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China's Efforts to Legitimize the Implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative in the Gulf

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Abstract

Although the Gulf is not highlighted on the official map of China's Belt and Road Initiative, it is one of the main regions where the BRI is being implemented. On the occasion of President Xi Jinping's speech at the 6th Ministerial Conference of the China-Arab-States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) in June 2014, he declared the regional countries as being "natural cooperative partners in jointly building the BRI". Since then, various actors from China, mainly firms, banks, and financial institutions have actively embarked on efforts to implement the BRI in the Gulf.

However, most of analyses focusing on the BRI in the Gulf have ignored that the realisation of the initiative in the Gulf is not restricted to the economic sphere. Rather, it involves legitimating efforts to translate the interests behind the initiative into a universal interest to attain the social support of regional states. This report aims to analyse how these legitimating efforts are being carried out and who are the actors involved. It does so by dividing China's efforts into two components: the efforts, which concerns how the objectives of the BRI are articulated to appeal to the regional society; and the actors, which refers to the specific actors involved in the process. In the last part, it also assesses the limitations of China's efforts.

Introduction

Although the Arabian Gulf is not highlighted on the official map of China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it is one of the main regions where it is being implemented. On the occasion of president Xi Jinping’s speech at the sixth Ministerial Conference of the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) in June 2014, he declared the regional countries as being “natural cooperative partners in jointly building the BRI.”⁽¹⁾ Since then, various actors from China—mainly firms, banks, and financial institutions—have actively embarked on efforts to implement the BRI in the Gulf.

However, most analyses focusing on the BRI in the Gulf have ignored the fact that the realization of the initiative in the Gulf is not restricted to the economic sphere. Rather, it involves legitimizing efforts to translate the interests behind the initiative into a universal interest in order to attain the social support of regional states. This report aims to analyze how these efforts are being carried out and identify the actors involved. The timeframe of the paper extends from the BRI’s launch in 2013 until early 2019. It divides China’s actions into two components: the *efforts*—how the objectives of the BRI are articulated to appeal to the regional society—and the *actors*—the specific institutions and persons involved in the process. Following this overview, the report assesses the limitations of China’s efforts under the umbrella of the BRI.

The Efforts: Articulating the BRI as Central to the Chinese Dream

There are multiple components in how the objectives of the BRI are presented to appeal to the regional society of the Gulf. The most prominent component of this effort is the depiction of the “Chinese Dream”, the main legitimizing idea promoted along with the BRI, as everyone’s dream.

(1) Muhammad Zufikar Rakhmat, “The Belt and Road Initiative in the Gulf: Building Oil Prosperity,” Middle East Institute (Washington, D.C.), Feb. 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/belt-and-road-initiative-gulf-building-oil-roads-prosperity>.

This is reflected in Xi's assertions that "everyone has their own ideals and aspirations, and all have their own dream[,] and that the Chinese Dream is [the] people's dream, and must closely rely on the people for its achievement, and must constantly be for the benefit of the people."⁽²⁾ Domestically, Xi seeks to convince the populace to not only follow the Communist Party of China (CPC) and to make sacrifices in order to realize the "dream" for the good of the country, but that the "dream [is] also for each individual Chinese [citizen]."⁽³⁾ This strategy is reproduced in the international context. In several of his speeches, Xi asserted that each country and region is entitled to its own "beautiful dream": there is the Korean Dream, the Latin American Dream, the Arab Dream, the African Dream, and so forth.⁽⁴⁾

This *equalization strategy* presents the implementation of the initiative as one that align Chinese interests with those of the Gulf states' broader interests, or put in a different way, as the Chinese Dream working in tandem with the dreams of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. This equalization strategy is voiced in an article written by Wang Jinglie, an executive committee member of the Chinese Society for Middle East Studies, wherein he stated, "we wish that when we realize the 'Chinese Dream,' the Arab countries will not only be happy for us, but will also achieve their own 'Arab Dream.'"⁽⁵⁾

The use of the phrase "Arab Dream" in Wang's article can be seen as an effort to equate the Chinese Dream with the national "dreams" of the GCC countries. Other actors have also been found to equate the Chinese Dream with the Gulf's "dream." Another example was related by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in the seventh Ministerial Meeting of the CASCF in Doha in 2016:

(2) William A. Callahan, "China's "Asia Dream": The Belt and Road Initiative and the New Regional Order," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 23, no. 2 (2016): 226-243, 226.

(3) Ibid.

(4) Ibid.

(5) Wang Jinglie, "China's Economic Restructuring and Extension of China's Middle East Strategy," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (in Asia)* 8, no. 2 (2014): 8-23, 22.

“The Chinese people are striving to realize a moderately prosperous society in all respects and the Chinese dream of great national renewal.... meanwhile, Arab people are working tirelessly to make their dream for peace, stability, and development come true.... these common dreams and aspirations are a strong bond that links the two sides.”⁽⁶⁾

Another crucial component of this effort is the promotion of the idea that the initiative’s vision is in line with the developmental visions and foreign policy initiatives of the GCC governments. For example, during King Salman of Saudi Arabia’s visit to China in March 2019, it was emphasized that Xi’s plan to revive the historical Silk Road is in line with the Saudi Vision 2030.⁽⁷⁾ Yet another component of this effort involves universalizing the idea that the BRI’s objectives will benefit not only China, but also the Gulf region. For instance, this was illustrated in Xi Jinping’s statement during the visit to China of Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2015. Xi stressed that “the two sides should strengthen practical cooperation under the framework of co-building the ‘Belt and Road,’ so as to realize mutual benefits, win-win results and common development.”⁽⁸⁾ In this respect, the shared dream initiative is presented as the linchpin in the realization of the BRI strategy.

The founding document of the Chinese project, “Vision and Action,” also follows the established line of “win-win” cooperation, declaring China’s values and interests to be everybody’s values and desires. For example, it

(6) Wang Yi, “The “Belt and Road” Initiative: A Great Opportunity for Deepening China-Arab Strategic Cooperative Relations,” Abu Dhabi: Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United Arab Emirates, May 10, 2016, <http://ae.china-embassy.org/eng/dshd/t1361965.htm>.

(7) “China, Saudi Arabia Agree to Expand Cooperation,” *Xinhua*, Feb. 5, 2019, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/qwyw/rdxw/80445.htm>.

(8) Xi Jinping, “Full Text of Chinese President’s Signed Article on Saudi Newspaper: Be Good Partners for Common Development,” *Xinhua*, Jan. 18, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-01/18/c_135021181.htm, cited in Oxford Business Group, “The Report: Dubai: 2016,” Oxford Business Group (Dubai), 2016, 33, and in Michael Gow, “The Core Socialist Values of the Chinese Dream: Towards a Chinese integral state,” *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 1 (2016): 92–116, 109.

begins its conclusion by declaring, “though proposed by China, the Belt and Road Initiative is a common aspiration of all countries along the routes.” In articulating the initiative’s energy objectives, for example, it also asserts, “we should promote cooperation in the connectivity of energy infrastructure, [and] work in concert to ensure the security of oil and gas pipelines and other transport routes.” Terms such as *cooperation* are used to reframe the initiative’s energy goals so that they are perceived as mutually beneficial.

Furthermore, part of the legitimizing effort behind the BRI includes becoming actively involved in regional issues, working to *equalize* China’s stances with those of the GCC states so as to present it as a good partner in promoting peace. This would contribute to enhancing the legitimacy of Chinese interests in the region. For example, China advocates that Palestine be restored as an independent nation based on the 1967 borders, a position similarly held by the GCC states. In order to reconcile Saudi Arabia’s dissatisfaction with various Sino-Iran deals, China backed the Saudi stance on supporting the government of Yemen.⁽⁹⁾ Likewise, it supports the Gulf’s united position that UN Security Council Resolution 2254 should be implemented in Syria. Responding to the Israeli attacks in Gaza, in May 2018, China also supported Kuwait’s proposal to end the conflict.⁽¹⁰⁾ In addition, China became involved in the 2017 dispute in the Gulf when it organized a meeting with Qatari leaders to discuss potential solutions to the crisis.⁽¹¹⁾

Indeed, these efforts have succeeded in making many regional political actors become more supportive of the initiative. Saudi Arabia’s Energy Minister

(9) Anoushiravan Ehteshami, Niv Horesh, and Xu Ruike, “Chinese-Iranian Mutual Strategic Perceptions,” *China Journal*, Jan. 2018, 1–20, 2.

(10) “China Calls for Calm, Restraint Following Gaza Conflict,” *Xinhua*, May 31, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-05/31/c_137221201.htm.

(11) Mohammed Al-Sudairi, “Why Beijing Is Lying Low in the GCC Crisis,” *MEI Perspective Series*, 2018, 1–14, 1; “Chinese Official Urges Gulf Crisis Settlement through Dialogue,” *Peninsula*, May 5, 2018, <https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/05/05/2018/Chinese-official-urges-Gulf-Crisis-settlement-through-dialogue>.

agreed that the BRI parallels the Saudi's own Vision 2030, based on the latter's "common features and notions."⁽¹²⁾ Kuwait's ambassador to China, Sameh Hayat, has also asserted that the BRI's goals correspond to Kuwait's 2035 Vision.⁽¹³⁾ In a meeting with the Chinese Foreign Minister in Doha in May 2016, Qatar's emir also pledged to take part in the BRI.⁽¹⁴⁾ Meanwhile, Omar Al-Hinae'i, deputy chairman of the State Council of Oman, stated in a meeting with Arken Imirbaki, president of the China-Arab Friendship Association, that Oman fully supports the realization of the BRI.⁽¹⁵⁾ Likewise, the chief executive of the Bahrain Economic Development Board asserted that Bahrain supports "China's vision of the Belt and Road Initiative to build a community of shared interests between the Arab world and China."⁽¹⁶⁾ A similar statement was made by the UAE's Minister of State, Sultan Ahmed Al-Jaber, in an interview with *Xinhua*: "the UAE is a founding member of the AIIB [Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank] and committed to its central mission of bringing the Belt and Road vision to life."⁽¹⁷⁾

This social support has also been converted into concrete endeavors. In Kuwait, for instance, the government has devoted approximately \$119 billion to constructing Silk City (Madinat Al Hareer).⁽¹⁸⁾ This is a planned urban area that includes a 1,001-meter-tall skyscraper dubbed Burj Mubarak Al Kabir, a duty-free area, and a two-square-kilometer nature reserve, as

(12) Giorgio Cafiero and Daniel Wagner, "What the Gulf States Think of 'One Belt, One Road,'" *Diplomat*, May 24, 2017, <https://thedi diplomat.com/2017/05/what-the-gulf-states-think-of-one-belt-one-road/>.

(13) "Kuwait, China Share Enthusiasm on 'Belt and Road' Economic Initiative," *Kuwait Times*, May 13, 2017, <http://news.kuwaittimes.net/pdf/2017/may/13/kt.pdf>.

(14) "China Takes Qatar Key Partner for Belt and Road Initiative: FM," *Xinhua*, May 11, 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-05/11/c_135351700_2.htm.

(15) "Oman Ready to Join in China's Belt and Road Initiative," *Xinhua*, Mar. 26, 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-03/26/c_135225787.htm.

(16) "Supporting China and the Growing Belt and Road Initiative," *China Daily*, Feb. 24, 2017, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2017-02/24/content_28329065.htm.

(17) "Interview: UAE Strongly Supports China's Belt and Road Initiative," *Xinhua*, May 10, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/10/c_136271693.htm.

(18) Muhamad Olimat, *China and the Gulf Cooperation Council: Strategic Partnership in a Changing World* (London: Lexington Books, 2016), 20.

well as a business center, conference centers, and other areas that focus on media, leisure, education, and industry.⁽¹⁹⁾ In commenting on the project, Sami Alfaraj, president of the Kuwait Centre for Strategic Studies and an adviser to the GCC, asserted, “we want to build railways all the way to China.”⁽²⁰⁾ The UAE’s financial center, the Dubai International Financial Centre (DIFC), has also cooperated with the University of Oxford to create a legal framework to deal with regulatory and legal challenges inherent in the realization of the BRI. It is said that the purpose of the framework is “enabling and safeguarding both Chinese and international commercial interests.”⁽²¹⁾

The Actors: From Elites to Cultural Exchanges

Government Elites

Since the BRI initiative was introduced in the Gulf, the task of propagating it has been carried out by state officials, who have increased the frequency of their diplomatic activities in the region. One notable example occurred just three months after Xi’s launching of the initiative, when Foreign Minister Wang Yi organized a meeting with General Secretary of the GCC Abdullateef Al-Zayani, in Riyadh⁽²²⁾ to promote the BRI as a beneficial project for the Gulf and to urge all countries in the region to take part in it. The Chinese Dream, in relation to the initiative, was first mentioned to those in the Gulf region in an article by Wu Sike, Chinese special envoy to the Middle East, entitled, “The Chinese Dream Needs Arabic Support and Cooperation.” The

(19) “Spotlight: China’s ‘Belt and Road’ Initiative Boosts,” *Xinhua*, Jan. 19, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-01/19/c_135024451.htm.

(20) Owen Bowcott, “Kuwait Plans New £132bn Metropolis,” *Guardian*, July 23, 2008, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2008/jul/23/oilandgascompanies.architecture>.

(21) Oscar Rousseau, “DIFC Courts Creates Legal Alliance for China’s Trillion-dollar Silk Road,” *Construction Week*, May 27, 2018, <http://www.constructionweekonline.com/article-49428-difc-courts-creates-legal-alliance-for-chinas-trillion-dollar-silk-road/#.WwrHY2ochow.twitter>.

(22) “Wang Yi Meets with GCC Secretary General Abdul Latif bin Rashid Al Zayani,” FMPRC (Beijing), Consulate-General of the People’s Republic of China in Gothenburg, Dec. 26, 2013, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cggb/eng/gyzg/xwdt/t1113185.htm>.

article attempted to create a common understanding among the Arab nations by aligning the Chinese Dream with Arab development goals and emphasized that “the process of realizing our nation’s dream complements Arab nations’ efforts to achieve peace and development.”⁽²³⁾

In subsequent years, these strategies were also employed by Chinese officials during their interactions with their Gulf counterparts. As an example, a meeting between Xi and the Emir of Qatar in November 2014 led to the ratification of the China-Qatar Strategic Partnership. In the meeting, Xi called upon Doha to become involved in the BRI and discussed how the initiative offers benefits for both nations.⁽²⁴⁾ At the sixth Ministerial Conference of the CASCF, in 2014, Wang Yi, through a written statement, again asserted that the Arab countries are “natural and important cooperation partners” in implementing the BRI and that the Chinese Dream should be manifested in growing China-Arab relations: “today, China and the Arab states are working together to build the economic belt and the maritime silk road to revive the modern-day silk road. . . . China will work with [the] Arab states . . . to achieve China’s great dream of national revival in the course of deepening Sino-Arab cooperation.”⁽²⁵⁾ The statement was a further attempt to present the BRI as working in favor of the interests of the Gulf countries. The same strategy was also apparent during Xi’s visits to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iran. In a speech at the Arab League, Xi declared: “China is ready to work with [the] Arab states to jointly build the Belt and Road and expand common ground in our respective efforts to achieve national renewal.”⁽²⁶⁾

(23) Wu Sike, “The Chinese Dream Needs Arabic Support and Cooperation,” *China Today*, Aug. 26, 2013, http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/english/zhuanti/2013-08/26/content_563290.htm.

(24) “Xi Jinping Holds Talks with Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani of Qatar and Two Heads of State to Establish China-Qatar Strategic Partnership,” FMPRC (Beijing), Consulate-General of the People’s Republic of China in Gothenburg, Nov. 3, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjwb_663304/zjzg_663340/xybfs_663590/xwlb_663592/t1207490.shtml.

(25) Wang, “China’s Economic Restructuring,” 21.

(26) Xi, “Full Text of Chinese President’s Signed Article.”

Xi was complemented by the then Chinese ambassador to Bahrain, Qi Zhenhong, who in the same month published a statement urging the GCC countries to cooperate with China in order “to realize the Chinese Dream and to revitalize the Arab states.”⁽²⁷⁾ China’s officials also frequently propagated the notion that the initiative paralleled the regional countries’ development visions. For instance, in CASCF’s seventh Ministerial Meeting in Doha in 2016, Wang Yi asserted that the BRI’s objectives are consistent with Qatar’s National Vision 2030.⁽²⁸⁾ During the visit of the Saudi Deputy Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, to China, Xi also universalized the Chinese Dream, saying that it was consistent with the Saudi Vision 2030 and “with the dreams cherished by the Saudis.”⁽²⁹⁾

Chinese officials, moreover, have also used regional newspapers around the Gulf to shape public opinion in favor of the BRI. Xi, for instance, wrote a piece entitled, “Be Good Partners for Common Development” in *Al Riyadh*, in January 2016, which was then distributed by *Xinhua* and widely cited in the West.⁽³⁰⁾ Xi promoted the initiative, highlighting Saudi Arabia’s role. Xi wrote that the BRI’s goals parallel Saudi Arabia’s development strategies and interests. One day before his visit to the UAE in July 2018, Xi also wrote a piece for two UAE newspapers, *Al Ittihad* and the *National*, entitled, “Work Together, Create a Better Future.” The article not only promoted the initiative, but also attempted to establish legitimacy for it by stating, “there are overlapping visions in the development strategies between the two nations.”⁽³¹⁾

(27) “With Belt and Road Initiative, Arab-China Cooperation Comes to Fruition,” Bahrain News Agency, 2016, <http://www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/725430>.

(28) “China Takes Qatar Key Partner for Belt and Road Initiative: FM,” *Xinhua*, May 11, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-05/11/c_135021181.htm.

(29) “Fusing Vision 2030 with Belt Road Initiative,” *Arab News*, Sept. 3, 2016, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/979346/middleeast>.

(30) Xi, “Full Text of Chinese President’s Signed Article.”

(31) “Xi Calls on UAE to Build Community of Shared Future with Belt and Road Initiative,” China Global Television Network, Jul. 18, 2018, https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d414f3463444f78457a6333566d54/share_p.html.

State institutions have also increasingly worked to encourage public debates on the BRI. In August 2017, for example, China's National Development and Reform Commission held a roundtable discussion in the UAE, entitled, "Sukuk and Economic Development: Opportunities and Challenges," to discuss the initiative's opportunities for the UAE. A panel discussion entitled, "Saudi Vision 2030 and the Belt and Road Initiative: Together for a Promising Future" was also held during Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit to China in 2016. The panel aimed to widen the conversation on the initiative by discussing its relevance in the Gulf and how it can benefit the region.⁽³²⁾

The strategy to equalize China's stances with those of the Gulf on regional issues has, however, been done mainly by state officials, especially through diplomatic exchanges at both the regional and broader international levels. For example, during the 2017 Gulf crisis, the CPC invited Qatar to discuss possible solutions to the dispute. At the meeting, Wang Yi sketched a parallel between China's position and that of the Gulf in welcoming Kuwait's mediation proposal.⁽³³⁾ In addition, during Israeli attacks on Gaza in mid-2018, China also voted in favor of the Kuwaiti-drafted UN Security Council resolution on the protection of the Palestinians. China's representative to the United Nations, Ma Zhaoxu, asserted that the draft reflected the actual situation on the ground and would help defuse tensions.⁽³⁴⁾ Aside from diplomatic exchanges, Chinese officials have also organized high-level meetings on regional issues to present China as a "good partner" for creating regional peace. For example, an "International Symposium on the Prospect of a Political Settlement of the Syrian Issue" was held in May 2018, which was the first global forum hosted

(32) Nabilah Annuar, "UAE-China Economic Cooperation to Drive Success of Belt & Road Initiative," CPI Financial (Dubai City), 2017, <http://www.cpifinancial.net/news/post/42518/uae-china-economic-cooperation-to-drive-success-of-belt-road-initiative>.

(33) "Chinese FM Calls for Dialogue, Greater Role of GCC on Qatar Diplomatic Crisis," *Xinhua*, Jul. 21, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/21/c_136459887.htm.

(34) "Chinese Calls for Calm, Restraint Following Gaza Conflict," *Xinhua*, May 31, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-05/31/c_137221201.htm.

by China on the Syrian conflict. Commenting on the forum, Pauley argued: “considering that the forum was held in Shanghai and was co-hosted by the Shanghai Institute of International Studies and Shanghai International Studies University, it is likely that China aimed to use the symposium as a legitimizing force for [its interests].”⁽³⁵⁾

The involvement of China in Middle Eastern issues has lured the regional elites to the initiative. In late 2018, for instance, the Qatari ambassador to China, Sultan Almansouri, expressed Qatar’s support for the BRI in a special interview with the *Global Times*, in which he stated, “I think this initiative is [beneficial] for all Asian countries, and the whole world and we will keep on supporting it. Qatar will . . . play an important role in it.”⁽³⁶⁾ A few months earlier, such increasing interest was also demonstrated by a forum held by Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Energy, Industry, and Mineral Resources, entitled, “Belt and Road Initiative, a Joint Vision for Cooperation and Prosperity.” The forum coincided with a meeting of the Saudi-Chinese High-Level Committee and concentrated on the potential cooperation and investment opportunities being stimulated by the BRI and Vision 2030.⁽³⁷⁾ A similar forum was also organized by First Abu Dhabi Bank, the UAE’s largest bank, in late February 2018. During the panel discussions, the conversations emphasized that the BRI presents opportunities for the UAE and the wider region, and that the UAE is well placed to maximize the opportunities offered by the initiative.⁽³⁸⁾

(35) Logan Pauley, “China Is Using Syria’s Peace Process for Its Own Ends,” *National Interest*, May 31, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/china-using-syrias-peace-process-its-own-ends-26062>.

(36) Wang Jian, “‘One Belt One Road’: A Vision for the Future of China–Middle East Relations,” *Al Jazeera Center for Studies Report*, May 9, 2017, 1–6, 1.

(37) “Major Saudi-China Investment Forum Set in Jeddah,” *Trade Arabia* (Bahrain), Aug. 22, 2017, http://www.tradearabia.com/news/OGN_329297.html.

(38) Jessica Combes, “Creating Opportunities for the UAE along the Belt and Road Initiative,” Dubai City: CPI Financial, 2018, accessed Mar. 29, 2019, <http://657633-web.www.cpifinancial.net/features/post/44391/creating-opportunities-for-the-uae-along-the-belt-and-road-initiative>.

Mainstream Media

The mainstream media also plays an important role in the legitimizing effort behind the BRI in the Gulf. The most notable example is the television network USILK, which was launched during the Chinese New Year in January 2017.⁽³⁹⁾ The programs that come under Quest Arabiya's⁽⁴⁰⁾ USILK initiative were the result of a strategic partnership between one of China's largest production houses, China International Communication Center, and the UAE-based production company Image Nation, beginning in November 2016. The agreement also led to the establishment of a \$300 million international film fund, the Culture China-Image Nation Content Fund, which is intended to provide investment for the dissemination of films and television programs from China.⁽⁴¹⁾

USILK broadcasts a variety of TV programs and series on Chinese culture, politics, entertainment, and the foreign policy of Xi Jinping. The broadcasts are the first Chinese TV programming in the Gulf and in the Arabic language and constitute an important effort not only to promote the BRI, but also to obtain social support for the initiative, which is evident from the programs that USILK is offering. "Wonder of China" is a five-part documentary focusing on the interaction between Chinese people and modern society, from biodiversity expeditions to Wudang Kung-Fu. "Back to [the] Village" provides a real-life comparison of cosmopolitan China with present-day rural China. In the meantime, "New Face of China" highlights the development of present-day

(39) "Arabic Channel Celebrates Chinese New Year, Unveiling Silk Road Line-up," *Al Arabiya*, Jan. 25, 2017, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/media/television-and-adio/2017/01/25/Arabic-channel-celebrates-Chinese-New-Year-unveiling-Silk-Road-line-up.html>.

(40) Quest Arabiya (a partnership between Discovery Communications and the Abu Dhabi-based Image Nation), is a free-to-air pan-Arab television channel, launched on December 7, 2015, which is broadcast across the Middle East and North Africa. It is the region's localized version of the Quest channel. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discovery,_Inc.

(41) Jessica Hill, "Image Nation Sign Dh1.1bn Movie Deal with Chinese Production Organisation," *National*, Nov. 13, 2016, <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/image-nation-sign-dh1-1bn-movie-deal-with-chinese-production-organisation-1.185420>.

China and the CPC's current strategies concerning politics, economics, and the environment. It also looks at new Chinese initiatives, from e-commerce to basketball, as well as the BRI.

Another program is "Changing Times," a documentary series that offers a glimpse into the lives and dreams of the Chinese people who are preserving the Chinese cultural heritage—from Kunqu opera, Bokh wrestling to throat singing. A final example is "Modern Life in China", a series that brings together the dreams and aspirations of strangers, with the series acting as a common thread that binds them as they struggle to make their dreams reality. Indeed, in all these programs, the notion of a "dream" and the encouragement to have dreams are apparent. It can be said that USILK is not only intended to increase Gulf society's awareness of China and its initiative, but also, and more importantly, to legitimize the BRI by instilling in the people's minds a belief in having and fighting for one's material dreams. When we look at these programs, we can see that there is a clear attempt by China to produce a common worldview with the Gulf's society under the framework of the Chinese Dream.

In 2017, a Chinese TV channel, CGTN Arabic, was relaunched with a regional office in Dubai; it was originally launched in 2009 as an Arabic arm of CCTV.⁽⁴²⁾ The channel aims to "show real China" to the regional audience and to connect both sides. The twenty-four-hour channel broadcasts on both ArabSat and NileSat, with 13.5 million followers on its Facebook page. Its programs include entertainment series, political news, and cultural and tourism shows. Other programs concentrate on teaching Chinese and on Islamic cuisine and halal food, as well as movies and documentaries on countries related to the BRI. The importance of the channel in forming a moral and intellectual legitimacy for the BRI was stated by the director of CGTN Arabic, Jia Peng, as

(42) China Global Television Network; China Central Television.

follows: “We have three goals: introduce China to the Arab audience, introduce the Chinese viewpoint vis-à-vis international problems, including Arab issues, to Arab viewers, and cover Chinese-Arab joint activities.”⁽⁴³⁾

The television program is also supported by printed publications. The most important of these efforts is the distribution of the Arabic translation of the well-known book entitled *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China, Keyword to Understand China and The Belt*, which discusses in detail China’s current policies and initiatives under Xi, including the BRI. The book, published by the government-associated Foreign Language Press, is a compilation of seventy-nine official speeches, conversations, and instructions by Xi covering the period November 2012 to June 2014. Compiled by the CPC’s Central Committee’s Literature Research Office and the State Council Information Office, along with the China International Publishing Group, the 500-plus-page volume is organized into eighteen sections and is intended to spread Xi’s ideology and the initiative to a wider audience. During my fieldwork, I discovered that the Arabic and English versions of the book are widely available in both large and small bookstores across the Gulf. The book is also available in several libraries in the region, such as at Georgetown University in Qatar and Sultan Qaboos University in Oman.⁽⁴⁴⁾

The publication strategy was also apparent in the participation of China’s publishing houses in various book fairs across the GCC countries. For instance, in 2017, some participated in the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair, where China was the guest of honor. The *Global Times* reported that the theme of “Reading China” was promoted by more than 3,500 books exhibited during the fair and that the event was held as the BRI “gains more ground” in the region; the participation of these publishers helps increase Gulf public

(43) Jumana Al Tamimi, “CGTN Arabic Aims to Show Real China to Arabs,” *GulfNews*, July 16, 2018, <https://gulfnews.com/uae/government/cgtn-arabic-aims-to-show-real-china-to-arabs-1.2252484>.

(44) This information is obtained from the websites of these libraries.

awareness surrounding China and its initiative. Further, at the event, important publications on the BRI and the Chinese Dream—including the well-known *Xi Jinping: The Governance of China* and *The Belt and Road Initiative: What Will China Offer the World in its Rise?* by Wang Yiwei—were showcased, and Arabic translations of the two books were also launched. Moreover, the event also marked the launch of the Chinese-Arabic Inter-Translation project by the New World Press, which aims to translate several Chinese books into Arabic. Aside from classical and modern Chinese literatures, the project also aims to translate works concerning the BRI and the Chinese Dream.⁽⁴⁵⁾

This, however, is not the first publication strategy pursued by Chinese social forces to raise Gulf society's awareness about China and its initiative. As stated by Wu Shangzi, deputy head of the State Administration of Publication, Radio, Film, and Television, at least 750 copyright agreements were signed between China and the Gulf states in 2016.⁽⁴⁶⁾ In an interview, Jacqueline Armijo, a scholar on Chinese Islam and Sino-Middle East relations, agreed that these publication fairs and agreements are efforts to introduce (or more negatively, insinuate) China and its initiative within the regional society.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Such efforts have also taken place elsewhere in the region. In March 2018, an exhibition of over a thousand Chinese books was organized in Kuwait. The books, which covered topics including Chinese history, culture, and politics, were then bequeathed to the National Library of Kuwait. The event's objective was, as the Chinese ambassador stated in an interview with *Xinhua*, "to enhance both people's understanding of each other's society and culture, and strengthen the people-to-people bond within the framework of the BRI."⁽⁴⁸⁾

(45) "'Belt and Road' Initiative Promotes Sino-Arab Cooperation at Abu Dhabi International Book Fair," *Global Times*, May 2, 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1044986.shtml>.

(46) Ibid.

(47) Personal phone interview with Jacqueline Armijo in 2017.

(48) "Over 1,000 Chinese Books on Exhibition in Kuwait to Promote Cultural Ties," *Xinhua*, Mar. 26, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/26/c_137067421.htm.

Chinese newspapers have been vital in supporting these efforts, primarily through the wide publication of quotations, interviews, and opinion pieces on the BRI, the Chinese Dream, and Chinese stances toward regional issues by Chinese politicians, diplomats, and academics. The *Global Times* for instance, published an article entitled, “B&R Initiative to Help Fix Problems Caused by the West in Mideast,”⁽⁴⁹⁾ which adamantly voiced the opinion that the various issues present in the region have been created by the West and that the BRI can address those problems. In early 2016, the newspaper also published an article stating that the BRI is the best development path for the region:

The US designed blueprint for the Middle East development has failed. The region is now tracing future puzzles. The turmoil will be intensified if the regional nations fail to find a right development path... Xi’s visit has brought a new blueprint for development—realizing peaceful development via the “One Belt, One Road” initiative...it is the only ideal way for the region to realize peace and development.⁽⁵⁰⁾

Academics and Educational Institutions

The roles of academics and educational institutions in these efforts should not be neglected either. When drawing up the plan for the BRI, Xi and his teams seemed to acknowledge the importance of intellectuals and academic establishments in the implementation of the project. The article “Vision and Action” states that the initiative will involve academic efforts, such as sending “more students to each other’s countries,” granting “government scholarships,” and establishing “cooperation in jointly running schools.”⁽⁵¹⁾ Such objectives

(49) Sheng Yang, “B&R Initiative to Help Fix Problems Caused by the West in Mideast,” *Global Times*, May 16, 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1047310.shtml>.

(50) Jia Jinjing, “‘One Belt, One Road’ Offers Blueprint for Peaceful Development in Middle East,” *Global Times*, Jan. 26, 2016, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/965765.shtml>.

(51) “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road,” Mar. 28, 2015, en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html.

have been manifested in the implementation of the BRI in the Gulf as a means to create legitimacy for the initiative.

One important institution is the State of Qatar Chair in Middle Eastern Studies, which was established during the Emir of Qatar's visit to Beijing in mid-2014, financed jointly by the Qatar government and Peking University (PKU).⁽⁵²⁾ The most noticeable initiative by the center was a conference entitled, "China's Foreign Policy and the GCC," held at Qatar University. Attendees at the conference included the coordinator of the Gulf Studies Program at Qatar University, Khaled Al-Mezaini; PKU professor and Institute of International and Strategic Studies (IISS) president, Wang Jisi; PKU State of Qatar chair in Middle Eastern Studies, Wu Bingbing; and assistant professor of International Affairs at Qatar University, Imad Mansour. The main topic of the discussion was the BRI.⁽⁵³⁾

Shanghai University (SHU) also played a role in inciting public debate about the initiative in the Gulf. In March 2016, the university cooperated with the Center for Turkish Studies, the Maltepe University, and the *Sociology of Islam* journal to organize a conference at Qatar University.⁽⁵⁴⁾ The conference, entitled, "Neoliberalism with Chinese Characteristics and Political Transformations in the Middle East," was attended by prominent scholars on China and, in an attempt to provide more legitimacy, the Chinese ambassador to Qatar, Li Chen, was invited. Among the topics discussed was the "One Belt, One Road: Politics to Economy," where issues related to the BRI and the Chinese Dream were discussed, including the Chinese model of development and the implications of the BRI for the Gulf. Academic institutions are also crucial in forming moral and intellectual legitimacy for the financial aspects of the BRI. For example, the China-UAE Conference on Islamic Banking

(52) Wang, "China's Economic Restructuring," 41.

(53) "QU Hosts Lecture on 'China Foreign Policy and GCC,'" *Qatar Tribune*, June 9, 2017, <http://www.qatar-tribune.com/PrintNews.aspx?id=69714>.

(54) For more information about the conference, see <http://chinaandthemiddleeast.blogspot.co.uk/2015/08/cfp-china-in-middle-east-neoliberalism.html>.

has been held annually in China since 2015. The conference—sponsored by various Chinese and Gulf institutions, such as the China Islamic Finance Club as well as the Dubai Center for Islamic Banking and Finance—discusses issues such as ways to enhance the interest-free Islamic finance aspect of the BRI’s implementation in the Gulf.⁽⁵⁵⁾

Confucius institutes play an important role in the legitimization efforts behind the BRI. At a conference in summer 2015, the head of the Confucius institutes program proclaimed that these entities were established by the Ministry of Education in order to teach the Chinese language and other China-related courses globally as well as to involve themselves in the implementation of the BRI.⁽⁵⁶⁾ Internationally, Confucius institutes have organized several training programs thematically related to the BRI, as well as public conferences and seminars.⁽⁵⁷⁾ In the GCC countries, where a few Confucius institutes have been established, such efforts have also been increasingly apparent. The first branch was established in Abu Dhabi at Zayed University in 2010 and was followed by a second one at the University of Dubai in 2011. The third branch in the region is located at the University of Bahrain, and was opened in 2014.⁽⁵⁸⁾

One notable BRI-related activity of the Confucius institutes in the Gulf is a conference held at the Abu Dhabi branch in March 2017, in cooperation with the Emirates Policy Center. It was entitled, “Prospects of Partnership between China and the UAE under the One Belt, One Road Initiative.”⁽⁵⁹⁾ The seminar,

(55) “3rd China-UAE Conference on Islamic Banking and Finance to Explore Potential for Participative Economy,” *Zawya*, July 21, 2018, https://www.zawya.com/mena/en/story/3rd_ChinaUAE_Conference_on_Islamic_Banking_Finance_to_explore_potential_for_participative_economy-ZAWYA20180721084910.

(56) Callahan, “China’s ‘Asia Dream,’” 46.

(57) “Mdm. Xu Lin: Confucius Institutes Boosts the ‘One Belt, One Road Initiative,’” *Hanban News*, Sept. 16, 2015, http://english.hanban.org/article/2015-09/16/content_615751.htm.

(58) Muhamad Olimat, *China and the Middle East since World War II: a Bilateral Approach* (London: Lexington Books, 2014).

(59) “Abu Dhabi Hosts Seminar on ‘Belt and Road,’” CCTV+, Mar. 30, 2017, <http://www.cctvplus.com/archive/20170330/8046664.shtml#!language=1>.

which was attended by over fifty academics and scholars from China and the UAE, discussed the relevance of the BRI and its impact on the UAE. In May of the same year, the Confucius institute in Bahrain held the first “Belt and Road” International Seminar, which was attended by over five hundred scholars from seven countries. Among the attendees were China’s then ambassador to Bahrain, Qi Zhenhong, and SHU’s vice president, Wu Xueying. At the event, topics related to how the BRI is being implemented in the region were presented, such as the importance of energy in the initiative and the various projects that are currently being pursued in the Gulf. One important activity during the conference was a seminar on cross-cultural communication, in which over twenty delegates from China and from regional countries attended, including Bahrain Foreign Ministry officials, the former Egyptian ambassador to China, and teachers of related majors from both the University of Bahrain and SHU to discuss issues that included how the initiative would benefit China’s relations with Bahrain.⁽⁶⁰⁾

Another important role played by Confucius institutes is in promoting the Chinese language across the region, eliciting considerable interest.⁽⁶¹⁾ Other institutes have also become involved in this effort. For instance, in 2015 the Chinese embassy in Qatar signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Translation and Interpreting Studies Faculty at Qatar’s Education City to collaborate in language teaching and cultural activities.⁽⁶²⁾ The deal has led to Chinese language classes being offered to the Qatari public. Indeed, the increasing interest in the Chinese language throughout the Gulf not only helps the implementation of the BRI in the region by raising people’s awareness of

(60) “Confucius Institute at University of Bahrain Holds First ‘Belt and Road’ International Seminar,” *Hanban News*, May 25, 2017, http://english.hanban.org/article/2017-05/25/content_687139.htm.

(61) Mimi Kirk, “Chinese Soft Power and Dubai’s Confucius Institute,” Middle East Institute (Washington, D.C.), 2015.

(62) Hamad bin Khalifa University: The Translation and Interpreting Institute (TII), “HBKU’s TII Signs Agreement with Chinese Embassy,” Feb. 20, 2015, <http://www.tii.qa/en/hbku%E2%80%99s-tii-signs-agreement-chinese-embassy-0>.

China, but by also improving communications among relevant stakeholders engaged with the initiative.

In addition to academic institutions, the role of academics should also be noted. In most cases, these intellectuals contribute to the promotion of the BRI and the dissemination of the Chinese Dream through their publications. Sun Degang of the Shanghai International Studies University and Yahia Zoubir of the Kedge Business School in France published a similar article in the same journal many years later, in which they stated, “Chinese and Arabs share similar dreams of achieving their respective national rejuvenation in the 21st century. As two great civilizations, the ‘Chinese Dream’ and the ‘Arab Dream’ share similarities.”⁽⁶³⁾

The academic interactions by institutions and individuals are not just uni-directional however. Academic institutions in the Gulf have increasingly published studies and held their own seminars on the BRI and the Chinese Dream. In May 2016, for example, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Qatar held a conference entitled, “The Arab World and China: Future Prospects of Relations with a Rising Power.”⁽⁶⁴⁾ There, the BRI and its significance to the region were discussed through a presentation entitled, “The Belt and Road and Sino-Arab Economic Interaction.” Kuwait University organized a similar conference in early 2017 entitled, “Sino-Kuwait Joint Effort for the Belt and Road Initiative,” which was co-hosted with the Chinese embassy in Kuwait. The conference examined how the BRI could bring positive changes to Kuwait and the wider Gulf. Some prominent Chinese figures also attended the event, including Wu Sike, special envoy to the Middle East, and Wang Di, Chinese ambassador to Kuwait.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Meanwhile

(63) Sun Degang Sun and Yahia Zoubir, “China-Arab States Strategic Partnership: Myth or Reality,” *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 8, no. 3 (2014): 98.

(64) “Forum Focuses on Future Prospects of Arab-Sino Relations,” *Gulf Times*, May 22, 2016, <http://www.gulf-times.com/story/494362/Forum-focuses-on-future-prospects-of-Arab-Sino-relations>.

(65) “Dr. Liu Rongxin Attends Seminar on Sino-Kuwait Joint Efforts for Belt and Road Initiative,” accessed Feb. 25, 2019, en.cdi.org.cn/component/k2/item/325-dr-liu-rongxin-attends-seminar-on-sino-kuwait-joint-efforts-for-belt-and-road-initiative.

in the UAE, the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research held a similar seminar in July 2018 entitled, “Prospects for UAE-Chinese Relations.” The conference, attended by the Chinese ambassador to the UAE, Ni Jian, discussed opportunities for the BRI in the region.⁽⁶⁶⁾

Aside from publishing studies and organizing conferences about the BRI, these regional institutions have also become interested in bolstering partnerships with Chinese institutions. In September 2017, UAE University concluded an agreement with Zhejiang University to cooperate in student exchanges and collaborative research and in academic activities such as courses and seminars.⁽⁶⁷⁾ Academics and public intellectuals in the Gulf have also increasingly engaged in promoting public debates on the BRI. For example, the GCC’s assistant general secretary, Abdel Aziz Aluwaisheg, wrote an article on the BRI for the Saudi-based newspaper *Arab News*, in which he stated that “the initiatives could usher in a new economic and political alliance between China and the rest of Asia, including the Middle East.”⁽⁶⁸⁾

Another example is Mohammed Selim, a lecturer at Kuwait University, who published a piece entitled, “The Chinese Dream: An Arab Perspective,” in which he asserted that there is a correlation between the Chinese Dream and the dreams of the people in the Gulf.⁽⁶⁹⁾ The emergence of pro-China intellectuals within the region is a vital moment in the effort behind the initiative, as regional actors are now not only supporting it, but also taking part in it. These actors have emerged due to China’s policy of extending of scholarships to Gulf students since the beginning of that nation’s internationalization in the Gulf in the 1990s

(66) Tariq Alfaham, “ECSSR Organises Seminar on ‘Prospects for UAE-Chinese Relations,’” Emirates News Agency, July 17, 2018, <http://wam.ae/en/details/1395302699384>.

(67) “Universities of China, UAE Sign MoU for Cooperation,” *Xinhua*, Sept. 14, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-09/14/c_136607370.htm.

(68) Abdel Aziz Aluwaisheg, “China, GCC Set to Talk the New ‘Silk Road,’” *Arab News*, Feb. 3, 2014, <http://www.arabnews.com/news/518966>.

(69) Mohammad Selim, “The Chinese Dream: An Arab Perspective,” China.org.cn, Dec. 6, 2013, http://www.china.org.cn/china/Chinese_dream_dialogue/2013-12/06/content_30821306.htm.

and 2000s. These scholarships are offered mainly by the China Scholarship Council (CSC), a nonprofit arm of the Chinese Ministry of Education that offers financial aid and scholarships to both Chinese and non-Chinese students to study overseas or in China. The CSC has worked with a variety of Gulf universities and ministries and has funded students from the region to study in China since the early years of that nation's presence in the Gulf.⁽⁷⁰⁾ Such efforts have been complemented by Chinese academic institutions, which participate annually in educational exhibitions across the region. These include the International Exhibition and Conference on Higher Education in Riyadh and the Dubai International Education Exhibition,⁽⁷¹⁾ which have led to more Gulf students becoming interested in studying in China.

When the BRI was introduced, Xi pledged to increase the number of scholarships to students from the countries along the silk routes.⁽⁷²⁾ Gulf students are included as recipients of this scholarship. As Xi announced in his speech at the Arab League headquarters in Cairo, his government intended to provide 10,000 scholarships and 10,000 training opportunities to Middle Eastern students.⁽⁷³⁾ The China-Oman Industrial Park at Duqm has also provided funding to the Omani government to sponsor scholarships for Omani students to study in China. The quantitative impact of the BRI-related scholarships, however, has not been clearly reported, although it is often stated that the number of students from the Gulf has been rising in the post-BRI-initiation period. In the last few years, many of the scholarship recipients have returned to the Gulf. As an example, in June 2018, the thirty-nine Omani students in the

(70) These scholarships are usually promoted through Chinese embassies in each Gulf state. As an example, see China Scholarship Council, "Introduction to Chinese Government Scholarships," Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Apr. 21, 2015, <http://sa.china-embassy.org/eng/zsgx/jyj/t1256389.htm>.

(71) Joseph Cheng, "China's Relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council States in a Divided Arab World," *China Review* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 35–64, 56.

(72) China National Development and Reform Commission, "Vision and Actions," 9

(73) "President Xi's Speech at Arab League Headquarters: Full Text," *China Daily*, Feb. 22, 2016, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2016xivisitmiddleeast/2016-01/22/content_23191229.htm.

first batch of recipients have all returned from vocational training at Ningxia Polytechnic to work at the Duqm industrial park.⁽⁷⁴⁾

This has resulted in the emergence of a group of people from across the GCC countries who are acquainted with Chinese politics, economics, and culture and are well-versed in the Chinese language. Even though not all are pursuing careers as academics, the experiences of living and studying in China have made these scholarship recipients very interested, not only in imitating the Chinese way of life, but also in educating their own public about China and what they have learned there.

Due to the increasing interest in China among politicians, intellectuals, and the general public, numerous universities in the Gulf have begun to offer China-related courses.⁽⁷⁵⁾ Qatar University, for example, now teaches classes on Chinese politics and philosophy in Arabic.⁽⁷⁶⁾ Other universities, such as Zayed University and New York University⁽⁷⁷⁾ in Abu Dhabi, also offer classes on Chinese language and politics.⁽⁷⁸⁾ Similarly, since mid-2016, Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in Oman has been teaching Chinese language courses.⁽⁷⁹⁾ It was also reported in mid-2014 that SQU planned to establish a Confucius

(74) "Spotlight: China, Oman Establish Industrial Park to Boost Bilateral Cooperation," *Xinhua*, Dec. 19, 2018. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-12/19/c_137683272.htm.

(75) China-related courses are also offered by several regional universities, such as Kuwait University, ("Modern and Contemporary History of Asia, Africa, or America"), the American University of Sharjah ("East Meets West: Colonial and Post-Colonial Encounters" and "East Asian Societies"), the University of Sharjah ("China in International Relations," "Foreign Policy of Great Powers," and "East Asian Politics"), and King Saud University in Saudi Arabia ("Mongols and Islamic Orient" and "Islamic Orient"). These are my own observations from the universities' websites.

(76) At Qatar University, the most important course is "Chinese Society and Politics in the 21st Century." However, other general courses, such as "Freshman Seminar," "Special Topics," and "Area Studies," often focus on China. When I took these courses in the final year of my undergraduate studies, they were all concentrated on China. In my interviews, some students informed me that in the subsequent three years, these courses have continued to focus on China.

(77) New York University also offers an undergraduate minor in Chinese.

(78) China-related courses offered at Zayed University include "Foreign Policy of Emerging Powers" and "East Asia." At New York University in Abu Dhabi, the courses include "Asian Borderland," "Empires and Imperialism in East Asia," and "Environmental History of China."

(79) "SQU to Offer Chinese Language Course," Sultan Qaboos University, Sept 20, 2016, <https://www.squ.edu.om/ic/News-Page/ArticleID/4294/SQU-to-Offer-Chinese-Language-Course>.

Institute branch. In July 2018, the UAE Ministry of Education announced that it would begin offering Chinese classes in one hundred schools, and Saudi Arabia and China also agreed in 2019 to include Chinese language in the curriculum at all stages of education in Saudi schools and universities.⁽⁸⁰⁾

Furthermore, there is also an increasing trend among these universities to hire scholars who are China specialists.⁽⁸¹⁾ For example, Jonathan Fulton, whose doctoral thesis and current research focus on China-Gulf relations and the BRI, is now teaching various courses on Chinese foreign policy at Zayed University.⁽⁸²⁾ Another example is Chai Shaojin, a Chinese academic from Northwest China, who is now teaching at several universities in the UAE while working as a senior research fellow at the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Community Development of the UAE.⁽⁸³⁾ These academics have been taking an active part in increasing awareness about China and the BRI through their writings as well as participation in public discussions about China and the initiative.⁽⁸⁴⁾

Cultural Exchanges

The “Vision and Action” document emphasizes “cultural exchanges” as a crucial part of the initiative’s implementation.⁽⁸⁵⁾ These cultural exchanges have become a crucial platform for the promotion of the BRI and the mobilization

(80) Weida Li, “UAE to Run Chinese Language Classes in 100 Schools Next Year,” *Gbtimes* (UAE), Aug. 1, 2018, <https://gbtimes.com/uae-to-run-chinese-language-classes-in-100-schools-next-year>.

(81) Examples include Imad Mansour, who has published and spoken about China and its foreign policy in the region, and Jacqueline Armijo.

(82) Jonathan Fulton is an assistant professor of political science at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, UAE. His teaching and research interests focus on China’s relations with the Gulf countries. He is the author of *China’s Relations with the Gulf Monarchies* (London: Routledge, 2018) and the coauthor, with Li-Chen Sim, of *External Powers and the Gulf Monarchies* (London: Routledge, 2019).

(83) Chai Shaojin was born in Northwest China and attended college in Beijing before he received his PhD from the University of Notre Dame. He is currently based in Dubai, where he serves as a senior research fellow in the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Community Development in the UAE.

(84) Personal interview with Jonathan Fulton in 2017, prior to the publication of the books listed in note 86.

(85) China National Development and Reform Commission, “Vision and Actions.”

of consent among Gulf societies. One such effort took place in late 2016, when the CPC partnered with Qatar to organize the 2016 Year of Culture in Doha (such events are called “culture years” in “Vision and Action”).⁽⁸⁶⁾ At the event, which I personally attended, efforts to increase people’s awareness of China and the historic Silk Road were very noticeable. One notable highlight was the exhibition, “Silks from the Silk Road,” which showcased one hundred items made of silk showcasing the history of silk and its cultural significance for relations between China and the Arab world.⁽⁸⁷⁾ A similar event was held in Kuwait in March 2018, where the Chinese embassy in Kuwait partnered with the National Council for Culture, Arts, and Letters of Kuwait to organize a cultural performance titled, “Splendid China.”⁽⁸⁸⁾ During the event, dancers, artists, and acrobats from Sichuan Vocational College of Art staged performances intended to “bridge better understandings among the younger generation in Kuwait about China.”⁽⁸⁹⁾

Confucius institutes also play a part in the effort to increase the awareness of the Gulf peoples through cultural events. In May 2016, for example, the Confucius institute in Bahrain organized a China Cultural Week.⁽⁹⁰⁾ The event was intended to promote Chinese culture among the people of the Gulf. Activities during the event included an exhibition of Chinese paintings, martial arts, and foods and a conference on Chinese culture and medicine. Such events have also been organized in other parts of the Gulf, including in Saudi Arabia, where previously such activities were seen as contradicting

(86) Ibid.

(87) Chen Nan, “China and Qatar Launch a Series of Cultural Events,” *China Daily*, Jan. 25, 2016, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/culture/2016-01/25/content_23226653.htm.

(88) “Cultural Performance ‘Splendid China’ Staged in Kuwait City, Kuwait,” *Xinhua*, Mar. 14, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/14/c_137037287_2.htm.

(89) “Splendid China,” *Arab Times*, Mar. 13, 2018, <https://www.pressreader.com/kuwait/arab-times/20180313/282883731239250>.

(90) Ren Xiao, “China as an Institution-builder: The Case of the AIIB,” *Pacific Review* 29, no. 3 (2016): 435–442, 437.

religious and cultural values. As an example, in May 2018, a Chinese Spring Festival was held at King Fahad Cultural Center in Riyadh.⁽⁹¹⁾ The event, which included a showcase of the Lion Dance, the Foshan Dragon, and martial arts demonstrations was attended by the former Chinese ambassador to Saudi Arabia, Li Huaxin, and other Chinese diplomats.⁽⁹²⁾ Li explained the importance of this event in legitimizing Chinese interests: “These cultural events are very important to create cultural knowledge, traditions and a friendly relationship between the two countries. Both have a rich culture, traditions, and history, and by introducing that it will create a strong relationship to serve the common interests of the two countries.”⁽⁹³⁾ Indeed, cultural activities have played a crucial role in the legitimizing effort behind the BRI. In a society where the awareness of China remains limited, these cultural activities are crucial.

Other entities have also played a role in these cultural strategies. Dragon Mart (also known as Dragon City) in Bahrain, for example, held a Chinese Folk Arts Exhibition in July 2016, which displayed Chinese painting, calligraphy, and handicrafts.⁽⁹⁴⁾ Several organizations that were formed in the early period of China’s internationalization have also taken part. Naveed Ahmad,⁽⁹⁵⁾ for example, reported that the Kuwaiti-Chinese Friendship Association has been active in organizing cultural activities, celebrating Chinese New Year, and exchanging cultural delegations. These cultural efforts have also encouraged regional actors and institutions to get involved as well. For example, Chinese Spring Festivals and New Year events have been held by New York University

(91) Lojien Ben Gassem, “Chinese Culture Takes Center Stage at Spring Festival Show in Riyadh,” *Arab News*, May 12, 2018, <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1301116/saudi-arabia>.

(92) *Ibid.*

(93) *Ibid.*

(94) “Dragon City to Host a Chinese Folk Arts Exhibition,” *Trade Arabia* (Bahrain), July 17, 2016, http://www.tradearabia.com/news/TTN_310524.html.

(95) Naveed Ahmad, “China’s Giant Leap towards the GCC,” *Al Araby*, Jan. 7, 2016, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2016/1/7/chinas-giant-leap-towards-the-gcc>.

in Abu Dhabi, the Dubai Mall, Dragon Mart, and various international airports across the region.⁽⁹⁶⁾

One important cultural event occurred during Xi Jinping's visit to the UAE in July 2018. The UAE's Ministry of Culture and Knowledge Development held a UAE-China Week during July 17–24, 2018, which featured several China-related activities such as a Chinese Film Week and Chinese Book Exhibition Week. In The same week, there were also daily exhibitions featuring traditional Chinese musical performances and Chinese plays. Noora Mohammad Al-Kaabi, the country's Minister of Tourism, asserted that the event aimed to banish misconceptions between the two nations. After the event, it was also announced that a UAE-China Week would be held annually.⁽⁹⁷⁾ It is important to note that during such events and on other China-related occasions, many public places in major Gulf cities have increasingly been decorated with Chinese-related ornaments.⁽⁹⁸⁾ These cultural activities have not only contributed to the efforts to increase awareness about China in the Gulf, they also highlight the fact that people in the region have been increasingly participating in these cultural efforts.

(96) "NYUAD Chinese Cultural Club Hosts Lunar New Year Celebration," New York University Abu Dhabi, Feb. 17, 2013, <https://nyuad.nyu.edu/en/news/latest-news/community-life/2013/february/nyuad-chinese-cultural-club-hosts-lunar-new-year-celebration.html>; Janice de Leon, "Dragon Mart, Burj Al Arab Gear up for Chinese New Year," *Gulf News*, Feb. 4, 2016, <http://gulfnews.com/news/uae/society/dragon-mart-burj-al-arab-gear-up-for-chinese-new-year-1.1665819>; "China and Qatar Cultural Year Launches in Doha," *China Daily*, Jan. 26, 2016, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/culture/2016-01/26/content_23250010.htm; Faisal Masudi, "Thousands Enjoy Chinese New Year Parade in Dubai," *Gulf News*, Feb. 16, 2018, <https://gulfnews.com/news/uae/culture/thousands-enjoy-chinese-new-year-parade-in-dubai-1.2174584>.

(97) Sami Zaatari, "UAE-China Week Kicks off in Abu Dhabi," *Gulf Times*, July 17, 2018, <https://gulfnews.com/news/uae/culture/uae-china-week-kicks-off-in-abu-dhabi-1.2253125>.

(98) Yao Kuangyi, "China's New Diplomatic Moves in the Middle East," *China International Studies* 6 (2014): 27–45; *Gulf Times*, "Qatar Airways Serving Special Menu to Celebrate Chinese New Year," Jan. 25, 2017, <http://www2.gulf-times.com/story/530422/Qatar-Airways-serving-special-menu-to-celebrate-Ch>.

Knowing Little about China: The Limits of the Legitimizing Efforts

Despite these efforts, strategies in socializing the BRI and in gaining the social support of the regional countries continue to encounter obstacles. Societies in the Gulf continue to have very little awareness of China, let alone the BRI or the Chinese Dream. On an anecdotal basis for example, in one class at Qatar University that I was allowed to observe during field research, none of the students was able to name the Chinese president or any other Chinese figure besides Jet Li or Jackie Chan.⁽⁹⁹⁾

Besides limited knowledge of China among Gulf society, there are three other issues that limit the appeal of the BRI in the region. First, there is a lack of a unified narrative regarding the initiative's visions and details at both political and entrepreneurial levels. The limited, though clearly defined, set of guidelines for the BRI is believed to suit China's pragmatic approach and allow the CPC to easily change plans during the implementation process, whenever new opportunities arise.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ However, this approach, alongside the lack of rhetoric that clearly spells out its foreign policy, often generates ambiguities for many stakeholders, including those in the GCC countries. This is also the case with the Chinese Dream as the legitimizing idea of the initiative. There is no precise meaning of the Chinese Dream. As Callahan proposes, distinct from the previous ideologies propagated by Chinese leadership to articulate their interests and ideals, Xi's Chinese Dream is historically encompassing and multilayered, which allows for diverse interpretations, depending on the interests of the interpreters.⁽¹⁰¹⁾ In an interview, Ben Simpfendorfer, founder and CEO of Silk Road Associates, also agrees that the ambiguity of the BRI

(99) This was on Dec. 21, 2016.

(100) Yu Jie, "The Belt and Road Initiative: Domestic Interests, Bureaucratic Politics, and the EU-China Relations," *Asia Europe Journal* 16, no. 3 (Sept. 2018): 223–236, 223.

(101) William A. Callahan, "China 2035: From the China Dream to the World Dream," *Global Affairs* 2, no. 3 (2016): 247–258, 250.

and the Chinese Dream causes confusion among stakeholders and makes it difficult for regional societies to fully understand the initiative.⁽¹⁰²⁾

Second, as has been noted by Joseph Cheng, a scholar on Sino-Middle East relations, in the past few years, regional public opinion on China has not been very positive. This has resulted in some factions within society having negative perceptions of the BRI, and thus the Chinese Dream. The GCC elites in general want a change in the region's existing geopolitical situation, and the support of a nontraditional emerging regional player, which is not associated with the current U.S. hegemony, is welcomed. China's relatively active cultural diplomacy, its support of the Gulf's stances over various regional issues, its emphasis on its unique historical and cultural relationship with the Arab world, and the principles it upholds, such as noninterference, have together generated a favorable reception among the Gulf's elites.⁽¹⁰³⁾ However, the Gulf's civil societies have expressed some pessimism and skepticism regarding China's increasing role in the region. As Cheng reports, there is an increasing perception of a "China threat" within Gulf societies.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ People there are concerned that the history of the relationship between the region and Western hegemonies could be repeated between themselves and China.

Such a threat has been perceived in different ways. Some view Chinese state capitalism in the region as constituting neocolonialism.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ Furthermore, in view of the weak industrial base in the Gulf, the inflow of manufactured products from China is regarded as a possible threat to the development of local industries. This economic situation is exacerbated by the fact that some Chinese businesses in the region frequently violate local laws on the labor

(102) Personal interview with Ben Simpfendorfer in 2016 in Hong Kong.

(103) Cheng, "China's Relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council," 53.

(104) *Ibid.*, 56.

(105) A second personal phone interview with Jacqueline Armijo in 2016.

force, environmental protection, and so on, which contributes to the negative image of China.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ Segments of the population in the region are also afraid of the threat that China's socialist culture may pose to local Islamic culture and resent the treatment of the Muslims in China, especially in the case of Xinjiang, by the Chinese authorities.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ In the social arena, there are also rising resentments against the phenomenon of the "ugly Chinese". As more Chinese are moving to the Gulf to settle and engage in economic and other activities, devout Muslims have expressed a dislike of some of their conduct, as it involves drinking alcohol, engaging in prostitution, exhibiting careless dressing habits, and other matters, which they consider as disrespectful of the local culture; all this has led to an increasingly negative perception of China in the Gulf.⁽¹⁰⁸⁾

To illustrate, dated research by Mohammed Al-Sudairi, entitled "China in the Eyes of the Saudi Media," reveals that media commentaries in Saudi Arabia as a whole have demonstrated new trends of skepticism and pessimism concerning China.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ The article asserts that these phenomena are grounded in Western criticism of issues such as China's poor human rights record, the old Cold War perceptions of Communist China in Western countries, and negative observations about the unsatisfactory quality of Chinese products, the Xinjiang riots, and Chinese vetoes on the Syrian issue at the UN Security Council. Cheng's more recent research discovered that these trends are also widespread within the media of other GCC countries.⁽¹¹⁰⁾ This phenomenon is still prevalent and presents an obstacle to the gaining of social support of regional society for the BRI.

(106) *Ibid.*

(107) *Ibid.*

(108) Cheng, "China's Relations," 56.

(109) Mohammed Al-Sudairi, "China in the Eyes of the Saudi Media," Gulf Research Center (Jeddah), Feb. 2013, 32.

(110) Cheng, "China's Relations," 54.

The third reason as to why the BRI's implementation has been impeded is that the efforts discussed previously in this report have still been limited, not only in socializing and legitimizing the BRI, but also in tackling the prevalent negative perceptions of China in the region. As Fulton argues, although these efforts have been relatively successful at the elite level, the strategies to penetrate regional societies have been minimal.⁽¹¹¹⁾ The Chinese party-state has acknowledged the inadequacy of efforts to gain acceptance by Gulf civil society; however, their responses tend to concentrate on propaganda attempts instead of genuine understanding. As stated by Qian Xiaoqian, the deputy head of the State Council Information Office: “compared with other aspects of China-Arab relations, especially political and economic dimensions, the communication of media between China and Arabians [lags far] behind.”⁽¹¹²⁾

To date, there are only limited reports on the development of China's presence in the Gulf that reflect the positive and notable changes it has had upon people's lives there. News about history, culture, and even the travel industries in both China and the Gulf remain infrequent as well. Furthermore, as discussed in the previous section, the effort of the media is only carried out in certain parts of the GCC – some countries are not included in that media coverage. Endeavors to penetrate regional television, such as USILK or the establishment of a CGTN Arabic, are only carried out in one or two regional countries. Published media is even more limited. The monthly magazine, known as *Al-Sin Al-Yawm*, which has a regional office in Cairo, is a slick tabloid of eighty pages with content targeted to an Arab audience.⁽¹¹³⁾ Each issue has a section entitled, “We're All East,” which highlights joint

(111) Fulton interview.

(112) Cheng, “China's Relations,” 53.

(113) Jon Alterman, “China's Soft Power in the Middle East,” in *Chinese Soft Power and Its Implications for the United States*, edited by Andrew C. Kuchnis, Bonnie S. Glaser, and Edward C. Chow (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2009), 63–76.

activities between Arabs and Chinese, as well as a section on Chinese life (“A Changing Society”), finances, and politics. It also looks at the story of the Arab community in China with a section titled, “In a Coffeehouse on a Chinese Street.”⁽¹¹⁴⁾ While *Al-Sin Al-Yawm* is, in many ways, an impressive effort to reach out to Middle East society, this is the only Chinese magazine in Arabic and it has no market sales network outside of Egypt; hence, its impact on the Gulf is limited.⁽¹¹⁵⁾

Radio broadcasts by China Radio International in Arabic actually started in the 1960s and reached the GCC several decades ago.⁽¹¹⁶⁾ However, its impact has been in decline since the 1990s because of competition from satellite television, which has been increasingly popular in the region. Furthermore, this broadcast is still transmitted by shortwave, and the reception is inconsistent and frequently of a low quality.⁽¹¹⁷⁾ These examples demonstrate the limitations facing China’s outreach in the region and highlight how much more effective American efforts have been. *Al-Sin Al-Yawm* pales in comparison to high-quality lifestyle magazines in the United States.⁽¹¹⁸⁾ This demonstrates the obstacles confronting Chinese strategies to increase awareness in the Gulf about the country and the BRI initiative and to also address the negative perceptions of China found in the region.

These inadequacies are also reflected in educational efforts. For example, although the number of Gulf students studying in China is increasing, the majority are not interested in Chinese politics, culture, or foreign policies. As explained by Tim Niblock, a professor of Middle East Studies, “so far, the educational and human-resources exchanges have been geared to short-

(114) Ibid, 74.

(115) Ibid, 74.

(116) Ibid, 74.

(117) Cheng, “China’s Relations,” 55.

(118) Alterman, “China’s Soft Power,” 74.

term and practical needs, with most students from the Gulf studying technical courses rather than engaging with China's culture and history."⁽¹¹⁹⁾ In an interview, Al-Sudairi affirmed that most of the Gulf students in China are majoring in engineering and natural science, rather than social science, a situation that does not contribute significantly to the efforts in legitimizing the BRI.⁽¹²⁰⁾ Additionally, although they are starting to be organized, public conferences and seminars on the BRI in the Gulf are still relatively limited. Besides not being widely organized across the region, such seminars and conferences remain focused on China's relations with the region or socializing the BRI in general, with no further effort to foster consensus. In a public talk on China-Gulf relations that I attended in Qatar, the information that was shared was mainly basic information on the BRI, and there was no discussion of how its development would benefit the region.

The efforts to teach the Chinese language in the GCC countries are also limited when compared to more ambitious endeavors by the U.S. Agency for International Development or the British Council, which directly teach English and other subjects to approximately 20,000 to 25,000 people in the Middle East every year.⁽¹²¹⁾ Although several regional institutions have begun to offer China-related courses, this phenomenon is not yet a common one across the Gulf. The same goes for Confucius institutes, with only two of the GCC states hosting these entities, causing China's educational efforts to be unevenly implemented across the region. Furthermore, Cheng also reported that since the launch of the CASCF, numerous contracts have been drawn up for the publication of Chinese books translated into Arabic language, but the implementation remains unsatisfactory.

(119) Wagdy Sawahel, "Seeking Soft Power, China Expands Activities in Arab Higher Education," *Al-Fanar Media* (London), Feb. 1, 2016, <https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2016/02/seeking-soft-power-china-expands-activities-in-arab-higer/>.

(120) Personal interview with Al-Sudairi in 2016 through e-mail.

(121) Alterman, "China's Soft Power," 73.

Several observers have affirmed that political elites in Beijing are well aware of these inadequacies and are planning to make a greater effort, especially tied to the introduction of the BRI. This is also because there is still a lack of expertise on the Gulf region within policy-making circles in China. Yu Jie has stated that, unlike the situation in Washington D.C., regional studies have never been taken seriously by the CPC, which has resulted in the limited presence of experts on the Gulf and the Middle East within the Party. Yu reported that the CPC has less than twenty Central Asia and Middle East experts who are closely following the region. Most of them do not even have direct access to key state officials, influential academics, or business leaders, and many are unable to even read, much less speak, Arabic. Only a few have ever traveled to the region for research. As a result, much of their existing research is based on arbitrary collections of evidence instead of systematic analyses of the target countries, which makes China's policy-making process concerning the Gulf badly informed.⁽¹²²⁾

The same goes for cultural endeavors. It cannot be ignored that cultural efforts have contributed to the socialization of the BRI among the GCC countries. With these efforts, regional societies have become increasingly aware of China and its cultures. It is, nonetheless, important to note that popular culture has not been utilized effectively. Chinese strategies are still limited, nor are they being pursued evenly across the region.

Based on this analysis, it can be argued that the legitimizing efforts carried out behind the implementation of the BRI in the Gulf still face limitations. In the process of gaining support from the GCC countries, there is a need to enhance the various strategies to not only increase consciousness about China, and the BRI, but also counter the prevalent negative perceptions toward China in the Gulf. Having said that, these efforts, however limited, still provide

(122) Yu, "The Belt and Road Initiative," 223.

evidence that the implementation of the BRI is not restricted to the economic sphere, but is also involved with legitimizing strategies. If these strategies are maintained and improved, it is possible that the BRI will find stronger traction within the Gulf countries in the future. This, however, will be a long and arduous process, reliant not only on how these efforts evolve, but also to a great extent on the ability to tackle the prevalent negative perceptions of China in the region. As Xi himself stated, “preparatory work must be done. One must not worry about it taking too long, for the work will be accomplished in the fullness of time.”⁽¹²³⁾

(123) Xi, “Full text of Chinese President’s Signed Article.”

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