

Asian Studies in the Arab states of the Gulf: challenges and potential

This is a preliminary exploration into the state of Asian Studies in the Arab states of the Gulf. Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are the six countries that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): a regional bloc formed in 1981 on the basis of geographical contiguity for economic, technical, social and cultural cooperation. They share not only a common religious and linguistic heritage, they are also endowed with hydrocarbon resources that have fueled rapid economic growth and modernization.

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EDUCATION—ESPECIALLY HIGHER EDUCATION—as an important aspect of modernization, though relatively new in this region, has received considerable state patronage. The first university in this area, King Saud University, was set up in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1957. Kuwait University was founded in 1966. University education began in Qatar in 1973, with gender-segregated faculties. The first university in the UAE, the United Arab Emirates University, was initiated in 1976, in Al Ain. The first public university in Oman, Sultan Qaboos University (SQU), opened in 1986. And in the same year, the University of Bahrain was established to combine the existing College of Arts, Sciences, and Education (1978) and the Gulf Technical College (1968).

Meeting the demands of a modernizing world

Most of these universities were public institutions created to meet the challenges of the human resource requirements of the modernizing countries of the region; social sciences were not given a priority. In fact, throughout the Arab world the modern universities are relatively young. A recent report observed: "... 97 percent of Arab Universities—491 out of 508—were created after 1950 ... 70 percent did not exist before 1991".¹ One of the challenges faced by these universities is the singular focus on technical and skill developments, accompanied by a penetration of market ideology, which affects both the curricula as well as the structure of the higher educational institutions. In all, the corporatization of the universities takes a toll on liberal education. Yet, it is interesting to observe that social science education is likely to receive more attention with growing interest in East Asia, which has become a dynamic economic region. With growing trade relations between the Arab Gulf states and China, Chinese soft power is being felt.

Soft power

The first Confucius Institute to be established on the Arabian Peninsula was in Dubai, in 2011. The second opened at Zayed University, Abu Dhabi, in 2012. The third Confucius Institute to come to the region is situated at the University of Bahrain, set up in 2014. Of the total 437 Confucius

Institutes worldwide (as of June 2015), there are only three in the Arab Gulf states, and a total of nine in the Middle East (two each in Egypt and Jordan, one each in Lebanon and Iran). In Russia alone there are twice as many Confucius Institutes than in the entire Middle East. The US, of course, is its main destination, with a presence at 96 universities.

The Confucius Institute was created following President Hu Jintao's 2005 call for "enhancing soft power of Chinese culture". Joseph Nye, among others, is skeptical about the success of the soft power offensive, since China applies oppressive policies against its own civil society.² Nye's analysis may be appropriate insofar as the United States, and other democracies with a vibrant civil society are concerned, but for the rest of the Global South, China's cultural diplomacy may prove to yield positive outcomes.

The Confucius Institute at Zayed University, as it does elsewhere, offers Chinese language courses, which have in recent years grown in popularity. The University of Dubai (established in 1997) offers Chinese language training for various governmental departments of the UAE. The University of Bahrain is a mature university with a Japanese studies program alongside French, German and American programs. Zayed University has also hosted the King Sejong Institute of Korea since 2010, which offers Korean language courses. In 2015, Sultan Qaboos University of Oman (SQU) became part of the Silk Road Universities Network (SUN), which was formed at Hankuk University in Jeonju, Republic of Korea. These are important steps that promise research cooperation and an exchange of students promoting interests in East Asian Studies.

Popular culture

In the GCC universities, the initial focus was to train students for the rapid modernization taking place in their societies. Humanities and social sciences did not receive much attention. In recent years, however, that lacunae is being addressed. General education courses at a number of UAE universities are 'going global' and now deal with not only western civilizations, but also include Asian civilizations. At Zayed University, a full course is offered within the Masters in Diplomacy program

on East Asia, covering China, Japan and Korea and the Newly Industrializing economies. The UAE University in Al Ain also offers a minor in Korean language. Following the course structure of North American universities, many of the public universities in the region have introduced general education programs, designed to generate a higher global awareness. Many of these programs involve Asia, but more specialized courses on Asian regions are still rather limited.

The absence of advanced courses or programs on East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia and Central Asia in the Gulf universities does not indicate a lack of awareness of the importance of the emergence or re-emergence of (specific parts of) Asia. Japan and the Republic of Korea have already made significant impressions insofar as their popular cultures are concerned. Many academic institutions in the region celebrate Japan day. At Zayed University, there are Japanese Clubs and Korean Clubs initiated by the students who partake in various Japanese cultural activities. The Japanese cartoon genre *manga* has won the hearts and minds of many young Emiratis and has made an impact on Gulf culture.³ The availability of Arabic versions of *manga* is proof of the popularity of East Asian pop-culture. There is also a growing number of fans of Korean drama and K-pop among the Gulf youth.

Insofar as South Asia is concerned, the influence of Bollywood as the purveyor of soft power has also played an important role. Indian cinema has an appeal in the Gulf region beyond the expatriate South Asian audience. Many Gulf citizens are enamored by the dazzle of Indian cinema. The younger Emiratis, however, do not necessarily share the same degree of enthusiasm of their parent's generation, and prefer to divide their attention between the Hollywood-generated and East Asian popular cultures.

Looking east

In this exploratory paper, by no means an exhaustive survey, some challenges, i.e., an excessive emphasis on the corporatization of higher education is discernible, yet the changing politico-economic realities of the world, and the recent 'Look East' tendency in the Gulf, may portend a bright future for Asian Studies in the region. But this is not going to happen on its own, a change of vision at the top decision-making levels, infused by an understanding of the changing global realities, would be needed.

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References

- 1 Mohammed Bamyeh, quoted in Faek, R. 2015. 'Social Sciences Growing in the Arab World—But Slowly', *Al-Fanar Media*, 24 March 2015; <http://tiny.cc/fanarfaek>
- 2 Nye, J. 2012. 'Why China is Weak on Soft Power?', *The New York Times*, January 17.
- 3 Good, O. 2009a. 'Gold Ring: The UAE's first Manga', *The National* (Abu Dhabi) July 20; Good, O. 2009b. 'Mad About Manga', *The National* (Abu Dhabi) September 22; Johnston, E. 2011. 'East Meets West', *Vision* (Dubai) August.



Left: Kwame Nkrumah with Zhou Enlai, photo courtesy of the Chinese Embassy in Accra.

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of Asia has an existential value in a rapidly changing world. That is a crucial first step. Turning this realization into concrete measures revolving around institutions, training and research programmes, backed by dependable sources of funding over a long period, should define the next vital steps; steps that the Accra conference hopes to inspire. The African sages intone that 'if you learn you will know'. That should be inspiration enough, as Africa begins the process of bridging the unacceptable intellectual gap that has existed between the two continents; this is a critical move for the mutual unmasking of both sides.

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References

- 1 Most notably expressed in what has come to be known as the Peking Opera.
- 2 Kierkegaard, S. 2004. *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, Penguin Classics
- 3 Files, T. 1972. *China and Africa in the Middle Ages*, London, England: CASS, p.4.
- 4 Gupta, P. 2010. 'Introduction', in Pamela Gupta, et al. (eds.) *Eyes across the water: navigating the Indian Ocean*, Pretoria: University of South Africa (UNISA) Press, p.3.
- 5 The writings of Asian thinkers like Kaoru Sugihara show

that the economic transformation of leading Asian countries like Japan was wrought from painstaking, incremental socio-technological changes driven by state led policy over decades rather than from a sudden miraculous turn of events. See for example, Sugihara, K. 2004. *The State and the Industrious Revolution in Japan*, Working Paper 02/04, London: London School of Economics.

- 6 Refers (in a loose and imprecise rendering in English) to the King of the Akyem people, one of the sub-groups of the Akans of Ghana and West Africa. It must be noted here that Danquah worked closely under Okyenene Nana Ofori-Atta I (his paternal brother) from 1915-1921.
- 7 Danquah, J.B. 1997. *The Ghanaian Establishment: Its Constitutions, its Detentions, its Traditions, its Justice and Statecraft, and its Heritage of Ghanaism*, Accra: Ghana Universities Press, p. 304.
- 8 Loosely translated in English as 'clan'. To paraphrase Danquah's words, Akan society is divided into clans and the clans into smaller families, based on the matrilineal system; *ibid* note 8, p.298.
- 9 *Ibid*. note 8, p.122
- 10 Appiah, J. 1996. *Joe Appiah: The Autobiography of an African Patriot*, Accra: Asempa Publishers, p.288.
- 11 The Dakar-based African Center for Trade, Integration and Development's programme on 'Globalization, Emerging Markets and South-South Trade' and the Pretoria-based Thabo Mbeki African Leadership Institute's (TMALI) emerging focus on China, are typical examples.