

The Development of China-Arab Cultural Exchanges: Opportunities and Challenges in the Belt & Road Era



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ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the scope and features of China-Arab cultural relations and its implications on their bilateral political and economic partnerships. These bilateral relations have evolved from strategic cooperation in 2010 to strategic partnership in 2018. Political cooperation, economic development, and cultural exchanges represent the three pillars of the contemporary China-Arab strategic partnership. China's cultural exchanges with Arab countries are implemented by different agencies. Education, publication, tourist, and religious exchanges have become the main pillars of cultural exchange. In this process, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Propaganda Department of the CPC Central Committee, the Xinhua News Agency, the State Administration of Radio and Television, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Press and Publication Administration, the State Administration of Religion, the Ministry of Education, the China Center for Language Education and Cooperation, the China-Arab Friendship Association, and other departments have formed a portfolio to participate in cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries. Their cultural exchanges are driven by Chinese and Arab officials. The two sides have set an example of South-South cooperation for exchanges of hearts and minds. Through the process, strategic cooperation between China and Arab countries has been enriched, which is an important means to enhance China's soft power in the Arab world. On this background, in this study firstly, it is introduced what the Chinese tools for cultural cooperation and which organizations are used, then the intellectual cooperation between China and Arab countries, the role of public opinion, the ways for improving mutual understanding, interactions between religious groups will be analyzed. It is also questioned the prospects of China-Arab cultural exchange. Finally, these issues will be evaluated in conclusion.

Keywords: Belt & Road Initiative, China-Arab relations, China's Middle East diplomacy, cultural exchange, soft power

Introduction

THE ARAB WORLD, AS THE CORE AREA OF the Middle East and the Islamic population, stretches from West Asia to North Africa. Surrounded by the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean Sea, the Arab countries cover an area of 13 million square kilometers and have an approximate population of 400 million (Sun, 2020: 37). Chinese and Arabs have a long history of people-to-people exchange, being the co-founders of the ancient Silk Road, that stretches back approximately 2,000 years. Standing at the East and West ends of the Belt and Road, China and the Arab countries are all developing countries that were marginalized after the post-First World War Western domination of Eurasia and Africa. In the present day, political exchanges, economic cooperation, and cultural exchanges are the three driving forces of China-Arab relations, and cultural exchan-

ges stand out as lacking sufficient study.

While cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries have fluctuated in quality through the past, they have continuously improved with the implementation of the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI). This paper probes China-Arab cultural exchanges in the era of the BRI. It highlights how cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries require both top-down guidance and bottom-up participation. It aims to mobilize the enthusiasm of social organizations, enterprises, and non-governmental organizations, and form a "government-guided and society-driven" interactive pattern where "officials set the stage while society makes the performance". Beijing pursues practical results in cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries for the construction of the "China-Arab community of common destiny", as raised by Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries include various official and non-governmental interactions, involving exchanges on culture, education, art, science and technology, health, sports, religion, tourism, press and publication, radio, film and television, academic research, as well as other fields (Ding & Chen, 2018:30). These exchanges involve a total of 23 sovereign states, as well as local governments and supranational regional organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Arab League. The focus of these cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries is on education, tourism, media, and religion. Additionally, such cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries take place on both digital and physical platforms, including personnel exchanges, translation and publication of classic books, and media and new media exchanges. Cooperation forums such as the Conference on Dialogue among Civilizations, the China-Arab Friendship Conference, the Tourism Conference, and the Press Cooperation Conference as part of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum are also important.

The focus of cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries is on education, tourism, media, and religion.

Cultural exchange between China and Arab countries primarily relies on top-level government action. A case in point is the 8th Ministerial Meeting of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), which was held in Beijing in 2018. President Xi Jinping announced at the opening ceremony that China would invite 100 youth leaders from Arab countries, 200 youth scientists,

and 300 scientists and technicians to visit China. In addition, it is announced that 100 Arab religious leaders and 600 Arab political party leaders will be invited to visit China, while 10 thousand training positions will be provided and 500 medical teams will be sent to Arab countries (Xi, 2018a).

The 9th Ministerial Conference of CASCF was held online in July 2020 due to COVID-19. Wang Yi, State Councillor and Foreign Minister, and Ayman Safadi, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates of Jordan, co-chaired the meeting. Foreign ministers and ministerial officials from all members of the League of Arab States (also called Arab League) and Ahmed Aboul Gheit, Secretary-General of the Arab League, attended the meeting, to which Chinese President Xi Jinping sent a congratulatory letter (Xinhuanet, 2020).

China and the Arab countries issued a joint declaration on fighting COVID-19, the Amman Declaration, and the implementation document of the Forum 2020 to 2022 was adopted by the ninth Ministerial Conference of CASCF.

These developments provided a framework for deepening cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries under the BRI.

According to the strategic plans of China and Arab countries, the China-Arab News Exchange Center was officially established, the China-Arab e-library portal project was officially launched, and the fourth “Arab Art Festival”, jointly held by China and Arab countries, was officially launched in China as part of the BRI (Xi, 2018b). As such, one could argue that the BRI has enriched China’s cultural exchanges with Arab countries and improved their cooperation mechanisms.

Through top-level government cooperation, 10 cooperation mechanisms have been formed (see Table 1).

As of 2020, the two sides have held seven seminars on China-Arab relations and dialogue between China and Arab civilizations, three Arab art festivals and three Chinese art festivals, six China-Arab countries friendship conferences, two China-Arab countries women’s forums, two China-Arab count-

ries tourism and businessmen conferences, and two China-Arab youth friendship and ambassador projects (Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University and Research Center of CASCF, 2018). By 2021, China has established 26 pairs of sister cities with nine Arab countries.

Table 1 : Mechanisms and departments for cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries

Cultural Exchange Mechanisms		Responsible (Leading) Department
1	China-Arab Radio and Television Cooperation Forum	Central Propaganda Department, Xinhua News Agency, Radio, Film and Television Department
2	China and Arab Cooperation for Art Festivals and Cultural Industries	Ministry of Culture and Tourism
3	China-Arab Tourism Cooperation Forum	Ministry of Culture and Tourism
4	China-Arab Civilization Dialogue Conference	State Administration of Religion, China Islamic Association
5	China-Arab University Presidents’ Forum; and cooperation between China and Arab think tanks	Ministry of Education
6	China-Arab Friendship Conference	China-Arab Friendship Association
7	China-Arab Women Cooperation Forum	All China Women’s Federation
8	China-Arab non-governmental organizations and social organizations	Ministry of Civil Affairs
9	China-Arab youth friendship and ambassador project	Youth League Central Committee
10	China-Arab Expo, and China-Arab Cities Forum	Local provincial and municipal governments

Source: (CASCF, n.d.; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, n.d.)



Cultural exchange between China and Arab countries primarily relies on top-level government action. (Feng Yongbin /China Daily, 2018)

China-Arab cultural exchanges consist of educational, media, tourist, and religious interactions. The first focuses on elite and intellectual exchanges; the second aims to influence public opinions of the target countries; the third aims at better understanding between the mass; the fourth attempts to influence religious groups between Chinese and Arabs. The following are the operations and cooperation areas for cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries.

Intellectual Interaction: China-Arab Educational Exchanges

Educational exchange is an important sub-field of cultural exchange between China and Arab countries. In July 2018, the eighth ministerial meeting of the CASCF jointly formulated the action plan of the CASCF for 2018-2020. The two sides agreed to “continue to strengthen cooperation in the field of education and scientific research, encourage exchanges between educational and research institutions of the two sides, strengthen and support exchanges between Chinese and Arab universities, gradually increa-

se the number of scholarships” (Action Plan of the CASCF for 2018-2020, 2018: Article 12). This is a steering document for China-Arab educational cooperation in the new era.

By 2020, 541 Confucius Institutes and 1,170 Confucius Classrooms have been established in 162 countries (regions) around the world (“China has established”, 2019). Among them, there are 135 Confucius Institutes and 115 Confucius Classrooms in 39 Asian countries, and 61 Confucius Institutes and 48 Confucius Classrooms in 46 African countries (Center for Language Education and Cooperation, n.d.). Confucius Institutes are non-profit educational institutions established by the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (originally Hanban) with Chinese language teaching as the main activity content. Its mission is to promote the Chinese language and culture to the world and strengthen cultural exchanges between all ethnic groups (Zhou, 2010: 213-214). Worthy of note here is that the Arab world is one of the core regions with the fastest growth in the number of Confucius Institutes in recent years.

Table 2: Confucius Institutes/Classrooms in the Arab world

Host Countries	Confucius Institutes or Confucius Classrooms	Year of Founding	Chinese Counterparts
Lebanon	Confucius Institute at Saint Joseph University	2007	Shenyang Normal University
Egypt	Confucius Institute of Cairo University	2008	Peking University
Egypt	Confucius Institute of Suez Canal University	2008	Beijing Language and Culture University
Jordan	Amman TAG Confucius Institute	2009	Shenyang Normal University
Tunisia	Sfax Broadcasting Confucius Classroom	2009	China Radio International
Sudan	Confucius Institute of Khartoum University	2009	Northwest Normal University
Morocco	Confucius Institute of Mohammed V University	2009	Beijing International Studies University
The United Arab Emirates	Zayed Üniversitesi Konfüçyüs Enstitüsü	2010	Beijing Foreign Studies University
The United Arab Emirates	Confucius Institute of Dubai University	2011	Ningxia University
Jordan	Confucius Institute of University of Philadelphia (Jordan)	2012	Liaocheng University
Morocco	Confucius Institute of Hassan II University	2012	Shanghai International Studies University
Bahrain	Confucius Institute of Bahrain University	2014	Shanghai University
Comoros	Confucius Classroom of Comoros University	2014	Dalian University
Egypt	Nile TV Confucius Classroom	2015	Beijing Language and Culture University
Morocco	Confucius Institute of Abdul Malik al Assad University	2016	Jiangxi Normal University of Science and Technology

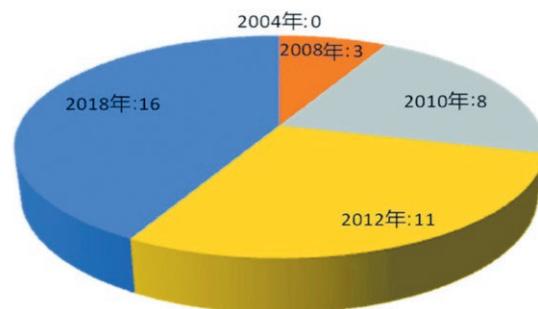
Source: Center for Language Education and Cooperation, n.d.; Dingz& Chen, 2018: 34-35.

Among African countries, Egypt has won the most scholarships from the Chinese government, and the students who have won the Chinese government's scholarships are mainly students in applied disciplines, such as science and engineering. The professional fields of study for foreign students include modern science and technology such as aerospace, life science, marine science, mechanical engineering, and information technology (Xinhuanet, 2019a). In West Asia, to promote educational exchanges between China and Arab countries, the Silk Road College of China University of Geosciences (Wuhan) was officially launched in 2017, laying the foundation for the "China Jordan University" jointly built by the two countries. China Jordan University is the first university led by the Chinese government to go abroad. Its campus is in Amman, the capital of Jordan. It is supported by the China University of Geosciences (Wuhan). After being completed, it will recruit students locally and regionally ("China and Jordan jointly", 2017). In 2018, the Chinese ambassador to Jordan, Pan Weifang, and Jordanian Minister of Culture, Nabih Shuqum, signed the agreement on the establishment of a Chinese cultural center in Amman, the capital of Jordan.

Educational exchanges between China and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are also flourishing. In July 2019, during President Xi Jinping's visit to the UAE, the headquarters of the Confucius Institute and the Ministry of education of the UAE, he signed the memorandum of understanding on the inclusion of Chinese in the UAE primary school education system, which promoted Chinese in the UAE (Sky News Arabia, 2019). At present, both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are part of China's comprehensive strategic partnership. Both countries include the Chinese language in the primary and secondary education system. Dubai

Chinese School, opened in July 2020, is the first example of these attempts and this school is the first full-time Chinese school successfully established overseas (Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in Dubai, 2020). The UAE has become a model of educational exchanges between China and the Arab States.

Diagram 1: Cumulative number of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms in Arab countries from 2004 to 2018



Source: (Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University & Research Center of CASCF, 2018: 19).

In recent years, King Saudi University has opened a Chinese major. In 2019, during the visit of crown prince Mohammed bin Salman to China, the Saudi government announced that the Chinese language would be included in the curriculum of all education levels in the kingdom. In addition to Saudi Arabia, Palestine also actively supported the founding of Confucius Institutes. In 2019, Al Quds University of Palestine celebrated the launch of the Chinese Confucius Institute, the first of its kind in the Palestinian territory. The university is important because it meets the growing needs of Palestinians to learn Chinese, enhances the Palestinian people's understanding of Chinese culture, and develops the traditional friendship between the two populations (Xinhuanet, 2019b). Despite the long-term unrest in Palestine, young students have great enthusiasm for learning Chinese.

With the joint efforts of China and Arab countries, steady progress has been made in educational exchanges between them. The number of Arab students in China increased from 1,130 in 2004 to 18,050 in 2016, with an average annual growth rate of 26%. The number of students studying in Arab countries increased from 242 in 2004 to 2,433 in 2016, with an average annual growth rate of 21%. From 2019 to 2020, 364 Egyptian students won Chinese government scholarships, including 126 doctoral students (Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University & Research Center of CASCF, 2018: 27-28).

Influencing Public Opinions: China-Arab Media Exchanges

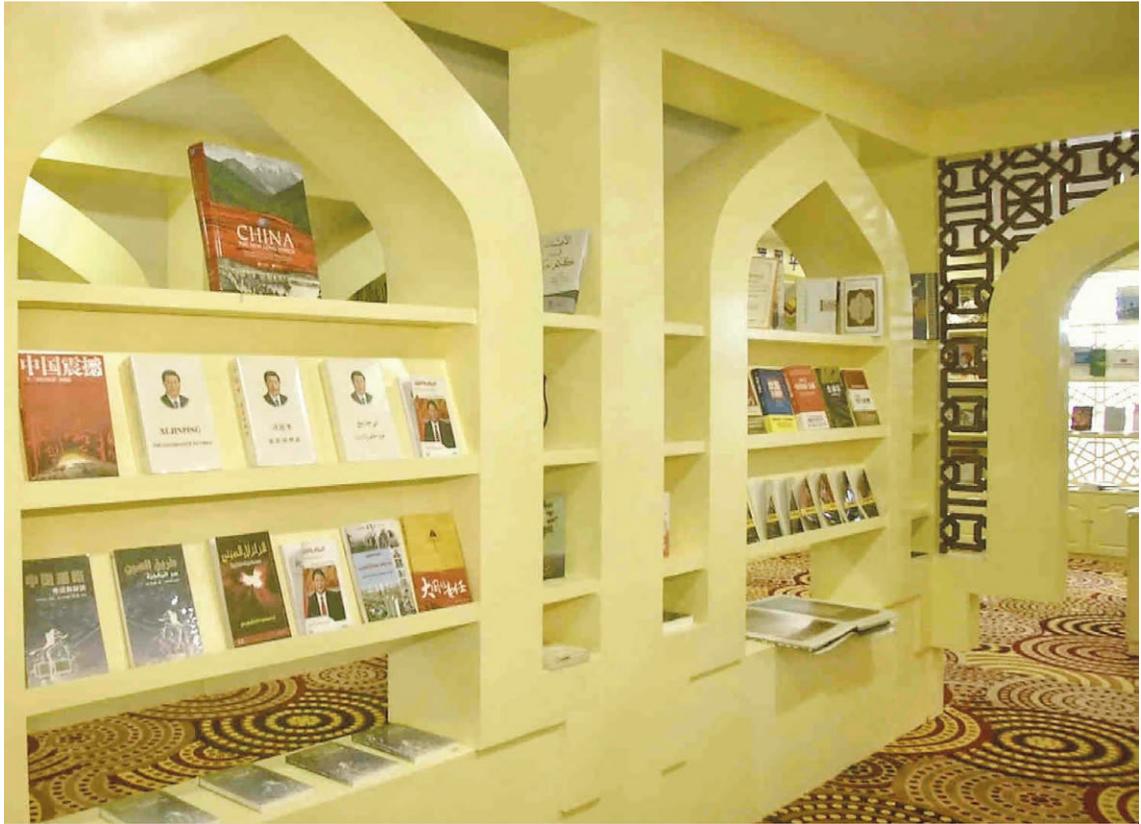
China-Arab media exchanges have various forms and rich contents including radio, film, television, online media, press and publication, and more. In July 2018, China and Arab countries jointly issued the Declaration on Cooperation, which stressed that the two sides would deepen cooperation in education, sports, health, art, publishing, training, and the establishment of cultural centers (CASCF, 2018). On October 25, 2018, the fourth cultural ministers' meeting was held in Chengdu. The representatives of China and Arab countries shared experiences and discussed development strategies on the theme of cultural exchange and cooperation under the framework of BRI international cooperation (Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China, 2018).

Radio communication between China and Arab countries is a form of public diplomacy, which helps Arab people better understand the real image of rising China. China aims to spread the cultural value of "benevolence, humanity and tolerance". At the same time, radio communication is a media channel for China to understand Arab culture. In exchanges of films and television programs, Chi-

na has translated many of its films and television series into Arabic. Some of the films also use Egyptian and North African dialects. In 2013, Kim Taro's *Happy Life*, which depicts China's modern life, was on the screen in the Arab world (Wu & Tang, 2019). Furthermore, a documentary on China's Sala ethnicity, still living on the Qinghai Plateau, won the first prize in the documentary program of the Arab Radio and Television Festival.

In China, many important public information websites and television stations have set up Arabic websites, such as the People's Net, China Network Television, Xinhuanet, International Online, Chinese network, and other media.

Due to the extensive use of digital satellite TV, 4G and 5G technologies, and mobile phones, the original single pattern of media communication is moving towards diversification and intelligence. In China, many important public information websites and television stations have set up Arabic websites, such as the People's Net, China Network Television, Xinhuanet, International Online, Chinese network, and other media. In addition, Arabic and Chinese bilingual media, such as the "Arab Information Exchange Center" and the "China-Arab network", are increasingly popular. Local customs and practices in China are included in news coverage WeChat, Today's Headlines, micro-blog, and so on. Promoted by Chinese and Arab leaders as an important part of media exchanges, the CASCF will hold art festivals and exchange visits of literature and artist groups following The Action Plan of the CASCF for 2018-2020, which clearly stated that China would hold the fourth "Arab Art Festival" in Beijing and Chengdu, and host the Forum of Chinese and Arab Ministers of Culture under the framework of the bilateral art festival.



Hundreds of Chinese classic and modern books have been translated into Arabic and exported to Arab countries. (CGTN, 2017)

China invited Arab artists to participate in the “Silk Road International Art Festival”, the “Maritime Silk Road International Art Festival”, and the “Silk Road (Dunhuang) International Cultural Expo”. China invited the Arab counterparts to attend the “Silk Road International Theatre Alliance”, the “Silk Road International Art Festival Alliance”, the “Silk Road International Museum alliance”, the “Silk Road International Art Museum Alliance”, and the “Silk Road International Library Consortium”. The translation of classic literature is a cornerstone of cultural exchange between China and Arab countries.

In 2010, China and the Secretariat of the League of Arab States signed a memorandum of cooperation on the “project of mutual translation and publi-

cation of Chinese and Arab classics” and launched the “project of joint translation and publication of Chinese and Arab classics”. By 2018, more than 30 kinds of Chinese and Arab classics had been translated and published. Professor Zhong Jikun of Peking University and Professor Zhu Weilie of Shanghai International Studies University successively won the “King Abdullah World Translation Award” in Saudi Arabia (Ding & Chen, 2018: 34).

The mutual translation of Chinese and Arab classics helps to strengthen cultural understanding between the two populations. Since 2016, many Chinese books have been published in Arab countries, introducing China’s economic development, diplomatic strategy, reform and opening-up, China’s rise, China’s poverty-lifting, and the BRI.

Table 3: Major Chinese books published in Arab countries since 2016

Titles of the Chinese Books	Publishers	Years of Publications
China Phenomenon: China's Experience and the Development of Diplomatic Relations during Reform and Opening up (1990-2015)	Tripoli: Modern Writers Press	2016
The Coming Oriental Giant: Will China Rule the World?	Cairo and Damascus: Arab Writers Press	2016
Political Socialism and Market Capitalism: China's Economic Development	Amman: Writers Academic Center	2016
China's Rise and Energy Challenges	Amman: Writers Academic Center	2016
Sudan-China Relations: 1956-2011	Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies	2016
We and China: Responding to the Second Leap-Forward	Casablanca: Arab Cultural Center	2017
Development Strategy, Economic and Trade Relations between China and the United Arab Emirates	Amman: Amjad press	2017
China's Poverty Eradication Policy: A Case Study of Algeria and China	Algiers: Banner Press	2017
Belt & Road Initiative and the Future of China Model	Ruth: Beirut Press	2018
New Journey of China's Economic Reform	Riyadh: King's University Press	2018
Chinese Dragon: A Global Economic Empire	Amman: Time Press	2018

Source: It is based on the open sources see (Ajang, 2021).

Through a series of foreign translation projects (such as that of Ningxia People's Publishing House), China has promoted the publication of Chinese classics in the Arab world. The "Project of Translation of Chinese and Arab Classics", the "Chinese Academic Translation Project", the "Chinese Book Promotion Plan", the "Classic China International Publishing Project", the "Silk Road Book Project", the "Chinese

Cultural Works Translation and Publishing Project", and the "Contemporary Chinese Works Translation Project" were established, which all became important platforms for the translation of classics (Bao, 2019: 140-160). For instance, Professor Wang Youyong of Shanghai International Studies University has been committed to the translation of Chinese classics into Arabic for a long time.

In recent years, he has successively translated Arabic versions of *Xunzi* and *Liezi*, which have been published and distributed in Lebanon by the Arab Thought Foundation and have had an influence in the Arab world.

Bettering the Mutual Understanding of the Mass: China-Arab Tourism Cooperation

The tourist market in Arab countries has great potential for development. For example, the Gulf Arab countries have become the fastest developing region. In 2014, the outbound tourism consumption of Arabian Gulf countries reached US \$40 billion, accounting for 31% of global Muslim tourism consumption (Pivac, 2015). Due to long stays, high per capita consumption, and high demand for tourist services, tourists from the Arabian Gulf countries have become the flashpoint. Strengthening China-Arab tourism cooperation is of great practical significance in promoting the upgrading of China's existing tourism industry, optimizing the source structure of inbound tourists, promoting the diversified development of China's cultural tourism industry, and further improving the internationalization level of China's tourism industry (Pew Research Center, 2011).

From 2005 to 2015, the number of Chinese tourists to the Emirates increased by 98% and is expected to reach 540 thousand by 2030.

By 2020, 13 Arab countries have become outbound tourism destinations for Chinese citizens, and tour businesses in nine countries have been officially set up (Middle East Studies Institute of Shanghai International Studies University & Research Center of CASCE, 2018: 17-18). Fifteen Arab countries boast 61 world natural and cultural heritage sites recognized by UNESCO (Wang, 2018). In recent years, the number of Chinese tourists to Arab countries has increased

significantly. This is due to its stability and how the UAE attaches particular importance to developing the tourist industry. As a result, Dubai has become the tourist hub of the Arab world with the fastest-growing number of Chinese tourists in recent years.

In 2013, at least 270 thousand Chinese tourists visited the UAE for leisure and business tours; from 2005 to 2015, the number of Chinese tourists to the Emirates increased by 98% and is expected to reach 540 thousand by 2030. According to the 2014 China Luxury Tourist White Paper, Dubai has become the third-largest overseas tourism destination that attracts rich Chinese tourists. In November 2016, the UAE announced that it would grant visa-free treatment to Chinese citizens. According to the statistics of Dubai Tourist Administration, the number of Chinese tourists exceeded 764,000 in 2017, an increase of 41%. On February 24, 2019, according to statistics released by the Dubai Tourist Bureau, the number of international tourists entering Dubai overnight was 15.92 million, with the number of Chinese tourists reaching 875 thousand, an increase of 12%. China surpassed Oman and became the fourth largest tourist source market of Dubai (Xinhuanet, 2019d). Emirates is a leading passenger service provider of China, operating 38 flights to and from China every week. According to data from the Ministry of Tourism of the UAE, the number of Chinese tourists in 2019 represented about 6.04% of the total number of UAE tourists. In the first five months of 2019, the number of Chinese tourists to the UAE reached 433 thousand, an increase of 5% (about 401,000) over the same period in 2018. In the past five years, Dubai has attracted 3.06 million Chinese tourists in total.

On June 10, 2018, the UAE contractor, Nakheel (Nasir group), announced in Dubai that it had signed a contract with the Chinese company "Beijing Zhongke Co., Ltd." worth 66 million dirhams (US \$17.97 million) to design and build the fountain project on the Palm Island of Dubai (Business Office of the Chinese Consulate General in Dubai, 2018).

In May 2018, the Etihad Aviation Group of the UAE signed a memorandum of understanding with the China Jiangsu Overseas Cooperation and Investment Corporation (JOSIC) to establish a strategic partnership. Accordingly, due to its investment in the China-UAE Industrial Park, Etihad Airlines of the UAE can enjoy preferential air transportation and freight prices on flights and services between China and other destinations through the Group's network. Etihad Airlines has also become the preferred airline for all operating companies in the China-UAE Industrial Park (Ne-tease Airlines, 2018).



President Xi Jinping (L) holds a welcoming ceremony for King Mohammed VI of Morocco, Beijing, May 11, 2016. (Xinhua, 2016)

In addition to the UAE, other Gulf countries have had a significant increase in Chinese tourists. For example, since Oman signed a memorandum of understanding on tourism with China in 2006, the number of Chinese tourists to Oman has increased by more than 30% every year, next only to the UAE. Between 2013 and 2017, Oman has had a significant increase in the number of Chinese tourists.

China's tourists to Arab countries can be divided into three categories in terms of purpose: business, Hajj, and leisure. Chinese tourists can choose their own tourist routes both online and offline.

With the development of tourism in China and Egypt, which is primarily for leisure, the exchanges and cooperation between China and Egypt's civil aviation industry are also increasing. There are two direct flights from China to Egypt (from Beijing and Guangzhou to Cairo). According to the data provided by the Egyptian Embassy in Beijing, about 150 thousand Chinese citizens visited Egypt in the first five months of 2017. During this period, Chinese tourists booked 850 thousand nights in Egyptian hotels, an increase of 116% over the same period in 2016 (Egyptian Embassy in China, 2017). According to the 2018 Chinese Citizens' Africa Tourism Report released by CYTS travel.com, Egypt has become one of the five most popular destinations for Chinese citizens in Africa (CYTS Travel Network, 2018). Egypt regards China as its main source of tourism and thus has successfully formulated projects to promote Egyptian culture in the Chinese market that has doubled the number of Chinese tourists to Egypt.

Morocco was the first Arab country that implemented a visa-free policy for Chinese tourists.¹ In May 2016, King Mohammed VI visited China following this success and the country has since become a primary destination for Chinese citizens to travel to (Wang, 2017: 67).

¹ Tunisia subsequently announced the implementation of the landing visa policy for teams with more than 10 Chinese tourists.

Song Yu, Secretary-General of the World Tourist Cities Federation claimed that the total number of Chinese tourists to Morocco in 2017 exceeded 100 thousand and that Morocco has become the country with the fastest growth of Chinese tourists in Africa (Xinhuanet, 2018). There are many reasons for the increase in Chinese tourists to Morocco. First, with the rise of China's national strength, the national disposable income has increased; second, Morocco promoted visa exemption for Chinese tourists during Chinese Ambassador Sun Shuzhong's tenure; and third, in recent years, direct flights between Morocco and China have been opened, which is one of the key factors that has enhanced Morocco's attraction to Chinese tourists.

In 2018, 9,453 Chinese tourists visited Lebanon. In 2019, the number of Chinese tourists to Lebanon reached 12 thousand, an increase of 22.4%.

Lebanon is particularly rich in tourism resources. On October 12, 2015, Lebanon held a tourist promotion activity for China in Beirut, its capital, to strengthen the cooperation between travel agencies of the two countries and customize tourism projects and routes for Chinese tourists. In 2018, 9,453 Chinese tourists visited Lebanon. In 2019, the number of Chinese tourists to Lebanon reached 12 thousand, an increase of 22.4%. Lebanese travel agencies had plans to receive 20 to 30 thousand Chinese tourists in 2021 if it were not COVID-19 (Xinhuanet, 2019c).

On November 19, 2019, the China-Arab Tourism Cooperation Forum opened in Beijing. China held discussions with 19 Arab countries including Algeria, the UAE, Egypt, and Morocco on China-Arab cultural and tourism cooperation, and all parties reached a consensus on establishing tourism cooperation mechanisms at government and enterprise levels (People's Net, 2019). Tourism cooperation has become a central

concern for the BRI between China and Arab countries in the new era.

Interaction between Religious Groups: China-Arab Religious Exchanges

From the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Egypt on May 30, 1956, to the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Saudi Arabia on July 21, 1990, China has established diplomatic relations with all 22 member states of the Arab League. Over the years, friendly relations between China and Arab countries have been developing continuously, and religious exchanges are an indispensable part of it. In 2018, Chinese President Xi Jinping said at the opening ceremony of the eighth Ministerial Conference of CASCF, China would invite 100 Arab religious leaders to visit China for exchange with different religions ("Jointly promote China-Arab", 2019). Religious exchanges help to enrich the cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries.

After the Arab world became an epicenter for COVID-19, the Muslim community in China responded pro-actively to the call of the Chinese government on struggling in unity against the pandemic with Arab countries. On February 2, 2020, the China Islamic Association's website released the "Wāz" (sermon) entitled "carry forward the fine traditions of Islam and contribute to overcoming the epidemic", which clarified the importance and necessity of suspending collective religious activities and implementing various measures from the perspective of religious doctrines, and called on the Islamic world to carry forward the spirit of science and strengthen their faith (China News Network, 2020). The China Islamic Association took the lead in donations for the Arab world and Chinese Muslims took the initiative as well. By February 14, 2020, Islamic associations in China had donated a total of more than 86.09 million RMB to fight the pandemic (China News Network, 2020).

A united front against the pandemic has become an extension of religious exchanges between China and Arab countries.

Exchanges between religious groups in China and Arab countries have gradually established mechanisms (Fjnet, 2009). China has established a fixed mechanism for sending religious students to Arab countries and incorporated it into the national agreement on foreign cultural exchanges. Every year, the Chinese Islamic Association sends graduates from 10 Islamic schools across China to study in colleges and universities in Arab countries. Young Chinese Muslim chanters also participate in the international recitation competition of the Holy Koran held in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and other countries. At present, 24 colleges and universities in China have opened Arabic majors (Fjnet, 2009). Such religious exchanges between China and Arab countries contribute to the dialogue of civilizations, which directly reverses the “clash of civilizations” theory put forward by Samuel Huntington.

Since the BRI was established, increasing amounts of Arab students have come to study in China. In 2008, 1,127 Chinese students were studying in Arab countries and Arab Muslims also actively aided China’s education.

Since the BRI was established, increasing amounts of Arab students have come to study in China. In 2008, 1,127 Chinese students were studying in Arab countries and Arab Muslims also actively aided China’s education. Since 1978, the Islamic Development Bank under the Organization of the Islamic Conference (now renamed “Organization of the Islamic Cooperation” and has 57 Member States), has provided \$10 million for the

construction and restoration of China’s Islamic colleges, etc. (Fjnet, 2009).

China’s local governments are also engaged in China-Arab religious exchanges. On November 6, 2015, at the invitation of the China Islamic Association, led by Sheikh Mohamed Bada, Secretary-General of Egyptian Azhar Supreme Missionary Committee, and a delegation of eight Islamic celebrities from six Arab countries, including Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan, visited China (Guangzhou Islamic Association Network, 2015). Guangdong is one of the earliest provinces where Islam was introduced into China. With famous historical sites such as Huaisheng Mosque and ancient Muslim tombs, Guangzhou has witnessed the development of Islam in the southern province. At present, many Muslims from South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa are engaged in business activities in Guangdong. The Mosques in Guangzhou have allowed Chinese and foreign Muslims to gather and connect in harmony (Guangzhou Islamic Association Network, 2015). China’s BRI is conducive to the establishment of a good cultural environment through the exchange of religious doctrines.

In 2019, the Chinese Muslims that made pilgrimages to Mecca provided training service for the staff of Saudi Arabia in daily Chinese language to facilitate their communication with Chinese pilgrims (China News Network, 2019). This demonstrates how encouraging religious exchanges and educational cooperation can promote understanding of both parties on each other.

In the future, religious exchanges between China and Arab countries will continue to play its unique and irreplaceable role as an important part and powerful supplement to the country’s overall diplomacy and the friendship between Muslims in China and in Arab countries will continue to deepen (Ma, 2015:31).



Prospects of China-Arab Cultural Exchanges

Although the overall design of cultural exchange between China and Arab countries has essentially been completed, there is still a long way to go to consolidate it. Especially since 2020, the scramble of the great powers' geopolitical struggle has escalated, COVID-19 has been wreaking havoc on the world, the world economy has been sluggish, and the "fragmented" Arab world has faced challenges for cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries.

First, cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries are still subordinate to political and economic exchanges. Although China has established diplomatic relations with all Arab countries, such diplomatic ties are mainly reflected in political, economic, and trade relations. Due to the differences between ethnic and religious beliefs, the people of Arab countries have not been monolithic, making it hard for China to implement unified cultural diplo-

macy (Zhao, 2012: 23). Since the beginning of the 21st century, China has established relatively mature cultural exchange mechanisms with the United States, Europe, Great Britain, and the Association of South-East Asian Nations, but the institutionalization level of cultural exchange between China and Arab countries is still limited.

Second, neither China nor Arab countries give priority to each other for cultural exchanges. Both sides focus on cultural exchanges with their respective neighboring countries on the one hand, and with Europe and America on the other hand. For Arab countries, their key partners for cultural exchanges are European countries; for China, their focus in cultural exchanges are Eastern and South-Eastern Asian countries, meaning Arab countries are secondary. Therefore, China-Arab cultural exchanges should be pragmatic starting with small steps.

The Chinese government attaches great importance to Arabic education and Chinese education is also highly valued by Arab countries.

Many universities in China have successively opened Arabic majors and trained a batch of excellent Arabic talents. These talents and scholars who are proficient in Arabic have become the pioneers to promote the development of China-Arab relations. However, if China and Arab countries do not seize the opportunity to improve teaching materials, teaching methods, talent training modes, and formulate medium and long-term development plans, the outstanding talents of China and Arab countries may flow to Europe and America, resulting in the 'brain drain' of Chinese and Arab talents. As a result, both China and Arab countries face an asymmetric dependence on European and American countries in education. China and Arab countries have long been marginalized with the backdrop of strong Western discourse, so they still have a long way to go to prioritize cultural exchanges between each other.

Cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries need to mobilize non-governmental organizations.

Finally, cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries need to mobilize non-governmental organizations. In recent years, cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries have been more official than non-governmental, resulting in "hot official ties while aloof non-governmental communication". There are few exchanges between local governments, non-governmental organizations, universities, think tanks, and citizens of China and Arab countries. Although tourism between China and Arab countries is grassroots, it is formidable to achieve the goal of "connecting the hearts of the people" put forward by the leaders of China and Arab countries.

The Chinese and Arab governments have taken the lead in designing several mechanisms, such as the China-Arab civilization dialogue, the China-Arab

Art Festival and cultural industry cooperation, the China-Arab Tourism Cooperation Forum, the China-Arab Radio and Television Cooperation Forum, the China-Arab University Alliance, the China-Arab Think Tank Cooperation, the China-Arab Friendship Conference, the China-Arab Women's Cooperation Forum, the China-Arab Forum for non-governmental organizations and social organizations, the China-Arab Youth Friendship and Ambassador Project, the China-Arab city forum, and more. However, ordinary people are "stand-by", making it difficult to align the feelings of Chinese and Arab civilians.

While these forms of cultural exchange between China and Arab countries are relatively active, sometimes the content is "vague", meaning Chinese and Arabs are like "familiar strangers". The purpose of cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries is to promote mutual cultural identity and promote the construction of a "community with a shared future for mankind". In addition to the existing top-down cultural exchange mechanism, it is necessary to promote exchanges between the two sides from bottom to top, with ordinary Chinese and Arab people as the predominant players.

To begin with, China and Arab countries need to explore the cultural elements of the ancient Silk Road to improve interactions between peoples of both sides. To this end, the two sides support the joint archaeological work in the Al-Serrian port of Saudi Arabia and support the operation of the international fund for the protection of endangered cultural heritage jointly established by China and the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Kuwait, and other countries ("Action Plan of the CASCF for 2018-2020", 2018).

Next, China and Arab countries need to expand the field of cultural exchanges. So far, the cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries are mainly in the four fields of education, media, tourism, and religion.

It is also necessary to expand to the “new frontier” of cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries, such as the exchange of traditional Chinese medicine and cultural heritage protection.

In 2019, China and Arab countries held a forum on public health. In it, two sides stressed the need to strengthen cooperation and exchange of experience in the medical field, to pay attention to the elderly, disabled, and people with special needs, to prevent infectious diseases, to encourage the transfer of medical technology, to strengthen the exchange of information between governments on public health laws and policies, to carry out medical research and experiments, to enhance cooperation between Chinese and Arab treatment institutions, and to promote cooperation in medical research and traditional medicines (“Action Plan of the CASCF for 2018-2020”, 2018). Both China and Arab countries have a rich traditional medical culture that needs to be inherited and protected properly.

Moreover, cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries need to keep pace with the times by incorporating new technologies and platforms. With the rapid development of technology, especially with the continuous emergence of social networking sites that affect people’s views and positions, China and Arab countries must pay attention to the role of the internet in non-governmental exchanges. In China and the Arab world, hundreds of millions of citizens are using the internet, including social networking sites that influence public opinion, such as micro-blogs, WeChat, Facebook, YouTube, etc. The number of Arab citizens using WeChat to communicate both with their Chinese friends and each other has been increasing. The Embassy of China in Egypt and other Arab countries began to build a WeChat official account while some embassies opened micro-blog accounts. New media will become a key platform for cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries in the future.



With the development of tourism in China and Egypt, the exchanges and cooperation between China and Egypt’s civil aviation industry are also increasing, Beijing Daxing International Airport. (Zou Hong /China Daily, 2019)

Conclusion

The friendship between the countries is expressed by the affinity between their peoples. In recent years, China and Arab countries have carried out dialogue and exchanges in the cultural field. The exchange of visits between Chinese and Arab artists has flourished, the number of exchange students has increased year by year, the project of mutual translation and publication of Chinese and Arab classics has been actively promoted, the joint translation training program has been carried out smoothly, and there are many highlights in the fields of civilization dialogue, de-radicalization cooperation, and youth and women exchanges.

First, China-Arab cultural exchanges have a profound historical accumulation. Research shows that the historical heritage of cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries is the ancient Silk Road. The Silk Road reminds both China and Arab countries of their respective glorious national histories and cultures and serves to enhance their national pride. When the Arab Empire and the Chinese Tang Empire were the most powerful in the 7th century, their interactions began. During this period, Chinese papermaking, silk, tea, and other products were introduced into the Arab world, while blue porcelain technology and galaxy science were introduced into China by the Arabs. In recent years, joint archaeological expeditions

between China and Arab countries, the revival of each other's ancient medicine, and the protection of cultural relics have all helped to promote the connection between the two people.

Second, cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries are integrated. Their cultural exchanges play a "fundamental" role in deepening and developing strategic relations and help to cultivate an affinity and friendship between the two sides. Both China and Arab countries are developing countries with underdeveloped social groups. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, together with the Propaganda Department of the CPC Central Committee, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Ministry of Education, the Xinhua News Agency, the Ministry of Health, the Friendship Association, and more than a dozen other departments, as well as provinces and cities, have promoted cultural exchanges between them. Thus, coordination and unity between different departments will be developed and overall cooperation with Arab countries within the framework of the CASCF will be developed.

Third, Cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries are divided into three different mechanisms: multilateral, collective and bilateral cooperation. Multilateral and collective cooperation is carried out under the framework of the CASCF, which has the advantage of higher efficiency because it can cover 22

Arab countries. Since the BRI was raised, China and Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Algeria have formed high-level joint committees to promote cultural exchanges under bilateral relations.

Fourth, China-Arab cultural exchange needs to be pragmatic. Although the current cultural exchange mechanism between China and Arab countries has been established, led, and promoted by the government, the key to its effectiveness is in non-governmental exchanges. In other words, the government can only play a leading role while specific affairs need to rely on social and non-governmental sectors. Exchanges between ordinary people and enterprises are grassroots and fundamental. It is far from enough to rely on several cooperation mechanisms and platforms such as the CASCF to promote cultural exchanges and cooperation at the official level. China and Arab countries should respect each other's cultural differences.

Therefore, China and Arab countries need to adhere to pragmatism and steadily promote cultural exchanges. After China put forward its BRI, Arab countries started "looking East" and China-Arab relations turned from "back-to-back" to "face-to-face". Cultural exchanges between China and the Arab countries will enable the two forces at the two ends of the BRI to revitalize the spirit of the Old Silk Road and develop a mutually beneficial and harmonious relationship.

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