

CHINA CROSSROADS

Saturday, June 12th, 2021, 15:30 – 17:00

China's Soft Power Initiatives in the Middle East

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Over the past 15 years Gulf – China relations have grown exponentially and involved all manner of business, energy, trade, political, and cultural relations. As these two regions of major economic power draw away from traditional Western financial and political centers of power, and increasingly develop networks with each other across Asia, various cultural projects are playing an increasingly important role. From major Chinese art exhibits in Qatar, to the UAE's recent decision to offer Chinese language lessons in K-12 schools across the country, cultural relations are developing in a range of unprecedented and influential ways. The three major Gulf countries, Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, have each taken the lead in different dimensions of cultural relations with China: Qatar, with regard to art and museums; the UAE with regard to primary and secondary school Chinese language initiatives; and Saudi with regard to higher education projects in the kingdom, as well as sending Saudi students to complete their university training in China. In addition, all three of these countries have also developed a range of major joint scientific research projects with China, in fields ranging from alternative forms of energy, to the development of salt-water rice hybrid crops, and the use of Traditional Chinese Medicine to treat some of the most common health problems facing Gulf residents today. These diverse cultural initiatives are indicative of both the increasingly important economic and strategic ties between China and the Gulf, as well as efforts to shift the perennial East-West gaze to an East-East gaze.

[Jacqueline Armijo](#) is Visiting Associate Professor of History at NYU Shanghai. Her research focuses on China's use of education and research initiatives to strengthen regional relationships related to the Belt and Road Initiative across Asia. Prior to NYU Shanghai, she taught at the Asian University for Women in Bangladesh, Qatar University, Zayed University (UAE), and Stanford University. In addition to living for more than six years in China, where she carried out extensive fieldwork in Yunnan, she has also lived in the Gulf region for 13 years. She holds a PhD in Inner Asian and Altaic Studies from Harvard University.

[China Crossroads](#) hosts talks on all topics related to China, including business, foreign policy, and other areas as they relate to China, the idea being that China is both already a "crossroads" of the world and itself at a "crossroads" in terms of its future global influence. For more information, contact Frank Tsai at editor@shanghai-review.org.