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Performative Diplomacy: Iran–Republic of China Relations, 1920–1949

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Abstract

This article seeks to fill a gap in the literature by sketching a narrative of Republic of China–Iran relations between 1920 and 1949. It analyzes the factors behind Sino-Iranian cooperation and competition in the tea and silk trades and at the League of Nations. Unofficial commercial interests, including Iranian merchants in Shanghai, played a larger role than previously thought in driving the establishment of the Sino-Persian Treaty of 1920. After ratifying the treaty in 1922, the Republic of China established an Iranian consulate in Shanghai in 1934. Diplomacy between the two nations, and the public ceremonies performed by foreign diplomats in Shanghai, were part of a pattern of performative nationalist diplomacy undertaken by both the Chinese and Iranian states.

Keywords: China; diplomacy; international relations; Iran; Key Ostovān; League of Nations; Shanghai

The signing of the Sino-Iranian Friendship Treaty of 1922 was a curious event, in that there were no obvious strategic, economic, or military concerns of any significance between the two states. China and Iran sat on opposite ends of the Asian continent, and had had no major commercial ties since the decline of the traditional Silk Road connections and rise of European colonial networks.¹ China had not even had direct relations with Iran since the Safavid era some three hundred years prior. Despite this, the Iranian state saw fit to revive these relations in the 1920s and found in the Nationalist Guomindang (國民黨, sometimes written Kuomintang) an enthusiastic partner.

Relations between the two states were driven primarily by the desire to enhance national prestige in the international arena, rather than strategic or economic concerns. This was achieved through establishing relations, trade agreements, and joint projects with other newly decolonized states, and by participating in the institutions of international diplomacy previously reserved for European nations that were deemed to meet the “standard of civilization.” Chinese and Iranian elites were able to affirm their nationalist identity by participating in performative nationalist diplomacy that could be presented for domestic or international consumption. In this way, international relations between China and Iran formed an important part of the nation-building (or nation-making) efforts of both states.²

This was facilitated by similar state ideologies that emphasized national rejuvenation and military discipline. Both state and non-state actors, including Iranian and Chinese tea

¹ Green, “From the Silk Road.”

² Following Reem Abou-El-Fadl, nation-making is preferred over nation-building, “partly to signify an ongoing (re)fashioning rather than one-off construction,” and partly to distance the term from nation-building’s connotation of “efforts to foster loyalty to, and the legitimacy of, a cultural and political community,” as outlined in Abou-El-Fadl, *Foreign Policy*, 19.

merchants operating in Shanghai and Hong Kong, sought to mobilize various nationalist projects to their advantage. However, although China sought to establish direct trade relations with Iran, this project was stymied by the two countries' incompatible economic goals. Divergent objectives also led to competition at the League of Nations and in other international arenas. Despite these bumps in the road, relations between the two continued to develop, as their value lay primarily in the prestige to be gained from both cooperation and competition, so long as they played out on an international stage and followed the rules of European diplomacy.

Relations between Iran and the Republic of China (ROC) have long been overshadowed by Iran's establishment of official relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1972, but there are compelling reasons to study this earlier period. Diplomatic history and diplomacy studies have recently moved beyond earlier realist analyses, which privileged a top-down view of the state. They have begun to produce scholarship concerned with the roles of identity, representation, and non-state actors.³ By examining a set of relations between two non-European states when they were not operating under any clear realist motivation, this paper also contributes to the sparse but growing literature on diplomacy in the Global South.⁴ It illustrates how international relations are bound up in questions of identity, nation-making, and prestige as well as questions of *realpolitik* and practical benefit.

This study is part of a larger project to explore twentieth-century Sino-Iranian relations from a historical perspective. It sets itself apart from other studies of Sino-Iranian relations by covering the period before 1972 and by drawing on sources in both Mandarin and Persian, one of only a handful of studies to do so. It should be noted that Chinese sources are far more accessible than Iranian sources, especially when it comes to newspapers. Some events are only described from the Western and Chinese point of view simply because copies of Iranian newspapers that may have covered these events were inaccessible to the author for the dates in question. Major newspapers in both countries followed events in the other quite closely and in impressive detail. In general, the readers of Iranian and Chinese newspapers had the opportunity to be very well informed about one another's affairs, and could supplement their knowledge with Western media, as many were educated in French or other European languages.

Identity, Nation-Making, and the Performance of the Nation

Identity and international relations are intricately linked. Identity alone does not explain or account for decision-making, but it is an important factor in both enabling and constraining certain sets of behavior, as well as defining what is considered part of the national interest.⁵ It also plays a role in efforts to construct, affirm, or otherwise "perform" the national mythology simultaneously on global (or public) and local (or personal) levels.⁶ In a dissertation on an exchange of insults between Baltic and Russian diplomats in the 1990s, Wynne Russell explores the links between diplomacy and identity:

Diplomatic exchanges are permeated with debates on the nature or fundamental qualities—one might say the identities—of nations, governments, non-state actors, or indeed any pertinent actor in the global social arena. . . . The international "order" being negotiated through diplomatic exchanges is as much a social order as it is the presence of rules or the absence of war.⁷

³ For a review of this literature, see Sharp, "For Diplomacy"; and Tsygankov, "Self and Other." For a discussion specific to the Middle East, see Telhami and Barnett, *Identity and Foreign Policy*; and Adib-Moghaddam, *International Politics*. For China, see Qing, *Allies to Enemies*; and Lee, *Identity*.

⁴ Braveboy-Wagner, *Diplomatic Strategies*

⁵ Abou-El-Fadl, *Foreign Policy*, 4–5, citing Smith, *Nationalism*, 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Russell, "Identity Diplomacy."

These negotiations, and the identities that inform them, do not occur in a vacuum, but against the backdrop of state and non-state forces attempting to influence, co-opt, and orchestrate them to various degrees. Consciously and self-consciously, these exchanges are understood by participants and observers in the context of personal, political, and public identities, and such narratives can be deployed in the press or in private to support personal or political projects. In other words, international diplomacy is a site where states can display their nationalist aspirations through ceremonies and public statements, joint development projects, friendship treaties and trade agreements, and engagement with international institutions of diplomacy. In this way, states can be seen “performing the nation” on an international stage.

The notion of “performative diplomacy” has gained popularity as an analytical lens in the study of current affairs, diplomatic history, and foreign policy.⁸ Naoko Shimazu has proposed the framework of “diplomacy as theatre” in her analysis of the Bandung Conference “to re-cast the conference as a theatrical performance, in which actors performed on the stage to audiences.” This performance sought to demonstrate China’s embodiment of the “*esprit de corps* of the newly emergent post-colonial world.”⁹ Reem Abou-El-Fadl uses a similar framework to explore the interplay between identity, nationalism, and foreign policy in the Cold War relations between Egypt and Turkey. She argues that Egyptian and Turkish elites “formed their nationalist commitments in a context shaped by international affairs, and . . . could only pursue these commitments in a dynamic with international interlocutors.”¹⁰ Drawing on constructivist theories of foreign policy over realist ones, this framework highlights how “leaderships thus sought to intervene in and instrumentalize the international field in the realization of their nationalist commitments, on behalf of a constituency that they considered themselves to represent.”¹¹ One observation that this study can add is that non-state actors, such as merchants and businessmen, also sought to instrumentalize and channel these new connections into projects that would benefit them and their clients.

Iran’s early relationship with Turkey also serves as a clear example of this dynamic. In his essay “Performing the Nation: The Shah’s Official State Visit to Kemalist Turkey, June to July 1934,” Afshin Marashi describes the pomp and circumstance surrounding Reza Khan’s widely publicized trip to Ankara in the summer of 1934. Crowds poured into streets decorated with nationalist symbols, enthusiastically waving flags and taking part in the performance of the nation. Marashi succinctly describes the international context in which this event occurred:

The elaborate and public nature of the welcoming ceremony at the Ankara train station reflected the new political climate of the emerging inter-war Middle Eastern state system. In the aftermath of the First World War, the Wilsonian doctrines of national sovereignty and international diplomacy had produced an increasingly formalized international system of nation-states. The demise of the Ottoman, Habsburg and Romanov empires—and the establishment of the League of Nations—led to the century’s first springtime of nations and the emergence of a wave of new states seeking recognition within the new international order.¹²

More than the norms of international diplomacy, this reflected how Asian elites viewed the world and their rightful place in it. There was an underlying belief in a “political metaphysic” that presumed an international community of equal partners, from which the non-West had been excluded.¹³ In forging new relations with one another, Asian elites

⁸ Shimazu, “Diplomacy as Theatre”; Ball, “Theatre of State”; Makarychev, “Performative Diplomacy.”

⁹ Shimazu, “Diplomacy as Theatre,” 225.

¹⁰ Abou-El-Fadl, *Foreign Policy*, 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Marashi, “Performing the Nation,” 103.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 105.

sought to resist this pattern and assert their independence. Conducting interstate relations under the rules of Western diplomacy was a way to rectify the humiliations of the colonial era and assert themselves on an international stage as modern societies.

These moments of engagement were not only for the eyes of the West. Domestic audiences also were an important target of the performance of nationhood. Diplomatic visits, especially at such a high level, were important because they “worked to publicise the adoption of the new Wilsonian model of national politics by the two emerging states [Iran and Turkey]” and to “circulate a new set of national symbols with which to define themselves, their relationship to each other, and their place in the world.”¹⁴ Moments of official representation, sometimes published in newspapers for public consumption, allowed for the performance of diplomatic ceremonies that reflected the military and the modernizing ideology of both states. Although China was not nearly as important to Iran as Turkey and therefore less widely publicized, official Sino-Iranian relations also can be understood through this lens. Due to the lack of significant economic, cultural, or strategic ties, early official interactions were partly performative, driven by the desire for prestige, and mediated by Chinese and Iranian notions of political and cultural identity.

Using this framework, the present study contributes to several debates in the field of diplomacy studies, history, and nationalism. First, it highlights the value of performative diplomacy as a mode of analysis by providing a more satisfying explanation of Iran–ROC relations than realist or identity-based interpretations alone could provide. Second, it provides additional depth by exploring the interplay between state and non-state actors. Third, it provides a case study of early twentieth-century relations between two Asian, non-European states that does not rely on a Eurocentric understanding of international relations, but instead draws on studies of the Global South. Finally, it builds on a growing body of literature that views nation-making not as a “domestically bounded phenomenon, directed by the state,” or an “agentless process driven by the exogenous forces of modernization,” but rather as an arena in which political and economic elites can draw on “discursive creativity and activism” to demonstrate, affirm, and realize their nationalist identities and modernizing projects.¹⁵

The Shah and the Generalissimo: Compatible Currents in Chinese and Iranian Nationalism

When discussing the international relations of China in the twentieth century, it becomes necessary to distinguish *which* China one is referring to. Before 1949, international opinion was mostly in agreement that the Nationalist Republic of China, led by General Chiang Kai-shek, was China’s legitimate government, although large swaths remained under local rule. After dominating his rivals, Chiang’s Nationalist Party emerged as the country’s leading political organization. Chiang soon faced opposition from a wide array of social groups, including the nascent Chinese Communist Party (CCP), formed under Soviet tutelage on July 23, 1921. The conflict between the two culminated in a wave of bloody repressions at the hands of the Nationalists, followed by a protracted civil war that began in 1927 and continued intermittently until 1949. Over time, the Communists eventually reversed the tide against the better-armed, better-funded, and internationally recognized Nationalist government. In May of 1949, after Nanjing surrendered to the CCP, Chiang declared martial law, and the Republican army and administration fled the mainland to Taiwan.

On October 1, 1949, Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party officially declared the creation of the People’s Republic of China. In the eyes of the international community, the Republic of China was still seen as China’s legitimate government, but the country was unquestionably under the control of the CCP. The PRC spent the next several decades advocating that nations switch recognition from the ROC to themselves, a policy that achieved

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁵ Abou-El-Fadl, *Foreign Policy*, 4, 18.

considerable success with the Republic of China's expulsion from the United Nations in 1971. By that time, most of the world had accepted the situation and formally recognized the People's Republic. Today, both governments lay claim to the entire nation, including Taiwan, and consider the other illegitimate. Therefore "China" can refer to the PRC, the ROC, or the sociocultural entity rather than the state itself. For the present article, the use of "China" denotes the Nationalist government, and the Communist government will be distinguished as the PRC, CCP, or People's Republic of China.

Official contacts between Iran and the Republic of China came into being as both states underwent profound political and social upheavals in the late 1910s and early 1920s that left them under the control of military modernizers. Iran found itself under foreign occupation, split between Great Britain and tsarist Russia. At the same time, bolshevism became an increasingly powerful force in Iran, especially in provinces close to the Soviet border and with largely non-Persian populations. After the outbreak of the Russian Revolution, the nascent Soviet Union supported several democratic and leftist social movements within Iran, including the *jangali* movement and the Persian Soviet Socialist Republic, also called the Soviet Republic of Gilan.¹⁶ In the ensuing political struggle, Reza Khan, an ambitious and rapidly rising military officer, was able to consolidate power by brutally crushing democratic experiments in the provinces. His rise was facilitated by a political elite that had largely abandoned the project of liberal democracy for an "illiberal nationalism" that drew on the rhetoric of cultural renewal that was sweeping across Asia.¹⁷ He crowned himself "Reza Shah Pahlavi" in 1926 and declared the beginning of a new dynasty.

Historians have disagreed in their assessment of Reza Shah and the impact of his period of rule. Whereas some have seen him as a modernizer and reformer, others have argued that he was primarily driven by a desire to "expand his control by expanding his state's power into all sectors of the country—into its polity, economy, society, and ideology."¹⁸ Much of his expansion of state power was centered around state bureaucracy and the military. Between 1925 and 1941, the military tripled in size, and the state bureaucracy had grown from nearly nonexistent to employing over ninety thousand people.¹⁹ Reza Shah himself put on a military persona and often appeared publicly in full military regalia. He centralized economic and political power in a personal patronage network and transformed the majlis into a virtually meaningless institution. His government laid railroads, built factories, and set up electrical grids. The education system was transformed along Western lines, expanded, and standardized. A secular judicial system replaced the traditional religious courts. Edicts were issued that attempted to ban various forms of Islamic and traditional attire.²⁰ Under his rule, the state sought to directly influence the daily lives of Iranian citizens in unprecedented ways. To promote national unity, he embraced an ethnic nationalist reading of Iranian history that relied heavily on visions of ancient Aryan glory. In short, the Iranian state extended its reach into new realms previously untouched.

Reza Shah's role in Iran is often compared to that of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) in neighboring Turkey.²¹ However, an equally useful comparison can be made to China's Chiang Kai-shek, who became the Republic of China's official leader in 1928. Like Reza Shah, Chiang took power when the central government was in crisis and was challenged by local military powers. Like Reza Shah, "Generalissimo" Chiang Kai-shek cultivated a military image and leaned heavily on the military to support his rule, especially once the Japanese invasion began in 1931. Despite the challenges brought on by the war, Chiang's government made substantial efforts to modernize the country's political, transportation,

¹⁶ For an overview of this history and of Soviet support for Iranian constitutionalism and democratic movements, see Matin-Asgari, *Eastern and Western*, 15–43.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 79–80.

¹⁸ Abrahamian, *History of Modern Iran*, 72.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁰ Katouzian, *State and Society*, 33–34, 335–36.

²¹ Atabaki and Zürcher, *Men of Order*; Nassaj, "Moqāyese-yī nūsdāzi-ye Īrān."

military, and economic systems. Chiang also attempted to promote nationalist sentiment and ideological unity through appeals to the ancient past, using a social and cultural reform movement based on neo-Confucian and Christian morality. Like Reza Shah, Chiang remains a controversial figure among both the public and historians; some see him as a unifying force who modernized China while fending off foreign aggression, whereas others decry his authoritarian tactics and the corruption associated with his rule.²² The Republic of China under the Guomindang was undoubtedly an authoritarian one-party state, and Chiang brooked no challenges to his rule. There was a marked similarity to the political and ideological approaches of the Republic of China and Iran that encouraged cooperation and friendly relations between the two.

Foreign policy is often related to domestic pressures and state ideology, and a common approach to politics can sometimes translate into a compatible approach to international relations. There was a long-standing desire among both Iranian and Chinese elites to restore some measure of prestige to their country in the eyes of the international community. In many ways, this desire was at the heart of the anti-colonial discourse and narrative of national humiliation that had taken root in both Iran and China and helped bring about constitutional revolutions.

In Iran, the narrative of national humiliation is most strongly associated with the Reuter concession. The Qājār government sought to grant the right to construct a railway system to German-born entrepreneur Baron Julius de Reuter (1816–1899) of Great Britain. In exchange, he merely asked for the right to nearly all future industrial development, exploitation of natural resources, and financial institutions.²³ Reuter was only required to pay 20 percent annual income for the railroad system and 15 percent for the other monopolies granted, as well as a cursory loan of £200,000. The concession was so outrageous that Lord Curzon, himself a proponent of British imperialism, called it “the most complete and extraordinary surrender of the entire industrial resources of a kingdom into foreign hands that has ever been dreamt of.”²⁴ Nasir al-Din Shah (1831–1896) was forced to cancel the plan due to widespread opposition to avert a palace revolt. Abbas Amanat describes the incident as “Iran’s first experience with large-scale Western capital [that] bore all the marks of unreserved exploitation.”

The Reuter concession was part of a larger pattern of capitulations to foreign governments that would leave the Qājār state politically and financially dependent on colonial powers. Over the course of the nineteenth century, Iran suffered a string of diplomatic and military defeats that resulted in the imposition of humiliating treaties, including the treaties of Golestān (1813), Turkmanchay (1828), and Paris (1857).²⁵ The resultant loss of territory and sovereignty to the Russian and British empires led to a severe reduction in Persia’s status and prestige internationally.²⁶ Amanat argues that as Europeans made diplomatic and territorial gains in Iran, they also pursued “interventions in Iran’s domestic affairs and . . . race[d] to acquire commercial and other advantages, capitulatory rights, and, later, economic concessions. Europe’s condescending attitude, gradually setting in as Iran’s weaknesses on the battlefield became more apparent, served as a cultural backdrop.”²⁷ This allowed European nations to extract legal and economic concessions from the court that facilitated Iran’s economic penetration by European goods. The Qājār court was equally eager for short-term gain and susceptible to pressure from the Great Powers and their Iranian supporters, and therefore frequently granted or even sought out these concessions.²⁸

By the 1890s, a litany of concessions had been granted to foreign governments and individuals to develop natural resources, public utilities, and financial institutions. Rights to Caspian fisheries, mines in Azerbaijan, and river navigation and the right to apply Iranian

²² For the negative view, see Wakeman, “Revisionist View.” For a more positive portrayal, see Taylor, *Generalissimo*.

²³ Amanat, *Iran*, 385–86.

²⁴ Curzon, *Persia*, 480.

²⁵ Abrahamian, *History of Modern Iran*, 36.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁷ Amanat, *Iran*, 276.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 412–13.

law to foreign citizens (extraterritoriality) were all signed away.²⁹ Nationalists criticized the move for selling out Iran's economic sovereignty, and religious officials argued that it was contrary to Islamic property laws.³⁰ In addition to offending religious and nationalist sensibilities, this also opened Iranian merchants to competition from foreign goods. Widespread opposition continued to build and periodically exploded into open unrest. The most famous example of this was the 1891 tobacco concession, which triggered a popular protest movement and substantial urban riots against the concession and European influence in general.³¹

Like Iran, China experienced a decline in international prestige and military power relative to the West in the nineteenth century.³² Like Iran, China was subject to humiliating demands following a string of military defeats, often referred to as the "unequal treaties." The first of these was the Treaty of Nanking (1843), imposed upon China by the British after the first Opium War (1839–1842).³³ In addition to monetary concessions, tax exemptions, and extraterritorial rights for British citizens, the British also demanded four treaty ports and the island of Hong Kong. The treaties of Whampoa (1844) and Aigun (1858) soon followed, which established similar legal rights for the French and the Russian empires. Soon, Europeans controlled most modern Chinese industries and even oversaw tax collection, ostensibly to ensure repayment of indemnities from the Opium Wars. China was "carved up like a melon" into various spheres of influence, an image that remains a potent memory in Chinese nationalism to this day.³⁴

In short, external aggression and foreign concessions had badly damaged Iranian prestige by the early 1920s. To this end, Iranian officials sought out alliances with the United States and Germany as a "third power" to counterbalance their two main rivals, Britain and Russia. They also concluded agreements with Turkey, Iraq, and Afghanistan that enhanced their international standing. These alliances often had little practical or long-term significance, but they allowed Iran to be seen acting independently and on its own terms.³⁵

The Republic of China followed a similar path. Diplomatic defeats after the Opium Wars and World War I formed an integral part of the "national humiliation" narrative. In the words of Sun Yat-sen, China's government sought "the status of absolute independence and equality in the family of nations." Chiang's overriding foreign policy concern was Japanese aggression, and his government received substantial support from Germany and the United States. However, minor relations were established with other countries to advance the image of a new China conducting its affairs on equal footing with the world.³⁶ Sino-Iranian relations in this era should be understood in the context of this goal, which was both personal and political to many Iranian and Chinese intellectuals.

Sino-Iranian Cooperation and Competition, 1920–1941

Diplomacy between Iran and Nationalist China began with the signing of the Sino-Iranian Treaty of 1920, an event carefully analyzed by Li-Chiao Chen.³⁷ He argues that the treaty was part of China and Iran's attempts at "strengthening themselves and their search for independence and integrity after the First World War," and their opposition to extraterritoriality in international affairs.³⁸ Although Chen's article provides valuable context, it

²⁹ Floor and Ettehadieh, "Concessions."

³⁰ Moaddel, "Shi'i Political Discourse," 460.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² For an overview of recent scholarship on the Self-Strengthening Movement, see Chang, "Reappraising Zhang Zhidong."

³³ Platt, *Imperial Twilight*; Polachek, *Inner Opium War*.

³⁴ Gries, "Narratives." See also Gries, *China's New Nationalism*.

³⁵ Saikal, "Iranian Foreign Policy."

³⁶ Wu, "Foreign Relations."

³⁷ Chen, "Signing."

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 991.

overlooks critical moments in the history of relations between Republican China and Pahlavi Iran. For example, Chen claims that “only a draft and not a formal treaty was signed” and that “the two Asian countries had no official contact, such as a consulate or a legation . . . until 1942.”³⁹ In fact, the Sino-Iranian Treaty was officially ratified in 1922, and an official consulate was established in Shanghai in 1934.⁴⁰ This is an understandable oversight, as no comprehensive study of this period exists in the literature, and it highlights the importance of drawing on a wide variety of sources in multiple languages. The Iran–ROC connection has also been largely ignored in favor of later connections with the PRC.

As Chen has argued, the end of World War I created new opportunities for both China and Iran to reverse some of the misfortunes they had suffered at the hands of European powers. Taiwanese scholar Chi-Hua Tang refers to the Chinese government’s efforts to abrogate or otherwise cancel the unequal treaties and their humiliating terms as “treaty revision diplomacy.”⁴¹ Chief among these terms was the right of extraterritoriality, a perennial concern of Iranian and Chinese nationalists.⁴² China had unsuccessfully attempted to cancel extraterritorial rights for most European countries when it entered World War I and was in the process of trying to regain control of the Shandong Peninsula, which had been ceded to Japan without Chinese consent at the Treaty of Paris. Iran also had canceled its extraterritorial rights with Russia, now the Soviet Union, after the Russian Revolution toppled the imperial state.⁴³ The Anglo-Iranian Agreement of 1919 tried to renegotiate Iran’s relationship with Britain along more independent lines, but it was never ratified due to public opposition to British and Russian interference. By early 1920, both China and Iran were new members of the League of Nations and were actively searching for a way to bolster their prestige in the context of these ongoing struggles.

In March 1920, Chinese and Iranian representatives met for the first time in Rome.⁴⁴ The initiative was taken by Isaac Khan, the Iranian minister in Italy, who had been instructed to pursue a friendship treaty with China by the Iranian government.⁴⁵ Chinese minister Wang Kuang-Chi welcomed the development, saying “China and Iran were ancient civilized countries, but all encountered serious challenges from foreign powers now.” The Chinese foreign ministry expressed similar sentiments, writing that “Iran has been a friend of business since the Tang dynasty, and now has the same ambition as ours.”⁴⁶

The most important feature of the treaty was that it stipulated that all citizens “will be subject to the local laws, and all judicial matters arising from disputes, crimes, etc. will be settled before the local tribunals of Persia or China, respectively.”⁴⁷ For China, it was only the second “equal treaty” (to borrow Chen’s phrase) to be signed without an extraterritoriality agreement, after the Sino-Bolivian Friendship Treaty that preceded it in 1919.⁴⁸ The treaty was ratified on February 6, 1922.⁴⁹ Chinese newspapers emphasized the significance of concluding the treaty without extraterritoriality.⁵⁰ The treaty was provided in Chinese,

³⁹ Ibid., 991, 1005.

⁴⁰ “First Persian Consulate.”

⁴¹ Chen, “Signing,” 994; Tang, *Treaty Revision Campaign*.

⁴² Extraterritoriality refers to exemption from local laws and tribunals, as for foreign diplomats. Extraterritorial rights were often used by British and Russian citizens in China and Iran to avoid punishment for crimes committed on foreign soil. For more on this topic, see Kayaoglu, *Legal Imperialism*; and Cassel, *Grounds of Judgment*.

⁴³ Chen, “Signing,” 995.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 1001.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Majles, “Qānun-e rāje‘ be tasvib-e ‘ahdnāme-ye mavedet.”

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ “Sino-Persian Agreement.”

⁵⁰ Although the present study did not find any references to the event in Iranian newspapers, this is largely an issue of access to newspapers printed at the time of the announcement. The full text of the agreement was preserved in the records of the majlis and presumably would have been published at the time of its adoption.

Persian, and French, with a note that the French version would take precedence in the case of a dispute.

For the next twelve years, there would not be any substantial development in Sino-Iranian relations. Ambassadors were not exchanged, and no further diplomatic communication was attempted. This was possibly due to the Iranian state's changing priorities under Reza Shah, who came to power over this period and had many competing foreign policy and developmental priorities. Relations with China, a low priority to begin with, likely fell by the wayside. Amanat notes that during this period, "the political climate noticeably shifted in favor of Reza Khan," in part because of his use of political intimidation and hired thugs to oppress his opponents.⁵¹

Despite this lull, the Chinese press continued to follow Iranian affairs. Newspapers like *Shen Bao*, a prominent periodical based in Shanghai, had been covering news from Iran from various perspectives—from pro-British to anti-imperialist—since the late 1800s.⁵² One of the first modern Chinese newspapers, *Shen Bao* was created in 1872 and managed by British industrialist Ernest Major (1841–1908).⁵³ It published some very brief news reports on events in Iran as soon as it was established, usually from a perspective sympathetic to British concerns; the constitution was only mentioned in passing in articles that emphasized the internal disorder it had created.⁵⁴ In 1907, *Shen Bao* was sold to Chinese entrepreneur Zhang Jian (1853–1926), a Chinese "official-entrepreneur" sympathetic to the constitutional movement.⁵⁵ Shortly thereafter, the paper began to publish articles in favor of constitutionalism in both China and Iran.⁵⁶ *Shen Bao* reached a circulation of 50,000 by the early 1920s and peaked at over 150,000 at the end of the mid-1930s, and ensured that the new nationalist-oriented reading public, which included merchants, officials, and other educated elites, could follow international news very closely.⁵⁷

Shen Bao noted Reza Shah's rise to power, which was inaccurately portrayed as a reaction to popular demand. A *Shen Bao* report alludes to "opposition from religious leaders and the people" to establishing a republic.⁵⁸ Another describes an incident at the majlis on March 21, 1924, as the result of popular pressure:

The Persian King has long been in Europe, which has led to a movement to reform the Persian Republic. The conservatives have become more entrenched in parliament. Some support a republic, but there are still many people who support the Shah. Opponents of the Republicans crowded into congress, and the police could not control them. Members of Congress who advocated for a republic were beaten.⁵⁹

Praise for Reza Shah was the norm; he was usually presented as analogous to China's national heroes or other nationalist strongmen.

A later article in 1942 gives a retrospective of the Shah's life that cast him as the founder of a republic and a nationalist modernizer, a kind of combination of Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek:

He ordered the former King of Persia to go abroad and planned to change Persia into a Republic, with himself as the president. Later, because the Persian people were not very satisfied with the Republican system, Reza Khan was formally appointed as the

⁵¹ Amanat, *Iran*, 556.

⁵² Figueroa, "China and the Iranian Left," 54–62.

⁵³ Wue, "Profits of Philanthropy."

⁵⁴ "Recent News of Persian Chaos."

⁵⁵ Wright, *China in Revolution*, 157.

⁵⁶ "Persian Autocracy."

⁵⁷ Chin, "Print Capitalism," 405.

⁵⁸ "Young Lord of Persia."

⁵⁹ "Persian State System."

hereditary Shah. He reorganized the army, defeated the bandits and rebellious Turkish chieftains, and enacted a new constitution. . . . Women no longer wear veils, schools have been set up, streets have been opened, new homes have been built, public health has been protected. . . the greatest achievement is the construction of a railway. . . . Among the countries of the Near East, Reza Shah's position is only matched by Kemal of Turkey. . . the [Persian] motherland has achieved a strong position thanks to the Iranian founder Reza Shah, and it shines brightly in the deserts of the East.⁶⁰

This hagiographic portrayal of Reza Shah was indicative of the ideological affinities between Nationalist China and Pahlavi Iran that facilitated good relations between both states.

Iranian newspapers also covered events in China, although they did not paint so rosy of a picture of Chiang Kai-shek, at least at first. *Eṭṭelāʿat*, a popular daily newspaper that began publishing in Tehran in 1926, carried extensive coverage of events in China, usually relying on Western or Russian news sources, as well as English-language newspapers from China like *China Daily News*.⁶¹ Their coverage tended to focus on political and military developments during the Chinese Civil War. Articles with titles like "New Attack by the Chinese Red Army" and "Rumors about Chiang Kai-shek's Injury" were common by the 1930s.⁶² Others focused on "Crime and Murder in Beijing" and other incidents of violence following Nationalist retreat and Communist occupation.⁶³ Chiang's government was depicted as weak and without real power.⁶⁴

In general, China was depicted as under imminent threat from the spread of communism and at the mercy of imperial powers.⁶⁵ Articles described mass starvation as "the communist movement gains momentum," whereas others quoted Chinese critics of Chiang who claimed that "due to Chiang Kai-shek's policy, the civil war in China has continued and the country's population is suffering." Due to Chiang's failure to provide development and address grievances, "the nation is in the throes of a communist uprising, and if asked to stay away from communism, it can never do so."⁶⁶ This discourse reflected the anxieties and priorities of the Iranian state, which was heavily invested in the notion that Iran, too, could fall to communism if it did not provide strong leadership and development projects. The implication was that Reza Shah was succeeding where Chiang had failed, and that without his leadership Iran could suffer the same fate. This reflected Western journalism about both China and Iran at the time, which provided the majority of the paper's sources.

Whether praising Iran's modernization efforts or bemoaning the losses of the Nationalists in China, these articles represent attempts to engage in nation-making. After the fall of China, more hagiographic depictions of Chiang would appear in the pages of *Eṭṭelāʿat* and the recollections of Iranian diplomats. Iranian authors with nationalist anxieties about communism saw themselves reflected in the Chinese mirror, whereas Chinese enthusiasm for Reza Shah was based on their own hopes and desires for the future of China. These articles demonstrate how international relations and global affairs were deployed as part of a nation-making effort in the public sphere, and how these ideas were often filtered through the prism of how such events were presented in the West.

Iran and China's "Opium War" at the League of Nations

By the late 1920s, China and Iran found themselves in competition over a position of influence in the League of Nations. League leadership comprised fourteen council seats, five of

⁶⁰ "Musings on Iran."

⁶¹ "Ezhārāt-e keshish kātolik raje' be qazāhā-ye Chānshā."

⁶² "Homle jadīd-e qoshūn-e sorkh-e Chīn"; "Shāye'āt raje' be jerāhat-e Chān Kāy Shī."

⁶³ "Jerayat va qatl dar Pekan."

⁶⁴ "Sabūt-e 'adam-e qodrat-e daulat-e Nānkīn."

⁶⁵ "Masā'edat-e ampriyālist-hāye farānse bā murtaje'in-e Chīn."

⁶⁶ "Ezhārāt-e Sūn Chuān Fān raje' be towse'e-ye komunizm dar Chīn."

which were permanent (held by Britain, France, Italy, Japan, and Germany) and the rest distributed among various European and South American states; only one seat was reserved for Asia. Competing priorities over the main international issue they had in common—the regulation of opium—also caused friction and led to occasionally tense exchanges. Participation at the League of Nations and in the international regulation of opium was part of the effort of both nations to erase potent symbols of inferiority inflicted by Europe. China and Iran had been previously excluded from the international institutions of “civilized” European nations, and the Chinese government had been forced to accept the importation of opium after British forces decimated the nascent imperial navy and looted the capital. Participation in these institutions was a way to demand respect and recognition as part of the community of “civilized” nations. Their efforts were publicized in domestic and foreign media coverage, an important aspect of the performance of the nation on an international stage.

Competition frequently occurred between China, Iran, and later Turkey.⁶⁷ For example, China occupied the League seat in 1928, but it was forced to vacate because Persia was gathering support to mount a challenge. Persia apologized to the Chinese state and expressed hopes that it would “not harm friendly relations between China and Persia.”⁶⁸ In 1930, China was prevented from occupying another seat available on the principle that “Asia should have one non-permanent seat at a time,” and Iran’s term was not yet up.⁶⁹ The next year, Iran was the one forced to step down in favor of China.⁷⁰ When this term expired in 1934, Iran first put itself forth as a candidate to challenge the Chinese and then later withdrew in favor of Turkey, which had a better chance of winning. The *North China Herald* observed that “Persia’s withdrawal in favour of Turkey increases the opposition to China’s chance of retaining the seat.”⁷¹ Iran sent its first ambassador to China at the height of this diplomatic rivalry.⁷²

China and Iran’s interactions at the League of Nations often touched on a critical international issue for both nations: the opium trade. Despite being illegal, opium was the main commodity traded between China and Iran in the early 1900s. This trade was the legacy of British imperial networks and continued well into the 1940s. Ram Regavim has completed a detailed study of the Iranian opium industry and its relationship to China during this period.⁷³ According to Regavim, after Reza Khan’s rise the Iranian opium industry was mostly tolerated and eventually became a government monopoly.⁷⁴ In 1923, the *North China Herald* reported that 12,642 pounds of opium had been officially imported into China from Iran, according to statistics provided by Arthur Millspaugh, the American adviser in charge of Iranian finances.⁷⁵ In 1925, the advisory council of the League of Nations Opium Commission declared that “Persia has already this year exported 460 tons of illicit opium, most of which is supposed to have been smuggled into China.”⁷⁶ Opium itself had been derisively called “Persian Dirt” (波斯土) in the Chinese press since the 1870s. The Iranian press was full of reports of opium seized from would-be smugglers bound for China, but the flow of the drug did not subside. Curbing this trade was exceedingly difficult, as the Iranian government had little incentive to end one of the most important revenue sources for its military and industrializing policies.⁷⁷ A League of Nations commission in the 1920s found no

⁶⁷ “China and the League.”

⁶⁸ “China Seen from London ”

⁶⁹ “China at Geneva.”

⁷⁰ “China to Obtain a Seat on the League Council.”

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² “China and Persia as Rivals at Geneva.”

⁷³ Regavim, “Most Sovereign.”

⁷⁴ Ibid., 185.

⁷⁵ “ Production and Export of Opium.”

⁷⁶ “Persia Exports 460 Tons of Opium This Year.”

⁷⁷ Regavim, “Most Sovereign,” 182.

evidence that the Iranian government was making any serious attempt to end opium cultivation or smoking.

Ending the opium trade was a central objective for China's Republican government and Chinese intellectuals, who viewed it as part of a long history of humiliation. In the nineteenth century, Britain had forced the militarily weak Qing state to accept a legal opium trade in two Opium Wars, which exacerbated a severe social problem and created a deep and lasting sense of injustice. By the 1900s, efforts to ban the trade had become increasingly transnational, and Chinese activists recognized that "China alone cannot hope to cope with the problem of narcotic drugs; permanent success in our war with opium requires effective cooperation between all the opium-producing and drug-manufacturing countries."⁷⁸ The First International Opium Conference was held in Shanghai as early as 1912, and the League of Nations established the League's Advisory Committee on Traffic in Opium in 1921. However, Iran was not particularly keen to cooperate. Iranian participation in these institutions was mainly to stave off regulation and ensure that the lucrative opium industry was replaced with funding for development projects. ROC delegates took part in these organizations as well, and disputes between the two sides over opium production played out in an international arena.

Iran's unwillingness to modify its position on the opium issue was evident even when ostensibly participating in organizations dedicated to curbing its spread. On May 26, 1936, the ROC delegate to the League advisory committee in Geneva raised the opium issue to his Iranian counterpart. He demanded an explanation of why quantities of opium had been shipped to China without import certificates, which were used to verify that the opium was used for medical purposes. The Iranian delegate replied that "his Government was not a signatory to the Hague and Geneva Conventions" and that "certain regions of China" might have escaped Chinese regulatory control and failed to inspect the certificates. When pressed for which regions he specifically had in mind, the representative was forced to admit that "Chinese ships called at times at Iranian ports, presenting alleged import certificates which the Government of Iran was not checking."⁷⁹ Although this somewhat tense exchange shows that opium could cause friction between the two countries, such conflict occurred against a backdrop of steadily increasing relations.

The driving force behind the desire of both China and Iran to engage with one another at the League of Nations was fundamentally the same: both states sought to be seen on the international stage, conducting their affairs in diplomatic arenas previously reserved for Western nations. In this way, Sino-Iranian cooperation and competition at the League of Nations was an active part of the performance of the nation, and one of the most visible to both foreign and domestic audiences. These interactions were reported not only in the domestic press but also in periodicals with a large foreign audience, such as the *North-China Daily Herald* and the *China Press*, as well as international publications that covered League affairs. These same publications also closely followed the daily lives of the diplomatic community in Shanghai, and when Iran sent an official ambassador there in 1934 he joined a lively social scene that consisted of Chinese officials, foreign dignitaries, and their families and clients.

Shanghai Diplomacy

The first Iranian diplomatic representative in modern China was Mīrza Hoseyn Khān Key Ostovān, who arrived in Shanghai on May 7, 1934 (Fig. 1).⁸⁰ Key Ostovān had joined the Iranian foreign service in 1916 and was consul in Karachi, India, before his appointment to Shanghai.⁸¹ Before his arrival, unofficial relations had been maintained by the owner

⁷⁸ "An Open Letter to Alfred S. K. Sze"

⁷⁹ "China Questions Opium Exports from Persia."

⁸⁰ "Relations Resumed after 1300 Years."

⁸¹ "First Persian Consulate."



“N.-C. Herald” Photo.
Mr. Key Ostovan

FIGURE 1. Mīrza Hoseyn Khān Key Ostovān. *North-China Daily Herald* photo, May 16, 1934.

of a sizable Iranian shipping company operating in Shanghai called Nemazee and Co. The appointment attracted international attention because of the supposed resumption of ties after 1,300 years. *Time* magazine wrote that “The proudest of Persians last week was Hossein Khan Keyostevan . . . he had just received orders to go next month to Shanghai and open a Persian consulate, thus becoming the first man in 1,300 years to establish official diplomatic relations between Persia and China.”⁸² This was actually inaccurate, as China had last had diplomatic contact with Safavid Iran (1501–1736) less than four hundred years previously.⁸³ The Chinese press reported this fact correctly. The new embassy was located at No. 5, Lane 591, Jing’an Temple, near the Italian consulate.⁸⁴

Key Ostovān quickly immersed himself in Shanghai diplomatic circles. He had frequent meetings with the mayor and with members of the foreign ministry in Nanjing.⁸⁵ A common

⁸² “International: After 1,300 Years.”

⁸³ “Consul General of Persia Arrived in Shanghai Yesterday Afternoon.”

⁸⁴ The English language press gives the location as “Bubbling Well Road,” which has been renamed “Nanjing West Road” (南京西路).

⁸⁵ “New Persian Consular Speaks.”



some of the very many official representatives of several nations who attended Tuesday's (Jan. 28) memorial service. From right, Key Ostovan, Iranian Consul, Mr. I. I. Spilvanek, Soviet Consul-General, Dr. Jean Kryszinski, Mr. Paul Scheel, Danish Consul-General, Mr. N. Aall, Norwegian Chargé d'Affaires, Mr. J. Delvaux de Fenille, Belgian Consul-General, and M. J. Brionval, French Consul.

FIGURE 2. Diplomatic representatives at memorial service for King George V. Key Ostovān is at the far left. *North China Daily Herald*, Feb 5, 1936.

sight at art exhibitions, cocktail parties, and other prominent social events, he was often surrounded by other diplomats and foreign representatives who undoubtedly were an impressive reflection of the growing international prestige of modern China.⁸⁶ He also attended public memorials and took part in other rituals of statesmanship, including a visit to the mausoleum of Sun Yat-sen and a memorial for King George V (Fig. 2).⁸⁷

Key Ostovān was frequently depicted in the press, in both photographs and cartoons (Fig. 3). His presence and the presence of other diplomats in Shanghai allowed the Chinese state to act out nationalist rituals with international actors. It served a function beyond the importance of the relationship itself—which in this case was not particularly significant—that of propaganda and identity-building efforts of the state among its elites.

In Shanghai, known then as the “Paris of the East,” Key Ostovān inhabited a cosmopolitan urban space that included at least 60,000 other foreigners and had vibrant Persian, Parsi, and Armenian communities.⁸⁸ Although exact figures are difficult to confirm, statistics from the Chinese press suggest only a few Iranian households in Shanghai; in 1934, only two households consisting of five men and five women each were officially recorded.⁸⁹ News articles alluded to the fact that “the number of overseas Chinese doing direct business in Persia is very small,” and “the number of overseas Chinese in Persia is not very large, about 100 people.”⁹⁰ In an article in the *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advisor*, Key Ostovān claimed that “there are more than 2,000 Persians in China, most of them being centered in Chinese Turkestan. In Shanghai, however, there are only about 100.”⁹¹ European globalization had effectively disconnected China and Iran from each other and circumvented their traditional economic ties.

Despite its small size, the Iranian community in Shanghai was especially prosperous and visible. Mehdi Farrokh, an Iranian diplomat sent to China in the late 1940s, writes in his travelogue *One Year in the Heavenly Country of China* about encountering Mehdi Namāzi, at the

⁸⁶ “Shanghai News”; “Cocktail Party at Cuban Legation”; “Preview Exhibition Attracts Many.”

⁸⁷ “Iranian Consul-General Sees Foreign Minister.”

⁸⁸ Saran, “Tatas of Shanghai.”

⁸⁹ “Municipal Public Security Bureau.”

⁹⁰ “Formally Establish Relations.”

⁹¹ “Iran’s Rise to Power under New Emperor.”



FIGURE 3. Portrait of Key Ostovān by Sapajou, a Russian cartoonist based in Shanghai. Sketched to commemorate his arrival in China. *North-China Daily Herald*, August 1, 1934.⁹²

time the owner of the well-connected firm Nemazee & Co. A wealthy philanthropist who had constructed schools and hospitals at home in his native Shiraz, Namāzi owned a home in Hong Kong that was attended by butlers, in addition to a home in Shanghai that shocked the consular officers with its splendor. Namāzi also had sponsored community infrastructure for the Iranian community in Shanghai, including a prayer house (خانه نمازی). Farrokh held Namāzi to be a man “full of patriotism and goodness, like all Shirazis” and Namāzi’s success made him feel proud of his people’s prosperity even in this faraway place.⁹³ Farrokh spent much of his time in Shanghai, and later at the embassy in Nanking, with members of the tight-knit local Persian community. He describes with affectionate detail the various parties held by what he called the “Iranian colony” at the embassy, including a wedding of one of the staff members (Fig. 4).

Shanghai also was home to a prosperous and visible Indian Parsi community.⁹⁴ The Parsis had achieved prosperity by serving as intermediaries for the British in the opium trade and included prominent members like Arbab Rostam Kermani, elder brother of Arbab Keikhosrow Shahrokh, one of the most well-known leaders of the modern Zoroastrian community, and Shahrokh’s daughter Manijeh, one of the founders of the Zoroastrian Women’s Organization.⁹⁵ Like Key Ostovān, Kermani also was a presence in the pages of diplomatic periodicals, which show some evidence of how these communities provided a direct

⁹² For more on Sapajou, see Djordjevic, *Sapajou*.

⁹³ Farrokh, “Yek sāl dar keshvar-e āsmāni-ye Chīn,” 11, 13.

⁹⁴ Palsetia, “Parsis of India.”

⁹⁵ Mehrfar, “Manijeh (Kermani) Shahrokh.”



FIGURE 4. The Iranian embassy staff in Shanghai, late 1940s. Farrokh, *Yek sāl dar keshvar-e āsmānī-ye Chīn*, 1952.

connection between Iran and China. For example, on October 28, 1910, Kermani published an editorial in English for the *North-China Herald*, criticizing an article that endorsed British and Russian involvement in Iran.⁹⁶ Shortly thereafter, on December 4, he published another article in the Iranian newspaper *Irān-e Nou*, commenting on affairs in China.⁹⁷ *The Memoirs of Keikhosrow Shahrokh* also make passing reference to prosperous Zoroastrian and Indian Parsi communities in Shanghai and Hong Kong.⁹⁸

Armenians also had a presence in Shanghai, although they were more visible in the north, in Harbin and Beijing, and further south, in Hong Kong and Guangzhou.⁹⁹ They had played a significant role in Chinese commerce since at least the seventeenth century, when they were granted equal rights to British merchants and often worked in aid of British colonial policy. Armenian physicians were especially prized, as Chinese sources had long associated them with the *Huihui yaofang* (回回藥方), a Chinese compendium of medicinal knowledge from the Middle East.¹⁰⁰ It remains unclear what role, if any, the Armenians played in Sino-Iranian relations during this period. More research is necessary before any conclusions can be drawn. Their presence is worth mentioning, if only to draw attention to the subject for further research, and to highlight the multivocal and cosmopolitan nature of early twentieth-century Shanghai.

The lives and dealings of diplomats, merchants, and other prominent Persians, Parsis, and Armenians were frequent topics in the diplomatic gazettes of the period, and likely a frequent topic of local gossip among these groups. Whether in the pages of newspapers or their own reflections, memoirs, and travelogues, Iranians in China were participating in a

⁹⁶ Kermani, "Affairs in Persia."

⁹⁷ Kermani, "Esteqrazat-e Chin."

⁹⁸ Shāhrukḥ, *Memoirs*.

⁹⁹ Sergoyan, *Gathering Place*; Office of the High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs, "China."

¹⁰⁰ Kauz and Yingsheng, "Armenia in Chinese Sources."

social performance that would not have been possible without such a cosmopolitan setting and wide variety of actors. In this way, the coverage of these communities and the pronouncements surrounding developments in Sino-Iranian affairs embodied and affirmed the national mythology, whether in private, among small groups, or for public consumption.

Iranians and the Shanghai Tea Trade: Mobilizing Nationalist Diplomacy for Personal Profit

Overall, there was little pressing need for Sino-Iranian cooperation, as both countries were quite remote and had only cursory economic and cultural ties. According to official publications, Reza Khan pursued ties with China out of a desire to raise Iran's profile internationally and to protect the interests of Iranian merchants.¹⁰¹ Shanghai had long been home to a small community of Iranian traders. However, the trade level was relatively low and consisted primarily of cotton, wool, dates, cigarettes, dried fruits, alcoholic beverages, and chemical reagents like ferric acid and wheat flour.¹⁰² Iran primarily imported tea, silk, and other luxury items from China.¹⁰³

Still, the Iranian government was keen to increase business ties with China. Key Ostovān's early activities were focused on meeting with members of the Chinese business community.¹⁰⁴ Commerce between the two nations had become indirect with the rise of railroads and steamships, which had routed Chinese and Iranian imports and exports through third parties like India and Russia.¹⁰⁵ Rectifying this situation was cast as yet another act of defiance against the European-imposed economic and social order, and restoration of a natural connection that had been cut off by colonialism. In this way, the discourse surrounding trade agreements and economic cooperation contributed to the performance of the nationalistic modernizing ideology of both states.

Despite this framing, the reality was that China and Iran had incompatible economic goals, and so there was not much result for so much effort, highlighting the essentially performative nature of some of these initiatives. Still, both political and economic elites felt compelled to present trade relations in this manner, either out of nationalist commitments or out of a desire to influence the budding Sino-Iranian partnership to their advantage. Although Chinese merchants pushed unsuccessfully for direct trade relations with Iran, relations with China were leveraged by Iranian politicians to further local development projects cast in nationalist terms, publicized in the Iranian press as part of the performance of the nation.

This was particularly the case with tea, one of the most important globally traded commodities in the early twentieth-century world, and one in which Iranians in China were directly involved.¹⁰⁶ An article memorializing the death of a pioneering Iranian tea trader in Shanghai, H. M. H. Nemazee, explains how Iranians like himself played a key role in the tea trade in Shanghai:

Mr. Nemazee was formerly head of the firm of H. M. H Nemazee & Sons, which he founded in 1893. Prior to that date, green tea was shipped overland by camel caravans through India and Afghanistan to the markets of Central Asia. Coming to Shanghai for the autumn races, Mr. Nemazee soon came to the conclusion that if the tea were packed in cases and shipped by way of the Black Sea, it would arrive in better condition. . . . His

¹⁰¹ Abidi, *China, Iran*, 29–30.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ "Persia Renamed Iran" (波斯更名伊) Shen Bao, March 22, 1935.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ See Saberi, *Tea*; Mair and Hoh, *True History*; Benn, *Tea in China*; and Evans, *Tea in China*. For primary sources, see Torgashev, *China as a Tea Producer*; and Chu, *Tea Trade*.

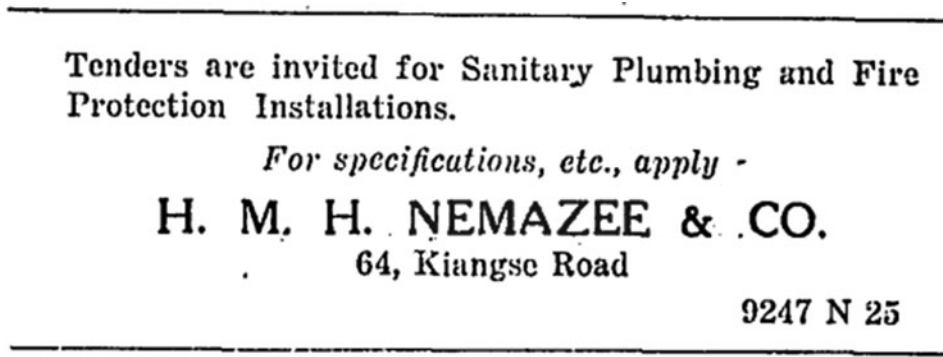


FIGURE 5. Advertisement for Nemazee & Co. *China Press*, November 25, 1929.

commercial activities covered a wide field, and extended to the control of a large fleet of fourteen steamers plying between the China coast and Arabia.¹⁰⁷

A 1910 report indicates that the bulk of tea shipments that year were going through Russia, specifically to Batumi in present-day Georgia, which suggests that they were bound for Middle Eastern, Central Asian, and western Russian markets.¹⁰⁸ Nemazee is listed as the second-largest exporter to Batoum, with 45,012 half-chests of tea shipped that year.¹⁰⁹ A 1913 report similarly indicated that “tea now ranks as an import of first importance in Persia.”¹¹⁰ Iranians like Nemazee played a key role in rerouting exports that had been bound for Central Asia and the Middle East through European intermediaries (Fig. 5).

Both the Chinese and Iranian governments had reasons to promote the tea trade and made efforts to do so. These efforts were not always complimentary. The Iranian state had acquired a monopoly on the importation, export, sale, and storage of tea and sugar in 1925 and began developing the domestic tea industry in the 1930s.¹¹¹ This hurt Chinese tea producers at a time when Chinese exports to Russia were already falling. An article in the *China Press* describes the competition between China and Iran over Russian markets:

Persia has employed six Chinese experts to advise the Minister of Agriculture in the matter of planting. . . Persia is exceptionally well situated to supply Muscovite needs and there appears to be no reason, climatic or other, why tea culture should not be equally as successful in Persia as in Assam. Existing extensions of the Russian railway system will bring the consumer into close contact with Persian plantations and one further blow will be dealt to China’s diminishing export of a staple, in the production of which this country led the world until a half a century ago.¹¹²

China was equally facing competition from Britain, whose re-export of Indian tea to Russia cut into a sizable portion of the Chinese tea trade.¹¹³ Consequently, Chinese tea producers had strong motivation to conclude a trade agreement that would enable Chinese goods, especially tea, to be supplied to Iran directly rather than through Russian, Indian,

¹⁰⁷ “Mr. H. M. H. Nemazee.”

¹⁰⁸ Wade, “Tea Season, 1910.”

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Wade, “Tea Season of 1913

¹¹¹ “Tea Monopoly Is Granted in Persia.”

¹¹² “Persia Planting Tea.”

¹¹³ Wade, “Tea Season of 1913.”

or British intermediaries. Opening markets in Iran directly to Chinese goods would offset some of the recent losses caused by Iranian competition. The involvement of Russian and British colonial networks made it possible for merchants in Shanghai to cast these efforts as part of the national rejuvenation effort and discourse of anti-colonial resistance, while conveniently eliding the involvement of Iranians. Similarly, politicians in Tehran called for revitalization of the tea industry as a nationalist project with China's help—but ignored pleas from the Chinese government to establish a trade agreement that would allow Chinese tea to compete directly with local producers.

The most substantial and visible sign of Sino-Iranian relations in Iran at this time was the Lahijan Tea Institute (مؤسسه چای لاهیجان), first established in 1931 with the assistance of several Chinese experts to “promote and develop the cultivation and preparation of tea.”¹¹⁴ The Iranian government employed four Chinese workers and paid them a generous monthly salary of 180 tomans, an allowance for housing, food, and medical needs, and a bonus of 2,000 tomans to assist with their return to China upon completion of their contract.¹¹⁵ Later, it would hire three workers for more complex tasks like tea tasting, translating, and overseeing production, for which it offered between 680 to 1100 rials per month. In total, the majlis approved 120,000 tomans of investment in the Lahijan Tea Institute as part of a larger bill designed to implement agricultural reforms, worth one million tomans. When the law was approved, it was extensively covered in *Ettelāʿat* with a major headline.¹¹⁶

Debates in the majlis about the Tea Institute reflected how the project was pitched as integral to Iran's national development. One official balked at the short-term contracts offered to the Chinese workers. He argued that it would be “detrimental to the government” and would cause “trouble and harm for the country” should the Chinese workers return home after a short time.¹¹⁷ Four years later, when the Tea Institute was not performing up to expectations, another bill was introduced to hire an additional three experts and purchase a tea drying machine. The purpose was to improve the quality of the tea, to encourage domestic consumption of Iranian tea over foreign products. “It cannot be said that because we make our own tea, people will not buy foreign tea. No, we have to make such tea that people are happy to buy it.”¹¹⁸ Alongside Chinese workers, several experts in botany, forestry, mining, and chemistry from Austria and Germany also were approved. China was thus part of a larger process of leveraging foreign connections in the name of nationalist economic projects. These projects were widely reported on in the Iranian press, as they simultaneously demonstrated nationalist credentials and Iran's new international prestige. Although not strictly performative in the sense of ceremonies and diplomatic exchanges, these articles were part of the performance of the nation for a domestic audience, with reference to international actors.

In addition to top-down initiatives like the Lahijan Tea Institute, there also were bottom-up pressures from Iranian and Chinese merchants in China directly involved in pushing for improved trade relations. After the arrival of an official Iranian representative, merchant organizations in Shanghai took the initiative in advocating for a Sino-Iranian trade agreement. Between 1934 and 1936, the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce received no less than three open letters from a consortium of Chinese and Persian merchants based in Fujian. The first was sent on June 15, 1934, three months after Key Ostovān's arrival:

The Shanghai Chamber of Commerce reported yesterday that the Ministry of Industry of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Nanjing received a letter from the Yangzhuang Tea

¹¹⁴ “Lāyeḡeh barāye estekhdām-e kārgar-e Chīnī.”

¹¹⁵ Tasmīm-e Majles, “Qānūn-e ejāze-ye estekhdām-e chahār nafar kārgar-e motakhaṡeṡ-e chāykāri az atbā-ye daulat-e Chīn.”

¹¹⁶ “Akhbār-e dākhele.”

¹¹⁷ Tasmīm-e Majles, “Shūr va tasvīb-e lāyeḡeh-ye estekhdām-e motakhaṡeṡ-e Chīnī.”

¹¹⁸ Tasmīm-e Majles, “Shūr va tasvīb-e lāyeḡeh-ye estekhdām-e motakhaṡeṡ-e chāykār.”

Association (洋莊茶業公會) on the 15th of this month. According to this letter from the Persian merchants, Persia imports 12 to 15 million pounds of black tea every year, about 200,000 to 250,000 boxes, all from India, Ceylon, Java, and Taiwan. In the past, Persia imported mostly Chinese tea, but since the establishment of a monopoly, Chinese tea has disappeared from the Persian market. . . the reason is that China has not concluded a trade agreement with the country.¹¹⁹

The letter claimed that representatives from the tea trade had been one reason the Chinese government had reached out to Iran in the first place, but that the government had inexplicably stopped. It also proposed that the government offer Persia a contract to purchase tea at a minimal tax with a most-favored-nation clause to ensure that other countries did not outbid China. The association felt that China had to make the first move, as the market for Iranian products in China was relatively small, and Iran had less motivation to conclude a deal. The article concluded that this was just a first step, and that “after signing this agreement, there will be more of Persia in China.”¹²⁰

When a few months had passed without an agreement, a representative of the Yangzhuang Tea Association sent another letter on August 29, 1934. This one urged the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce to use its influence and pressure the government to conclude a deal:

It has been a long time since the start of negotiations between the two sides on the Sino-Persian trade agreement regarding the export of tea. . . . If no agreement is made, the national tea industry will be restricted. . . it will be difficult to develop. . . . For this reason, I have sent a letter to the City Chamber of Commerce, urging you to petition the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. . . . If there is a delay in the agreement, then Chinese tea markets may make the same mistake as at the Treaty of Tianjin [when China ceded trading rights to France and effectively ended its influence in Vietnam].¹²¹

The repeated requests show the importance of this issue to the local Chinese and Iranian merchant community. The specter of diplomatic disasters like the unequal treaties was invoked in Sino-Iranian relations to promote a defensive trade agreement that would help Chinese merchants regain some ground lost to colonial competitors.

Tea traders were not the only industry interested in a Sino-Iranian trade deal. On November 8, 1934, a third letter reached the Shanghai Chamber of Commerce, this time from the Silk Industry Association:

Regarding the Sino-Iranian trade agreement, which the government has not yet brought up. . . . In Persia, in addition to Chinese tea, Chinese silk is also a bulk export product. Since the country concluded an unequal tariff treaty, both silk and tea have disappeared in Persia. . . . After several negotiations, a satisfactory result has not yet been obtained. . . our pain is the same as the tea industry's. . . . It seems there is no hope of success at the present.¹²²

An update on negotiations was published a month later by a newspaper in Nanjing, which claimed the two sides were close to an agreement. The treaty was framed as assistance for the embattled silk and tea industries in Shanghai: “the Shanghai silk and tea industry was hit by overseas trade. . . . Please quickly conclude the Sino-Persian trade treaty to

¹¹⁹ “City Chamber of Commerce.”

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ “Call for a Sino-Iranian Agreement.”

¹²² “Call for a Sino-Iranian Export Agreement.”

provide relief.”¹²³ However, four months later that relief had still not arrived, and it seems the Iranian government did not respond to the Chinese draft proposal.¹²⁴

Although an official agreement was never concluded, the advocacy surrounding it did lead to greater Sino-Iranian cooperation. The Iranian government eventually dispatched personnel to Shanghai to set up a Far East Trade Bureau to improve Iran’s foreign trade ties throughout Asia. The consulate also was upgraded to a consulate general office in 1936, which coincided with a flurry of visits from “Iranian guests” and meetings with the Iranian ambassador widely publicized in *Shen Bao* and other dailies.¹²⁵

It is unknown what delayed the Sino-Iranian trade deal in the years that followed. It is most likely, based on the debates surrounding the tea industry in the majlis and the government monopoly on tea after 1925, that the idea was opposed by Iran’s growing national industry of tea merchants and their political allies, who would have no reason to welcome Chinese competition. However, the question was rendered moot just a few years after; World War II broke out in 1939, and Britain and Russia occupied Iran and replaced Reza Shah with his young son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, in 1941. In the years that followed, the question of a trade deal would fall by the wayside and Sino-Iranian ties would once again become indirect. Iranian interests in China were managed in part by foreign intermediaries: first the Netherlands in 1941, and later Turkey, reflecting the low level of priority given to this relationship. An official embassy would not be established until after the war, in 1944, first in Chongqing and later moved to Nanjing. These events were covered in the Chinese, Iranian, and international press, but only with passing interest.¹²⁶

Conclusion

From the 1920s, Iranian state ties to Nationalist China were driven by two factors: a desire for international prestige and the demands of Chinese and Iranian merchants in Shanghai. The ties were established through a variety of initiatives that drew on nationalist narratives and reaffirmed the states’ own commitments as nationalist modernizers; this has been understood as performative nationalist diplomacy. Iran and the Republic of China competed in international markets and political organizations, and they had divergent priorities on issues like opium and the tea trade. However, the two states had complementary ideological orientations and historical outlooks, especially when it came to Western imperialism. Both had experienced a state of semicolonization at the hands of the West, had suffered a series of “national humiliations,” and had developed a narrative of national renewal that was common across Asia at the turn of the twentieth century. Connections in trade, state visits, and other official interactions served the purpose of legitimizing the independence and authority of both rapidly modernizing Asian states and were facilitated by a similar ideological and political orientations.

The reestablishment of official Sino-Iranian diplomatic relations took place against the backdrop of Sino-Iranian cooperation and competition at the League of Nations. Both China and Iran sought to improve their international prestige by participating in the institutions of European diplomacy. Chinese merchants and Iranian traders in Shanghai took advantage of this impulse to push their own economic interests. They petitioned for a Sino-Iranian trade agreement that would enable the revival of direct silk and tea trade between the two nations, which led Iran to dispatch a mission to establish an East Asian trade organization in Shanghai. An official trade agreement was never signed, but this period left a lasting positive impression of Nationalist China on the Iranian state.

¹²³ “Sino-Persian Treaty Is Mutual Consultation.”

¹²⁴ “Sino-Persian Negotiations.”

¹²⁵ “Iranian Office in Shanghai Upgraded.”

¹²⁶ Garver, *China and Iran*, 304.

This story highlights the influence of non-state actors attempting to influence foreign policy from below. Minor political relationships took on a new significance from local actors' perspectives in their attempts to resist the challenges of a global economic system dominated by Europe. It seems to have been local economic concerns that initially drove Nationalist China to contact Iran. In Fujian, tea and silk producers advocated for their own economic interests and sought to open up the Iranian market to Chinese goods. Traditional diplomatic analysis privileges questions of international diplomacy and influence and overlooks the influence of non-state actors. In a situation where strategic concerns were minimal, this influence played a more significant role in driving forward Sino-Iranian relations than was previously understood.

Restoring national prestige through international engagement remains a part of both China's and Iran's foreign policy discourse. It is still regularly invoked by Iranian and Chinese leaders, from Khatami's attempts to popularize his "dialogue among civilizations" (گفتگوی تمدنها) theory at the UN to Deng Xiaoping's policy of "reform and opening up" (改革开放). More recently, in the context of the recent Iran–China 25 Year Agreement, which has been widely portrayed as a challenge to Western hegemony (now American rather than British), Xi Jinping expressed to Hassan Rouhani that China was committed to "safeguarding national sovereignty and dignity" in Iran, and Rouhani thanked China for helping Iran "defend its national sovereignty and territorial integrity."¹²⁷ The continued use of such rhetorical flourishes in Sino-Iranian relations highlights the importance of studying the historical origins of this important modern relationship.

Sino-Iranian relations in this period also offer a fascinating window into Iranian merchant communities' activities in Shanghai and the international community of diplomats that closely supported them. Although small in number, the Persians of Shanghai and Hong Kong seem to have held substantial political and economic influence relative to their size in early twentieth-century China. Communities like the Parsis and Armenians also played an important role, which the present study was unable to adequately explore. The figure of Key Ostovān, an important constitutionalist and ally of Mohammad Mosaddeq (1882–1967), is similarly a relative unknown in Iranian studies. Additional historical research is needed regarding this significant but poorly studied diaspora community.

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¹²⁷ "Xi Jinping Says China Ready to Strengthen Coordination with Iran."

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