

Development of International Chinese Language Education in Iran: An Analysis in the Context of Iran's Foreign Language Policy Characteristics

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Abstract: This paper focuses on examining the relevant policies concerning Chinese language education within Iran's foreign language education policy framework from the perspective of its historical context. By analyzing the characteristics of Iran's foreign language policy and the current situation of Chinese language teaching in Iran, this paper studies the future development of international Chinese language education in Iran.

Keywords: Iran; Foreign language education policy; International Chinese language education

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1. Introduction

As an important part of the national language policy, foreign language education policy is related not only to the political, economic, scientific, and technological development of the country, but also to the security of the country, the inheritance of cultural traditions, and the improvement of the overall quality of the next generation^[1]. For international Chinese language education, overseas Chinese language teaching needs to comply with the foreign language education policy of the target country and formulate Chinese language promotion strategies according to local laws and regulations. Therefore, it is necessary to study the foreign language education policy of the host country. In addition, the study of foreign language education policy of other countries can also provide guidelines for the formulation of foreign language education policy in China^[2].

Iran, the full name of which is the Islamic Republic of Iran, covers an area of about 1.645 million square kilometers and it is an ancient civilization in West Asia. China and Iran have a long history of interaction, with Iran as an important partner from the ancient Silk Road to today's "Belt and Road." In recent years, the cooperation between the two countries has deepened, and in 2021 the two countries signed the "China-Iran 25-Year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement," which further deepens the cooperation between the two sides in the fields of politics, economy, and culture. Additionally, the demand for local Chinese language learning in Iran is also gradually increasing. The study of Iran's foreign language education policy, especially the

Chinese language education policy, plays an important role in further understanding Iran's national conditions, strengthening the friendly exchanges between the two countries, and promoting the development of Chinese language teaching in Iran based on local conditions.

In recent years, Chinese language teaching in Iran has developed continually, and there have been new changes in Iran's official policies on Chinese language teaching. However, no one has specifically examined and studied the Chinese language education policy in Iran's foreign language education policy. This paper studies the characteristics of Iran's foreign language education policy through relevant literature and explores the future development of international Chinese language education in the local context of the current situation of Chinese language teaching in Iran.

2. Chinese language education policy in Iran's foreign language education policy

Foreign language education policy determines the foreign language as the "key language" ^[3] of the country. In order to achieve certain political, economic, and cultural goals in a specific period of time, each country formulates its foreign language education policy accordingly. Throughout Iran's foreign language education policies in different periods, Arabic ^[4], French ^[5], and English ^[6] have been the primary foreign languages at different times. Chinese, on the other hand, has been a very popular foreign language in Iran in recent years.

In 1991 after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education (MOSTHE), which coordinates the field of higher education in Iran, introduced a curriculum for the undergraduate degree in Chinese language in higher education institutions. It is stipulated that the duration of undergraduate studies in Chinese language is four years and that 143 credits must be completed before graduation, including 23 credits of public courses, 24 credits of basic courses, 77 credits of major courses, and 19 credits of specialized courses. The curricula of Chinese language majors in all major universities and colleges must be based on the framework laid by the Ministry of Science and Technology. On this basis, in 1996, Shahid Beheshti University School took the lead in signing a cooperation agreement with China's Shanghai International Studies University (SISU) to establish Iran's first undergraduate program in Chinese language, and SISU also established a program in Persian language and literature at the same time, and the two schools plan to send their teachers and students to each other's institutions for exchange visits every year. In 1997, the Iranian government approved the opening of a Chinese language department in the Faculty of Humanities at Shahid Beheshti University, which was the first time that an Iranian university formally offered a Chinese language program ^[7]. Since then, Shahid Beheshti University has been the only Iranian university with an undergraduate program in the Chinese language for 16 years.

In July 2008, Yunnan University in China and University of Tehran in Iran started to prepare for the establishment of a Confucius Institute, and in January 2009, the Confucius Institute at University of Tehran (hereinafter referred to as "DUT Confucius Institute"), the first Confucius Institute in Iran, was successfully inaugurated. At the beginning of the establishment of the Confucius Institute at University of Tehran, it was mainly responsible for the teaching of Chinese as a second foreign language in social classes and elective courses in the College of Foreign Languages of University of Tehran, and at the same time, it also provided support for the Chinese language teachers of Shahid Beheshti University.

On June 16, 2012, in an interview with a reporter from the Hamshahri newspaper, the spokesman for the Iranian Ministry of Science, Technology and Higher Education stated plans to expand the size of Iranian colleges and universities specializing in the Chinese language, including the opening of Chinese language majors in Esfahan, Shiraz, and Mashhad ^[8]. Since then, Semnan University, Esfahan University, Allameh

Tabataba'i University, and University of Tehran have introduced Chinese language programs. However, some universities encountered many problems soon after the introduction of the Chinese language programs. At Allameh Tabataba'i University, due to the shortage of teachers and other reasons, the Chinese language program was only able to enroll students every other year or every two years, depending on the number of Chinese language teachers. After the introduction of the Chinese language program at Semnan University in 2013, it was discontinued in 2015 due to problems with teachers and teaching materials ^[9]. Students enrolled in the previous program were transferred to the University of Tehran to continue their studies. The University of Tehran formally enrolled undergraduate students in the Chinese language program in 2015. Thanks to its professional and stable teaching staff and relatively abundant teaching resources, the University of Tehran is the only Iranian university that maintains annual enrollment in the Chinese language program.

In 2019, the Confucius Institute at Mazandaran University, the second Confucius Institute in Iran, which was established through cooperation between China's Guangzhou University and Iran's Mazandaran University, was officially inaugurated. The Confucius Institute offers two levels of short-term Chinese language classes at Mazandaran University. In December of the same year, the Iranian Minister of Education expressed his support for the addition of Chinese as a second language in Iranian primary and secondary schools and agreed to study the feasibility of this matter. With the support of the Cultural Affairs Department of the Iranian Embassy in Beijing, Yunnan University, which hosts the Confucius Institute at University of Tehran, commissioned Dr. Khani Adel, the former Deputy Cultural Counselor of the Iranian Embassy in Beijing, and his wife, to co-write, translate, and publish eight textbooks for Iranian Primary Schools (grades 1–8) in Chinese-Persian, which provide an appropriate Chinese-versus-Farsi curriculum for the teaching of Chinese as a second language in Iranian primary and secondary schools. This has provided Iranian primary schools with bilingual Chinese-Persian teaching materials that are appropriate for Iran's national conditions.

In February 2022, the Iranian Ministry of Health issued regulations for foreign language examinations for studying abroad, in which a new rule was introduced for applications to study medicine in China: applicants' Chinese language proficiency needs to be at Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK) Level II ^[10]. At the same time, the Ministry of Health communicated with the Confucius Institute at the University of Tehran, the only Chinese proficiency test center in Iran, about the Chinese proficiency test (HSK). In the same year, there was a surge in the number of Iranian students taking the HSK Level II exam, including 495 HSK Level II students in the third Chinese proficiency test of 2022 held by the Confucius Institute at the University of Tehran on December 3 alone, creating the highest number of students in a single test since the Chinese proficiency test (HSK/HSKK) was held in Iran.

In July 2023, according to the latest resolution of the Supreme Council of Education signed by the Iranian president, the Chinese language was included in the Iranian basic education system ^[11]. Prior to this, German, French, Italian, Spanish, and Russian were selected by the Supreme Council of Education as the foreign languages allowed to be taught in schools, thus in addition to English, Iranian schools can selectively teach students six other languages, including Chinese.

3. Impact of foreign language policy characteristics on the development of local international Chinese language education in Iran

- (1) Strong religious color is an important factor that must be considered in local Chinese language education

As an Islamic country, Iran has experienced the process of religious education, secularization of education followed by the return of religion in the development process of modern civilization ^[12].

After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the combination of clerical rule and democratic politics led to the restoration and strengthening of religious education and the establishment of a new educational system based on Islamic culture. Arabic, which is inextricably linked to Islamic culture, rose in prominence and changed from being a foreign language to a compulsory language along with Persian^[13]. The religious character of Iran is an important factor that must be taken into account in the process of spreading Chinese as a foreign language in Iran. Because of the differences between Chinese and Iranian cultures, particularly in religious beliefs, the process of spreading Chinese culture should be based on language to avoid the misunderstanding of “missionary.”

(2) Diversification of foreign language choices brings new opportunities for the development of Chinese language education

In the face of the current changes in the international political and economic situation, Iran’s foreign language education policy has been gradually diversified. Although English is still the first foreign language in the national education system, the government has been actively advocating the teaching of other languages. This also provides opportunities for the development of Chinese language in the country. At present, Chinese language education in Iran is mainly concentrated in universities and social language learning classes for adults, and there is no Chinese language education for primary and secondary school students. Iranian students majoring in Chinese language have zero Chinese language proficiency when they enroll in school, while most of them have a certain degree of English language proficiency. This makes it necessary for Chinese teachers to use English as an intermediary language in the teaching of Chinese language at the primary level of the Chinese language program. Compared with students in other countries where Chinese language classes are offered at the primary and secondary levels, it is almost impossible for Iranian students to apply for undergraduate programs in China directly after high school. Now that the Chinese language has been incorporated into Iran’s basic education system, Chinese language teaching in Iranian primary and secondary schools is bound to enter a new era in the future.

(3) Some outdated Chinese language education policies affect the cultivation of high-level Chinese language talents

Compared with European languages such as Arabic and English, Chinese language teaching started relatively late in Iran. In recent years, although the education department of the Iranian government has strongly supported the development of Chinese language education, not many relevant policies have been introduced, and some of them even remain at the end of the last century. For example, the current Chinese language curriculum in Iranian universities was formulated in 1991, and the curricula of Chinese language majors in universities must be based on this curriculum, and if adjustments are necessary, they must be reported to the authorities and go through a long and complicated approval process. Language teaching undergoes constant development with the changes of the times, and the Chinese language curriculum of more than 30 years has not been able to promote the better development of Chinese language education. At the same time, the Chinese language education system in Iranian universities is not comprehensive enough, and only one university has established a Chinese language department. It is known that some Iranian universities, including Shahid Beheshti University and University of Tehran, had planned to offer master’s degrees in Chinese language education, but they were shelved due to the lack of teachers, and some schools are still trying to apply for them. At present, Iran can only provide undergraduate Chinese language education, which is not conducive to the training of local Chinese teachers. Under such circumstances, it is necessary for the relevant

Iranian authorities to introduce more policies conducive to the cultivation of local Chinese language talents, actively promote cooperation between Chinese and Iranian universities, and introduce Chinese experts and scholars in the field of Chinese language teaching, so as to build a complete education system for Chinese language majors from bachelor's degree to doctoral degree.

4. Conclusion

The formulation, implementation, adjustment, and revision of language policy is an important means for a country to seek and realize its own cultural interests, which helps to enhance the country's soft power and is closely linked to the overall national development strategy. In the current context of globalization, in addition to the political and economic interdependence of countries worldwide, other cross-cutting areas of social life, such as education and culture, have become deeply integrated into the globalized landscape. Iran's current relatively open and diversified foreign language education policy has also adapted to the demands of the times. "Since there are big differences in the language situation, social conditions, etc., in each country, country-specific Chinese language teaching should be carried out in Chinese language dissemination and its global dissemination should be actively explored" ^[14]. Given the current foreign language education policy in Iran, international Chinese language education should be localized within the scope of local laws and policies. Based on the actuality of the current Chinese language education policy, it is important to continuously explore innovation and optimize cooperation, so as to make it more in line with the learning needs of the local residents, and further promote the vigorous development of Chinese language education in the region.

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