

Description

The increasing engagement of Iran towards China is nothing but a major issue in the Gulf region. Yet, despite this, GCC countries have been cooperating with China when talking about trade, investments, politics, and even culture.

In this podcast, We are joined by Mohammed Al-Sudairi, a Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Asian Studies Program at KFCRIS. Mohammed and Jonathan talked about the political view of GCC towards China, the relationship of GCC countries with China in terms of people, culture, and businesses, and the competition narrative of the two countries, the USA and China in the region.

Key Takeaways

- The political perspective of GCC countries toward China
- The early diplomatic ties of some GCC countries with China
- Oman and Kuwait's early relations with China suddenly become passive.
- Chinese investments moving to other countries due to bad politics
- The Sino-Arab citizens assimilate the culture and life of Arab people
- Competition narrative of US and China in GCC
- Impression of Gulf people towards China
- The Saudi citizens trying to live in the Mainland China

Quotes

Energy has been the main catalyst for this orientation between GCC and China - Mohammed

There is solidified imagery about China as a potential alternative to the U.S. - Mohammed

A lot of these individuals wrote about their experiences and depicted China as this great liberatory power. - Mohammed

Featured in this Episode

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Transcript

Jonathan Fulton: Welcome to the China Mina podcast. I'm your host, Jonathan Fulton, a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and political scientist outside University and Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. If you look at the headlines, China's relationship with Iran is a major issue in the Gulf region. But if you look at the trade, investment contracting data, expatriate populations, and political and cultural cooperation, you'll see that China's relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council GCC are far more substantial. The GCC consists of the six

Gulf monarchies Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. And if you've been watching in recent years, you've noticed that there has been a lot of meaningful engagement with China from this side of the Gulf. To tell us more about China's GCC relations. I'm happy to speak today with Dr. Mohammed Al-Sudairi. Mohammed is a senior research fellow and head of the Asian Studies Program at the King Faisal Center for Research in Islamic Studies in Riyadh, and a postdoctoral fellow at the Hong Kong Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Hong Kong. His research interests encompass Sino, and Middle Eastern relations, Islamic and leftist connections between East Asia and the Arab world, and Chinese politics. Mohammed, welcome to the show.

Mohammed Al-Sudairi: Thank you for having me, Jonathan.

Jonathan Fulton: Of course, I've been looking forward to this. So, Mohammed, I'd just like to start with a brief overview. How do you see the GCC country's orientation toward China? Do you see uniformity or certain countries being more or less engaged?

Mohammed Al-Sudairi: The way I would describe it is that these countries, starting from the late 1980s onwards for different economic reasons, have been in a slow process of orienting themselves towards China and putting greater emphasis on that relationship. Of course, energy has been the main catalyst for this orientation, and arguably it's not just limited to China itself. I mean, look at this process, actually, one could argue goes back to the 1970s in relation to South Korea, and the Republic of China, namely Taiwan and Japan, which had become major importers of Gulf oil after 1973. And China's economic ascent in the 1980s and 1990s has really put it at the center stage of that process. And as a result of this growing economic dynamic, these various states of the GCC had formulated their own eastward or Easternization foreign policies that have put greater weight on developing political ties, building on these economic connections. Now, while all of them have this general orientation, we see that some states have managed to develop far more sophisticated institutions and instruments in relation to this engagement than others. I would say that based on my own sort of reading and assessment and I'd be very interested to hear your own views on this, I would say that probably the United

Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have been the most in terms of trying to create substantive institutional bonds, whether they are in terms of creating cooperative committees at the highest level to try and facilitate coordination between different ministries. Although arguably this is a tool that they have used many times, including with the Republic of China, when it was still the only recognized China by Saudi Arabia in the 1980s. And they've also appointed key figures to essentially establish more direct communication between the top leadership in both places. You don't see that in the case of, say, Oman or Kuwait. And I think that has more to do with just simply the way in which the current foreign policy-making process is and, you know, sort of the way in which the domestic politics shapes their engagements with other actors, you know, they don't have, I would say, the same dynamism that we see in the context of the UAE and Saudi at this current moment. But, yes, so to put it simply, there is an overall orientation, but some actors are far more proactive in their institutional building of trying to formalize the relationship with China.

Jonathan Fulton: That's great. You know, there are a couple of points you made. The first is I don't know if you saw, but the first episode we did was with Prof. Anusha Shami, and that was one of the points he was talking about was that this isn't just a matter of China and Gulf countries are China and Iran in his episode. But, you know, a broader Asianization, or Easternization process where you see these dynamic economies and societies all coming together in a lot of meaningful ways. So I think, yeah, you're right. This does seem to be part of a bigger story. And I do agree with your assessment. I think the Saudi and the Emirati side certainly seem to have been the I don't know if you'd say the early adopters or the bigger players in engaging with China. And I think that you see that from trying to say that, when China uses this partnership diplomacy, those two countries are at the highest level. And I think that's because Saudi Arabia offers a lot more to China, you know, with its energy relationship. Of course, it's its enormous economy, but also its central role in global Islam and its geographic endowments. Having the Red Sea and the Gulf Coast lines is a pretty unique attribute in the UAE with its logistics hub. And it's very dynamic in a global society. These two countries seem to offer a lot more to China, the region, than the other countries you mentioned. So I would agree. I think that's where you see the bigger engagement.

Mohammed Al-Sudairi: Yeah. Although I would say that, you know, it's interesting when you think of it historically because Kuwait and Oman among the GCC states were the earliest to normalize diplomatic ties with China, and in fact, if you look at the types of engagement that were taking place in the context of GCC China relations, they were the most active actors. I mean, there's a lot, I think, that needs to be done in terms of looking at what Kuwaiti institutions, Kuwaiti companies were doing. I mean, they were putting a lot of money into the early infrastructural developments in China, the early charity outreach, and the Islamic outreach. In the Chinese context, a lot of the big iconic cultural events and engagements between the two sides were, in fact, carried out by Oman, like, for example, the very famous vessel that had gone from Oman and traveled all the way or journeyed all the way to Guangzhou in 1981. It was done as a way to symbolize sort of the civilizational engagements between China and the Arabian Peninsula. So it's interesting to see how different actors phase out and new actors really come to the fore.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah, I agree. And you know, it's interesting because like I said, if you've been watching this over the longer arc, you know, in 2017, around that period, there were a lot of big stories about China, Oman, you know, that Tacoma's going to be this flagship project driving the two. And China made a tremendous loan to Moniz in August of that year. And then things kind of cooled off. And then, you know, in 2019, there were a lot of stories out of Kuwait about why the Harrier, this Silk City project, and then that kind of cooled off as well. And I wondered, you know, do you think this is about domestic political issues? Is it about personalities or decisions? Do you have any insight into why these brief bursts kind of cooled quickly?

Mohammed Al-Sudairi: Yeah, I think I mean, as I understand them and I would actually include other cases even beyond the Gulf like I'm thinking about Iran and the 25-year agreement or in the case of Syria and the process of reconstruction there. I think what has happened is that in the last ten, 15 years, as China's economic footprint has grown, there has solidified this imaginary about China as a potential alternative to the U.S., as you know, a very wealthy, capable power that's able to address the economic problems of the region in substantive ways. You know, unlimited capital, essentially. And so what has happened at the local level in many

places is that you've had different officials try to frame various projects that they're carrying out and putting sort of a China tag onto it. You know, for example, in relation to Duan, you're talking about a project that precedes the Belt and Road Initiative. And the same actually is applicable to Silk City and Kuwait. I mean, that's sort of a renaming that they have done to repackage it and sell it to Chinese actors. Right. And then they've invited the National Development and Reform Commission to come in and visit Chinese companies. But as you can see in a lot of these instances, the expectations about sort of how Chinese capital will be transformative have not necessarily materialized in the ways local actors wanted. And I think that has a lot to do with the fact that a lot of people are buying much into the narrative about China's sort of economic role in the region. Right. And the realities of Chinese capital. I mean, most Chinese investment globally, if you look at it pre-COVID, was something to the tune of around 130, 150 billion U.S. dollars a year. The vast majority of that money was going to OECD countries. I mean, the Middle East and African states were only capturing something in the realm of 2 to 3%. So in a lot of ways, these incidents are more reflections of exaggerated hopes and aspirations at the local level than they are a reading of the actual realities about China and its engagement with the region.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah, I think that's a really good point. You know, we see a lot of hype, a lot of big MoU signed and I think that often reflects maybe a lack of awareness on both sides. I mean, as you said, Duqm is something that the Omanis have been trying to find FDI for a very long time. And I think not just in the Gulf, but, you know, with Gwadar and Pakistan, you know, a local agency, local governments will say, look, China's got this ambitious project and we have something we've been wanting to fund for a long time. There's a synergy that we can take advantage of. But at the same time, maybe the lack of awareness of realities on the ground for Chinese state-owned enterprises or for local agencies not knowing how to cooperate with China on some of these things, maybe it just doesn't take off the way that it's expected.

Mohammed Al-Sudairi: You know, and it's typically, you know, you also have questions about corruption. There are also calculations about profitability that may impede Chinese actors from entering into these projects. I mean, all of these things shape the nature of their engagement. I mean, this idea that the Chinese state looks at the region as part of a big global strategic

chessboard and then issues commands to companies and enterprises, and capital to move in certain directions. Is an overly simplified understanding of China and its global engagement.

Jonathan Fulton: Sure you've got Chinese you know, commercial actors who are looking at you know, an under-exploited market someplace where they can make some money quickly. And I know that talking with the Chinese rep who'd been in Oman for a while, he said that they had cooled to the local environment pretty quickly because they just weren't getting the contracts and thought they were getting. Oman's economic situation was not as strong as it hoped it would be, and a lot of companies were packing up and moving to Dubai or to Saudi, or wherever. So, you know, I think I think it's natural as they, you know, get a little more experienced in the region. You're going to see these ebbs and flows and, you know, the shifting of capital and shifting resources to different places.

Mohammed Al-Sudairi: Exactly. I mean, this is also the case with the Chinese business networks in the UAE. Right. I mean, for a long time, they've positioned themselves essentially as a hub for a lot of, you know, basic Chinese products and consumables to the region. And that model, embodied in Dragon March, was quite successful, especially in the early 2000s and into maybe the 2010s. But that model kind of reached a plateau. And what we saw is that a lot of these local business networks began to move into other places in the Gulf and essentially replicated the Dragon Mart model. Right. So I met a lot of Chinese businessmen from Zhejiang, for example, Fujian who were in Bahrain as well as in Saudi, who had moved from the UAE because it had become slim pickings over there. But they weren't really as successful either in those places. Right. Because of the way in which the consumption patterns are changing, people are now using more electronic markets to purchase a lot of their home products. So, yeah, there are a lot of interesting changes happening.

Jonathan Fulton: There are. And this is a research project I'd love to see somebody put together. You know, when you saw all of the movement into Oman, what you saw was a lot of the folks from the Chinese side were coming from Ningxia. And then, you know, in 2017, there's a lot of movement here in Abu Dhabi and a lot of these people are coming from Guangzhou and

Dubai. It seems to be dominated by Fujian and Wenzhou. I think what you see is a lot of regional consortiums or networks. I mean, you kept using this word network, and I think that's what you see as these Chinese business networks come together, work together, you know, succeed together. Do you see that in Saudi as well? Do you see a regional representation that you find in Saudi more, more frequently than, you know, in other parts of the peninsula?

Mohammed Al-Sudairi: I have not had the opportunity to really look at the new Chinese sort of diaspora community that has come to settle in Saudi from 1990 onwards. The only communities that I've engaged with were Chinese who had taken on Saudi citizenship, and a lot of them were people who came from Qinghai, Gansu, some Ningxia, and a few other places in China. And a lot of them are the descendants of people who had fled from those regions during the communist takeover. And a lot of them settled in my own hometown of Jordan, but an even larger number had settled in (inaudible) which is up in the months that I want mountains very cold. And in fact, even though the landscape kind of looks like Gansu a bit arid, the weather is pleasant and there's a bit of vegetation. And these, you know, communities from the late 1980s and into the 1990s as normalization was picking up. They were given Fast-Track visas to revisit their relatives in the Northwest, and some of them entered into business and, you know, sort of acted as middlemen traders between China and Saudi. But I think, you know, their sort of importance and relevance in the context of Sino-Saudi economic engagement is quite small, and I think it has continued to downsize with time. Right. They were certainly useful at a certain moment and there were maybe some united front impulses. But yeah, I think that's gone now.

Jonathan Fulton: So when I was doing my Ph.D., I read about these, you know, this Chinese community in Jeddah, you know, and these classic works by Louie and Craig Harrison Uttoxeter had written about them, but I didn't realize that you'd actually spent time talking with these people. I mean, have they fully assimilated Saudis now, or do they still maintain kind of a deep Chinese identity?

Mohammed Al-Sudairi: Well, there's a great scholar by the name of Dr. Janis Haju Jong, Korean scholar who got her Ph.D. from Duke University. And she did fieldwork actually on the

Chinese community in the Hejaz. And I'm hoping and in fact, I do believe that she is converting her thesis into a book film. But I mean, she was very kind enough to introduce me to a lot of these people because she had done extensive fieldwork and interviews. And what was interesting is that the older generation of individuals who had come as young men in the 1950s majority were men, but it also included women. And of course, they first went to Egypt as part of an entourage and sets of families that were associated with the warlord of Qinghai mobile farm, who was there as sort of the representative of the Republic of China to Egypt. But then when Egypt shifted diplomatic recognition to the People's Republic in 1956, he essentially moved to Jeddah and the consulate there was elevated into a full-fledged embassy. At that point, he became the Saudi ambassador, the ambassador to Saudi Arabia for the Republic of China, and he continued to hold that position until 1961. There was a bit of a scandal and he ended up taking Saudi citizenship. So the people from his generation, a lot of them didn't really pick up much Arabic. They continued to sort of maintain a very insular type of stance toward the rest of Saudi society. I mean, I met, for example, the head of the community who had passed away a few years ago, (inaudible) and he actually used to be the representative of the Middle East Chinese communities to the Legislative Council and for Taiwan under the Republic of China. And he could not speak much Arabic. I mean, I had to converse with him in Chinese, and he spoke with a very heavy Northwestern accent. The younger generations are far more assimilated, and in fact, a lot of them kind of lost their proficiency in Chinese. Some of them are relearning it in recent years. I mean, they're picking up more standardized ones. And it's kind of similar, in fact with what we see with the Turkic communities who sort of originate from parts of China and in the town of Basin Turkistan or Xinjiang, however you want to call it. And what I've noticed is that the younger generations of people and in fact, even the older generations, they're proficient in Arabic. But what's interesting is that the younger generations are picking up Turkish, which is kind of closer to Weaver or sure. Other Turkic languages, because they've kind of lost their sort of ancestral tongues.

Jonathan Fulton: Wow. That is cool. I've got to go back and find this dissertation and read it. That sounds fascinating. Okay. Well, getting back to where we were a couple of minutes ago, we're talking about, you know, the GCC engagement with China. You mentioned something I thought was interesting. There seems to be a dominant narrative that a lot of what's happening is in response to the U.S., you know, this perception that the U.S. is leaving, therefore, Gulf countries are hedging towards China. The way you're framing it, I think you would disagree with

that assessment. There seems to be something more sustainable to it. Do you think that's fair? Is this more than just a, you know, reflection of a worsening set of relationships between GCC countries and Washington?

Mohammed Al-Sudairi: I mean, I think that's the framing that some people want to push, whether in the Beltway or even some actors in the Gulf. Right. Who tries to push this as part of a calculation of signaling or conveying certain messages to the United States. But I think, you know, if we sort of move away from the Gulf a bit and think about China's relationship with other key regions that are much more firmly integrated into the U.S. security sphere, like, say, South Korea or Japan or even the European Union. A lot of these places have very large economic relationships with China. Right. I mean, in the case of South Korea and Japan, we're talking about China being their first number one trade partner. Something to the level of 23 to 25% of their total foreign trade is captured by Chinese imports and exports. So, you know, the Gulf's engagement in economic engagement with China is it's very difficult to read it as somehow directed against the United States and even in sort of the critical arenas that U.S. officials tend to focus on the technological realm or the military security around the key sensitive technologies, their cutting edge technologies, the key armaments are still obtained from the United States or European actors. Right. I mean, we can talk a bit more about the technical aspect, which kind of sort of unpacks this a bit. But, you know, I think this reading that the Gulf is being captured by China and that it's building a fundamental alliance with China is not something that I see on the ground. And I don't necessarily think that that's something that the leadership, whether in Beijing or Riyadh or Abu Dhabi, really wants to. At least this is my own personal assessment of it. I don't know what you think about that.

Jonathan Fulton: No, I agree. I think that this great power competition narrative really misses a lot. You know, I think that when people in Washington or in Beijing look at a place like the UAE or Saudi, they often see, you know, their own reflections. You know, they see themselves competing, you know, that these countries are chess pieces on a chessboard kind of thing. And I think that's not the case. I don't think the binary really reflects what countries see as their options. You know, I don't think that being here in Abu Dhabi, you know, there have been countless examples of different officials saying we don't like this strategic competition narrative.

We don't feel we have to choose. It's not a matter of the U.S. giving us, you know, the security relationship and China giving us an economic relationship because there's a lot of other countries, too, right? I mean, this is something that keeps getting missed out on, you know, just what, maybe a month ago, a little over a month ago, we're speaking in early June, will release us later. But in early May, India and the UAE signed this Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, you know, this massive free trade agreement. That's not a great power competition, right. That's saying, hey, we've got a lot of interest with a lot of other countries, a lot of, you know, rising economies where we have deep interests and deep engagement and cultural connections and expatriate populations and historical connections. So, you know, I would agree with you. I think there are a lot of factors. It's not just a matter of picking one or picking the other, right?

Mohammed Al-Sudairi: Yeah. I mean, at the end of the day, the Gulf States in different ways are all dealing with very serious political and economic transitions at the moment. And they're pushing for different reforms and they want to obtain a competitive edge and, you know, to maximize the resources on hand to be able to push these reforms now. So this is why they will engage with as many actors as possible at the same time. This doesn't necessarily mean, you know when we talk about sort of the great power competition, that there isn't kind of this uncertainty about the sort of the security of the Gulf in the future. That sort of hangs and affects the zeitgeist. Like, for example, since we have talked a bit about Kuwait and it's something that I looked at a bit, sort of the debates surrounding Silk City. What's interesting about those debates and they kind of were initiated by rumors that had been circulated, I think back in I want to say 2018 or two. Yeah, I think it was 2018 when the late Emir of Kuwait visited China as part of one of the major conferences there and returned. And on WhatsApp, there were these messages that circulated saying that he had managed to obtain something to the tune of roughly 1 trillion U.S. dollars off investments from China. And that this money will go into the Silk City project and it will come in exchange for Kuwait seeding islands to be used and as sort of concessions to China where China can deploy naval assets there. And this narrative that was developed in the Kuwaiti social media and Kuwaiti WhatsApp groups was very much a security narrative. The idea was that Mubarak , in the early 20th century, had managed to reach an understanding with the great power of that era, Great Britain, and to sort of put Kuwait under its security umbrella and therefore safeguard the independence of Kuwait. What essentially the emir had done in doing or reaching this agreement is safeguard Kuwait's security against its predatory neighbors,

implicitly claiming that Iraq and Saudi had aspirations to divide Kuwait and undermine it and whatnot. So, you know these types of narratives. Ah, I think it is very much representative of the current moment. And they kind of, you know, conveyed to us some of the uncertainty that is there about the future and sort of the solidity of the relationship with the United States. But really only that the region is in a period of transition. But it doesn't necessarily mean that that transition means that people are thinking in binary terms all the time or even that the leaderships are.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah. So I wonder just again, like just riffing off this with the idea of Kuwait. I mean, there was a lot of movement. I mean, in 2017, there were a lot of official visits from China. And like you said, the late emir visited China as well. And there were a lot of emails and a lot of talks, but Kuwait ultimately pulled back. And I wonder, you know, Kuwait, more than any other country in the GCC, you know, felt the sharp end of aggression from a neighbor. And, you know, that security commitment that the U.S. offers is one that China doesn't. Right. China has no alliance policy. China doesn't want to get caught up in entanglement. It wants to engage in economic intercourse. And they don't want to get caught up in a lot of security stuff in the Middle East because it's not a core interest in the way Beijing calculates it. So I wonder if Kuwaitis looked at this and thought, you know, maybe going all-in with China isn't the smartest move here because this could jeopardize our longer-term relationship with the U.S... I'm not sure. I'm just spitballing here.

Mohammed Al-Sudairi: I'm not sure. I mean, I think this is more just simply, you know, popular perceptions of what China is. And you also see it in the media commentary about China, whether in Saudi or the United Arab Emirates. You know, instead of overexaggerating China's capacities and what roles it could play in the region, whether militarily or economically, I think, you know, the story of Kuwait in relation to China and Silk City is more of a domestic story. That is to say, the officials who were interested in realizing the project were kind of sidelined. The project itself went through a lot of bureaucratic reshuffling. There was also the problem of a political deadlock about the project since there were a lot of local business elites who were opposed to it because they kind of saw that if there was room given to Chinese enterprises, they might undermine their own hold over certain segments of the Kuwaiti market. So there's a lot of dynamics that went into it. And the security aspect was, I think, not considered at all. And now.

Whether China's sort of, you know, security relationship with the region as a whole is going to change in the next ten, 20 years, I think is open to speculation. What I think might happen is perhaps the conclusion of agreements similar to some of the ones we've seen in the Pacific nations and other contexts, where there's going to be a lot more engagement in terms of police training. I mean, this is also happening in many African states, with some more intensified military exchanges. Certainly, the more interesting types of engagement that I've seen in the last few years has been China's willingness to participate in a lot of fora which in the past it has never really exhibited much interest in engaging with, for example, the OIC, the Organization for Islamic Conference, and now they have the ambassador of China to Saudi Arabia is also the representative of China to the OIC. And I think this has more to do with their adjustments that have come as a response to fears about losing public opinion as it relates to Xinjiang since the crisis emerged in 2017. But. I don't know. Again, as I said earlier, I don't see any fundamental rethink about China's security relationship with the region, whether in terms of the thinking in Beijing or in terms of local capitals.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah, the security stuff is interesting, but you've mentioned public perception at a couple of points. And I think this is interesting because I've said another episode when the subject of China comes up in my class, which is all the time. My students will often voice this opinion of China that it's the superlatives. China's the biggest, the best, the strongest, the richest, most powerful, you know, but there's not a lot of actual knowledge. You know, most students talk about China. They're not doing it with a lot of actual information. I think it's just, you know, stuff they're seeing in the news. Mostly what we're talking about is a lot of government-to-government relations. You know, these, you know, in the security sphere, investment or development, you know, as a guy from the Gulf, how do you think Gulf publics tend to see China?

Mohammed Al-Sudairi: I think that's a very difficult question because as far as I know, there hasn't been any systematic survey or polling of public opinion across the GCC about stuff.

Jonathan Fulton: It's really tough to do, right?

Mohammed Al-Sudairi: Yeah, I mean, I would imagine there are a lot of impediments, but I haven't seen any. I mean, I've looked at the Arab barometer and many other surveys and the.

Jonathan Fulton: Arab Youth Survey. There's the Arab Youth Survey in Dubai, I believe. But it also, you know, it's very, you know, surface level when it comes to this stuff in China.

Mohammed Al-Sudairi: Yeah. I mean, generally what I find in the region is there's probably maybe a plurality of opinions about China. I mean, I've encountered very negative ones that kind of convey the legacies or reproduce the legacies of the Cold War regarding China as a communist power, as an atheistic power that sort of suppresses religion, particularly Muslims. But I've also encountered, as you've said, in terms of, you know, the opinions you see in your classroom, kind of very positive Orientalism about China romanticized Orientalism. And I don't think that's new in the region. I mean, one of the areas of interest that I have is kind of looking at the Arab intellectual engagement with China during the Cold War. I mean, I published a paper with Third World Quarterly looking at it. What of the Arab visitors and long-term Arab foreign experts? The language idea stayed in Maoist China from the 1950s all the way to the early post-Cold War in the 1990s. And I looked at a lot of their travelogs, a lot of their writings, poetry, etc... And what's particularly interesting is that a lot of these individuals, much like fellow travelers, by the way, for many other cultural contexts. All subscribed to a very orientalist and romanticized vision of China. Right. I mean, these people had very limited engagement with China or Chinese society. I mean, for example, in the case of the foreign experts who were there to teach Arabic or to translate propaganda material directed at Arab audiences abroad, a lot of them were not allowed to really leave a certain radius within the city of Beijing. They were not allowed to have fraternal ties or even marriage ties, of course, with Chinese citizens. A lot of them lived in seclusion and really this kind of expat bubbles. But a lot of these individuals wrote about their experiences and kind of, you know, depict China as, you know, this great liberatory power. They had a lot of praise for their economic achievements, even though this was during the Great Leap Forward. Right. You know, sort of the mass starvation that happened during that period. A lot of them had a lot of sort of unusual thoughts, really, about wider Chinese society as a result of this lack of interaction. You know, people thought that, you know, the Chinese population had

extinguished its sexual attractions by virtue of Maoist ideology and that people were kind of amazed by that. People were amazed by the sort of ant-like organization of labor capacity of the Chinese population. And actually what's funny is that a lot of these ideas kind of continue today. And, you know, these ideas are kind of drawn from the echoes of these older writings that people are still reading. So, for example, one prominent Sinologist was actually one of the few Arab Sinologists of the 20th century, a Marxist by the name of Haddad anyway, who had gone to China for several periods in the late 1970s, into the early 1980s, and again in the 1990s. I mean, he wrote perhaps some of the most important books in the Arab Library in China. And when you read his books, you know, for example, almost Sartre for cleaning the book of Chinese Novelties, which is still being reprinted after his death. And it's quite popular. I mean, the book is in many ways a simplified, reductive vision of Chinese civilization and the Chinese state that shapes people's perspectives about it. And, you know, when you take into consideration the current moment. How do people engage with China from afar? Right. In terms of like, say, Tik Tok or on, say, YouTube videos that showcase Chinese infrastructure and economic development. It's, I think, not surprising that people have these very positive imaginaries about China, at least in some circles. But I think we would need to conduct a scientific survey to really know what people think about China and how their views have changed over time.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah, I agree. It's funny when you're describing this, I'm thinking of a lot of these classic books that I read as a student of, you know, Europeans during the late Shang Dynasty. And they, you know, they'd say, you know, this is the Chinese might let me explain the Chinese, you know, whatever. Right. And it sounds kind of similar, right. That there is a lot of shallow treatments that are explaining this big stuff. And that's kind of shaping how the public later came to it to engage how they saw China.

Mohammed Al-Sudairi: And I think what's interesting is that this kind of reductive language, that sort of kind of focuses on the idea that the interaction is taking place through two distinct civilizations, two distinct cultural spaces, and sort of, you know. People who embody these civilizational and cultural traditions. This language continues to permeate and shape even the official discussions between, say, the GCC and the People's Republic today. Right. I mean, if

you look at a lot of the articles that are written by Chinese ambassadors in the Gulf, and if you look at sort of the narratives that are often used in official conferences and gatherings between the two sides, that is the language that they use, right, of civilizational encounters, cultural encounters. So the complexities and the messy pictures are kind of sidelined and they are a very nice positive story.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah. So this to me is interesting because, you know, I've been at a university here in Abu Dhabi since 2006, and we don't have an area studies program, you know, so we don't find students are actually learning a lot about, you know, not just China, but a lot of different countries, whether I think they should be. And I think that lends to kind of this easy, reductionist thought that you're describing. I'm wondering when I note that I've been since 2019, but when I used to go to Shanghai or Beijing pretty frequently and I'd visit university campuses, I'd see a lot of Arab students, people doing graduate studies or, you know, usually graduate studies and they'd often be from Egypt or they'd be from, you know, what, Egypt seems to dominate. I'm wondering if you've spent a lot of time on the mainland. You've spent a lot of time in Hong Kong. Is there a corresponding Gulf population in China that you're aware of? Are there a lot of, you know, either students or business communities or just people who are fascinated and moved there? Do you find that kind of engagement?

Mohammed Al-Sudairi: Okay. I mean, the Gulf population. And when we say really Gulf, we're really talking about the Saudi population in terms of known presence that has kind of numerical visibility and has been growing steadily since the mid to 2000. I mean, before that, there were some people who ended up coming in the late 1990s and I spoke to some of them. And, you know, they would mention stories about how when they ended up in China, the embassy would ask them, why are you here? Right. It's like they had obtained official government scholarships from China to come. But from mid-2000 onwards, under the umbrella of the King Abdullah scholarship program, there had been growing influxes of people coming to China from Saudi Arabia, something to the tune of almost 300 students per year. I remember when I was kind of asking around about the data in relation to the number of students back in 2012, the cumulative number of Saudis who had come to China was something at around 1400 students, and I think that number had also grown and accumulated to probably a few thousand. Now, there have

been disruptions in the last two decades in terms of the number of students coming in, because I think multiple GCC states, for example, had banned students from going to China to study medicine because of disagreements about the number of years that they could study in China. There was a lot of uncertainty about the quality of the testing there, but the Saudi population was mostly students, and a lot of them, a third were based in Beijing, and another third were based in Wuhan. There was a perception of what was being a city for families, Saudi businessmen, and whatnot. I haven't seen many who had settled in China long term. Usually, the Arab communities that had emerged in China were quite sizable up to maybe five years ago. In places like Guangzhou, you will, and maybe even to a lesser extent, Shenzhen. A lot of them were from Iraq, for example, Kurds actually, in fact, from Iraq. There was a short-lived Syrian influx after the start of the civil war, and there were a lot of Sudanese who come and go, but also a lot of Yemenis, in fact, actually the head of the Arab community in Guangzhou for a while was from (inaudible) which is very much in line with the stereotype about (inaudible) right, very good, very well positioned with business. But yeah, I mean, it has grown with time and in fact, a lot of the graduates from China, that is to say, Saudis have already come back to the country over the last five, seven years. I think they've kind of struggled with some of these graduates to really kind of utilize their skill sets, especially their Chinese language fluency, to be able to find suitable jobs. I mean, I've heard from some of them, you know, they have gone down to (inaudible) and other places that had been kind of presented as key projects of Sino-Saudi cooperation. But what happened in a lot of instances is that Chinese companies were kind of hesitant to recruit and hire Saudis, even those who could speak Chinese, at least in terms of giving them substantive jobs. But yeah, there has been a growing presence. But whether it had effected a change because I guess that was in relation to your first the first part of your question about area studies and understanding China, whether this has really contributed to a better understanding of China as an open-ended question because a lot of the people, as far as I know, who had gone to China were people who went into different STEM fields or studies or business. So very few had gone into the humanities, which is quite an interesting difference from the older generation of Arabs, particularly Palestinians or Syrian Palestinians who I met who had gone to China in the late 1960s, and 1970s, all of whom had studied things like Chinese literature, history, and had gotten PhDs.

Jonathan Fulton: That's really interesting. Well, look, Mohammed, this was really cool for me. I really enjoyed this. Especially when you're talking about this Chinese community in Jeddah is

something that's kind of captured my imagination. I want to learn more about this. Okay. Well, Mohammed, thanks so much for this. This has been enlightening. I really enjoyed this. I'm sure our listeners are going to get a lot from this as well. To our audience, thank you so much for joining us. Follow us on our social media page. Subscribe and write to us on iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you get podcasts. And I'll see you in our next episode. Thank you very much.