that those young guys seem unconsciously drawn by the rooted Chinese-colored "Robin-hood complex," which means "to kill the rich and take their property to the poor". Thus, their natural sympathy towards the poor sometimes lead them to stand by the poor side before making a rational judgement or without knowing the true factors.

But an encouraging factor in the questionnaire is: SHISU students seem more neutral and objective, less influenced by the internal mainstream media. The supporting background is: this university has a school for Arabic studies; an Institute for Middle-East studies which is the top one principal think tank and the only winner of Institute of Excellency Award in China. Besides (In addition), there is a Department of Hebrew Studies, offering Jewish studies, including religion, culture, history, Hebrew language together with (besides) Israeli studies. Additionally, some exchange programs at both faculty and student levels between SHISU and Tel-Aviv or the Hebrew or Ben-Gurion or Bar Ilan universities. Moreover, the SHISU Arabic major students have opportunities to be sent to Egypt or Iran as visiting students or M.A./ Ph.D(d) exchange program students. Those input and output of programs have widened the vision of the students(') and their horizon of knowledge about the Middle East.

Overall, those college students are very engaging and enthusiastic toward the outside of the world. They are self-starters and quick learners in such a high-tech society with easy access to internet or TV. Also they have shown their sincerity and responsibility when facing with new knowledge and challenges, which is shown in their questionnaire taking. Their answers in the questionnaire confirms the assumption that they have learned, to

some extend, how to look at the world with wide-angle lens.

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Notes

- Note 1. For more information, see: <http://imharbin.com/jews-in-harbin/>
- Note 2. For more information, see: <http://www.ikgf.uni-erlangen.de/people/index.shtml/youde-fu.shtml>
- Note 3. For more information, see: <http://jpkc.henu.edu.cn/sjls/JSJJ.HTM>
- Note 4. For more information, see: <http://philo.nju.edu.cn/show.php?id=256>
- Note 5. For more information, see: <http://www.cjss.org.cn/newac.htm> & <http://www.cjss.org.cn/newpc.htm>
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