

The Middle East in the Eyes of the Far East:

A Book Review

Anchi Hoh*

Weilie Zhu, *Zhan Zai Yuandong Kan Zhongdong* (Arabic title: *al-Sharq al-Awsat min Manzur Ustadh Sini*, English translation: *Observing the Middle East from the Standpoint of the Far East*), Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2000.

If one ever has questions about the Middle East and Islamic studies in China, how its education curricula are formed, or what role they have played in the history of China-Middle East relationship, the book, *Zhan Zai Yuandong Kan Zhongdong* (written in Chinese, *Observing the Middle East from the Standpoint of the Far East*), provides enlightening answers to all the above-mentioned questions.

The author, Mr. Weilie Zhu, in his mid-sixties, has been a veteran in teaching, researching, and publishing in the fields of Arabic and Middle East studies in China. Graduated from Beijing University in 1965 with a major in Arabic language, Zhu has taught at Shanghai International Studies University (SISU) for several decades. Between 1978 and 1980, he studied at Cairo University. Since his return, Zhu has held many important positions, including Director for the Research Center for Arabic Language and Culture, Head of the Department of Arabic Language, Director for the Research Center for Social Sciences at SISU, Vice Chairman of Foreign Language Teaching Committee of the Education Ministry, Editor-in-chief of a journal *The Arab World*, and Vice President of the Middle East Studies Association in China. In 1994, Zhu was appointed a research fellow at the Royal Research Center for Islamic Civilization in Jordan. Accumulating years of knowledge and experience, in this book Zhu narrates the history and current development of Arabic and Middle East studies in China from an educator's perspective, which could help his Western counterparts construct a comparative view in order to measure the progress made in the West concerning the same fields.

This book is divided into four sections and contains 68 short essays. These sections are: commemorating and honoring several well-known scholars and

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professors in the field of Arabic teaching and research, reflections and analyses of various issues in Arabic literature and language, travelogues of the Middle East and observations of the political and economic situations in the Arab world, and further analyses of the political conflicts and development in the Middle East and China's role and foreign policy toward the Middle East.

In the first section, Zhu dedicates a few chapters to several of his former instructors: Mr. Jian Ma, Mr. Linrui Liu, and Mr. Xianlin Ji and celebrates their achievements in teaching and translating Arabic language. Through introducing these important figures to readers, Zhu outlines a general picture of the early development of Arabic teaching and translation in China. In the second section of this book, Zhu shares his views and experience in teaching and translating Arabic literature in China. In one essay, Zhu gives an account of the history of the translation of Arabic literature in China. In a few other essays, he discusses the current status of Arabic language education and his vision of how it can be reformed to cultivate more highly qualified students in order to better meet the needs of the country. The remaining two sections of the book offer an insight of the political, economic, and cultural aspects in the Middle East from a Chinese perspective. The author's analyses and observations are valuable from a scholarly point of view because he frequently adopts a cross-cultural approach by juxtaposing Chinese, Islamic/Arabic, Jewish cultures and civilizations, which effectively helps to broaden readers' world views.

To general Chinese readers, the translation of Arabic names in this book is of great help since these names are long and difficult to pronounce compared to Chinese names. However, it might be even more helpful to add the Arabic script or Romanized forms of these names as a quick reference. After all, it is easy to translate an Arabic name into Chinese; it is extremely difficult to do a reverse translation.

To sum up, this book, written based on Zhu's years of experience and expertise in teaching Arabic language and culture in China and involvement in the China-Middle East interactions, is a gateway to an overall understanding of the role China plays in the field of Middle East studies, particularly to those who are interested in gaining a global view of the Middle East affairs or cross-cultural study. The only drawback is that one without Chinese reading capability will need to wait until the English translation of this book becomes available, which unfortunately is not happening anytime soon.